

A Brief Introduction to Gnostic Texts

*The Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Philip, the Apocalypse of Peter,
The Letter of Peter to Philip, and the The Gospel of the Egyptians*

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I will never forget walking into the office of a faculty member at St Mary's (the divinity school of the University of St Andrews) to find him reading the Nag Hammadi documents. I had just been reading some of these documents in the library which led me to exclaim, "Ugh, you are reading the gnostic writings."

He replied with a chuckle, "You don't like the gnostic writings?"

"No, they are just too bizarre for me," I said.

"I love these writings," he replied, "I'll tell you what I find bizarre - the apostle Paul, now he is bizarre!"

I did not respond to that goad. I think he wanted to joust with me, knowing that I was an "evangelical." My brain was too soft at that moment from several hours of reading the Gnostics.

As I have pointed out in book reviews and other articles, critics of Christianity and the NT will oftentimes make the point that alternative texts (typically the Gnostic ones) were systematically discriminated against by the early church. Usually the attack has a foundational position that these gnostic groups were another expression of early Christianity and the orthodox leadership suppressed them in order to seize, or hold, political and ecclesiastical power. This position is forcefully expressed by Bart Ehrman, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Here are two quotes from "Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew."

Only twenty-seven of the early Christian books were finally included in the canon, copied by scribes through the ages...Other books came to be rejected, scorned, maligned, attacked, burned, all but forgotten—lost...

This one form of Christianity decided what was the "correct" Christian perspective; it decided who could exercise authority over Christian belief and practice; and it determined what forms of Christianity would be marginalized, set aside, destroyed. It also decided which books to canonize into Scripture and which books to set aside as "heretical," teaching false ideas...this victorious party rewrote the history of the controversy, making it appear that there had not been much of a conflict at all, claiming that its own views had always been those of the majority of Christians at all times, back to the time of Jesus and his apostles, that its perspective, in effect, had always been "orthodox." p.4

Where did we get our New Testament Gospels in the first place, and how do we know that they, rather than the dozens of Gospels that did not become part of the New Testament, reveal the truth about what Jesus taught? p.93

My intention in this paper is to introduce some of these alternative texts of the first four centuries. This is a *brief* introduction meant to give the reader some idea of the content in these documents. This will enable you to engage with someone proposing the ideas represented by Professor Ehrman – I run into these people quite often (in person and online). They repeat his ideas, but unlike Ehrman, they have not read these documents and have very little idea what Gnostics and some of the alternative Gnostic-like Christian sects actually read and/or believed.

The Gospel of Mary

This document was "found" by a German scholar in Cairo in 1896, but was not published until 1955. The *Da Vinci Code* book/movie brought this gospel back into the public eye recently. Most scholars believe this document was written in the second century, some arguing for an early second century date. The text we have is missing the first six pages and one other large section.

In the first part of the document Jesus is answering some questions being asked by some of his disciples. Jesus departs and the disciples are disheartened. Mary begins to encourage them, “turned their hearts to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the Savior.” (*Gos. Mary* 5.4) Peter then says to Mary, “we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of woman. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember which you know, but we do not, nor have we heard them.” (*Gos. Mary* 5.5-6) Mary begins to tell the disciples about a vision she had received, but after only a few lines the manuscript breaks and we have three pages missing. The MS apparently resumes in the middle of Mary’s answer with this:

...And desire said, I did not see you descending, but now I see you ascending. Why do you lie since you belong to me? The soul answered and said, I saw you. You did not see me nor recognize me. I served you as a garment and you did not know me. When it said this, it (the soul) went away rejoicing greatly.

Again it came to the third power, which is called ignorance. The power questioned the soul, saying, Where are you going? In wickedness are you bound. But you are bound; do not judge! And the soul said, Why do you judge me, although I have not judged?

I was bound, though I have not bound. I was not recognized. But I have recognized that the All is being dissolved, both the earthly things and the heavenly.

When the soul had overcome the third power, it went upwards and saw the fourth power, which took seven forms. The first form is darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth is the excitement of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the sixth is the foolish wisdom of flesh, the seventh is the wrathful wisdom. These are the seven powers of wrath. They asked the soul, Whence do you come slayer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space? The soul answered and said, What binds me has been slain, and what turns me about has been overcome, and my desire has been ended, and ignorance has died. In a aeon I was released from a world, and in a Type from a type, and from the fetter of oblivion which is transient. From this time on will I attain to the rest of the time, of the season, of the aeon, in silence.

(Gos Mary 8.10-24)

This is basic Gnosticism – the soul is ascending through the heavenly realms, being stopped and quizzed along the way by the various spiritual guardians.¹ The MS then continues with both Andrew and Peter questioning whether Mary could really speak for the Savior:

When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Savior had spoken with her. 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 have 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. And when they heard this they began to go forth to proclaim and to preach.

(Gos Mary 9.1-10)

¹ This is discussed briefly on the Church History 101 web site in the Second Century - The Initial Heresies and Heretics, <http://www.churchhistory101.com/century2-p5.php>.

This exchange is interesting. Andrew echoes what many would have thought about Mary's comments, "these teachings are strange ideas." Then Peter echoes another thought that would have been common, "Did He [Jesus] really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us?" These two comments accurately reflect objections made by the orthodox of the day. Ehrman wants us to think this "Gnostic understanding of the faith...came to be suppressed by Christian leaders of later centuries,"² but these objections appear within the very document. This clearly indicates that these are contemporary objections – immediately seen as different, or as Andrew says, "strange."

The Gospel of Philip

This document is part of the Nag Hammadi Library and is a bit more difficult to date. It "resembles the orthodox catechisms from the second through fourth centuries."³ This gospel is a collection of strange passages, but I will begin with one that is commonly quoted,

Jesus took them all by stealth, for he did not appear as he was, but in the manner in which they would be able to see him. He appeared to them all. He appeared to the great as great. He appeared to the small as small. He appeared to the angels as an angel, and to men as a man. Because of this, his word hid itself from everyone. Some indeed saw him, thinking that they were seeing themselves, but when he appeared to his disciples in glory on the mount, he was not small. He became great, but he made the disciples great, that they might be able to see him in his greatness. 57,28 - 58,10

I have seen this passage used many times, but have never been told that this is really the only passage in the gospel that says anything worthy to repeat. These two passages accurately reflect this gospel – do not be discouraged if you find these difficult to understand.

"The Father" and "the Son" are single names; "the Holy Spirit" is a double name. For they are everywhere: they are above, they are below; they are in the concealed, they are in the revealed. The Holy Spirit is in the revealed: it is below. It is in the concealed: it is above. 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 so 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." 59,11-27

It is not possible for anyone to see anything of the things that actually exist unless he becomes like them. This is not the way with man in the world: he sees the sun without being a sun; and he sees the heaven and the earth and all other things, but he is not these things. This is quite in keeping with the truth. But you saw something of that place, and you became those things. You saw the Spirit, you became spirit. You saw Christ, you became Christ. You saw the Father, you shall become Father. So in this place you see everything and do not see yourself, but in that place you do see yourself - and what you see you shall become. Faith receives, love gives. No one will be able to receive without faith. No one will be able to give without love. Because of this, in order that we may indeed receive, we believe, and in order that we may love, we give, since if one gives without love, he has no profit from what he has given. He who has received something other than the Lord is still a Hebrew. 61,20-62,6

² Ehrman, Bart D., *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, (New York 2006), p.239.

³ Isenberg, Wesley W., "The Gospel of Philip (II,3), Introduction and Translation," *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, edited by James M. Robinson, (New York 1990), p.141.

Apocalypse of Peter

This document is part of the Nag Hammadi texts and probably dates from the third century. This document clearly represents gnosticism with a docetic Christology, the emphasis on the divinity of Jesus which typically minimizes his humanity. In this passage Jesus is speaking to Peter; you will see a reflection of the belief that Jesus, as a divine being, could not suffer.

"Come therefore, let us go on with the completion of the will of the incorruptible Father. For behold, those who will bring them judgment are coming, and they will put them to shame. But me they cannot touch. And you, O Peter, shall stand in their midst. Do not be afraid because of your cowardice. Their minds shall be closed, for the invisible one has opposed them."

When he had said those things, I saw him seemingly being seized by them. And I said "What do I see, O Lord? That it is you yourself whom they take, and that you are grasping me? Or who is this one, glad and laughing on the tree? And is it another one whose feet and hands they are striking?"

The Savior said to me, "He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness. But look at him and me."

But I, when I had looked, said "Lord, no one is looking at you. Let us flee this place."

But he said to me, "I have told you, 'Leave the blind alone!'. And you, see how they do not know what they are saying. For the son of their glory instead of my servant, they have put to shame."

And I saw someone about to approach us resembling him, even him who was laughing on the tree. And he was <filled> with a Holy Spirit, and he is the Savior. And there was a great, ineffable light around them, and the multitude of ineffable and invisible angels blessing them. And when I looked at him, the one who gives praise was revealed.

And he said to me, "Be strong, for you are the one to whom these mysteries have been given, to know them through revelation, that he whom they crucified is the first-born, and the home of demons, and the stony vessel in which they dwell, of Elohim, of the cross, which is under the Law. But he who stands near him is the living Savior, the first in him, whom they seized and released, who stands joyfully looking at those who did him violence, while they are divided among themselves. Therefore he laughs at their lack of perception, knowing that they are born blind. So then the one susceptible to suffering shall come, since the body is the substitute. But what they released was my incorporeal body. But I am the intellectual Spirit filled with radiant light. He whom you saw coming to me is our intellectual Pleroma, which unites the perfect light with my Holy Spirit."When he (Jesus) had said these things, he (Peter) came to himself.

VII.80,22-84,14

In this passage you also clearly see gnostic dualism – the Jesus hanging on the cross is “the fleshly part,” the physical. The living, speaking, and victorious Jesus is “the intellectual Spirit-filled” one. Early Christianity believed that humans (and Jesus) have a physical body *and* a spirit, these two are *not* separate, but are connected. The Gnostics emphasized a separation of the two, so you see Jesus represented with two distinct “beings.”

The Letter of Peter to Philip

This document is also part of the Nag Hammadi Library and dates from the end of the second century or the beginning of the third century. This letter contains early Christian thought, but

with clear gnostic themes included. This is a version of the Gnostic story of creation and is a fair representation of this document. It is certainly bizarre to the first time reader.

Then a voice came to them out of the light saying, "It is you yourselves who are witnesses that I spoke all these things to you. But because of your unbelief I shall speak again.

First of all concerning the deficiency of the aeons, this is the deficiency, when the disobedience and the foolishness of the mother appeared without the commandment of the majesty of the Father. She wanted to raise up aeons. And when she spoke, the Arrogant One followed. And when she left behind a part, the Arrogant One laid hold of it, and it became a deficiency. This is the deficiency of the aeons.

Now when the Arrogant One had taken a part, he sowed it. And he placed powers over it and authorities. And he enclosed it in the aeons which are dead. And all the powers of the world rejoiced that they had been begotten. But they do not know the pre-existent Father, since they are strangers to him. But this is the one to whom they gave power and whom they served by praising him. But he, the Arrogant One, became proud on account of the praise of the powers. He became an envier and he wanted to make an image in the place of an image, and a form in the place of a form. And he commissioned the powers within his authority to mold mortal bodies. And they came to be from a misrepresentation, from the semblance which had emerged."

VIII.134,19-136,16

The Gospel of the Egyptians

This is another document contained in the Nag Hammadi Library. I have saved the most bizarre for last. This is such a strange document that it is difficult to believe. While Clement of Alexandria quotes from an apparently "inspired" *Gospel to the Egyptians*, this is not the same document. The long stretches of vowels were meant to be sounded out while reading, probably like secret code. [Brackets indicate holes and degradations in the manuscript where the translators have postulated the contents.]

[incorruptions. The] Father of the great light [who came] forth from the silence, he is [the great] Doxomedon-aeon in which [the thrice]-male child rests. And the throne of his [glory] was established [in it, this one] on which his unrevealable name [is inscribed], on the tablet [. . .] one is the word, the [Father of the light] of everything, he [who came] forth from the silence, while he rests in the silence, he whose name [is] in an [invisible] symbol. [A] hidden, [invisible] mystery came forth iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii[iii] eeeeeeeeeeee-eeeeeeeeee[ee o] oooooooooooooooooooooooooo uu[uuu] uuuuuuuuuuuu-uuuuu eeeee eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee aaaaaaa[aaaa] aaaaaaaaaaaa oooooooooooooo[oo] oooooooooooooo. III.43,13-44,9

But from now on through the incorruptible man Poimael, and they who are worthy of (the) invocation, the renunciations of the five seals in the spring-baptism, these will know their receivers as they are instructed about them, and they will know them (or: be known) by them. These will by no means taste death. le ieus eo ou eo oua! Really truly, O Yesseus Mazareus Yessedekus, O living water, O child of the child, O glorious name, really truly, aion o on (or: O existing aeon), iii eeee eeee oooo uuuu oooo aaaa{a}, really truly, ei aaaa oooo, O existing one who sees the aeons! Really truly, aee eee iii uuuuuu ooooooooo, who is eternally eternal, really truly, iea aio, in the heart, who exists, you aei aeis aei, ei o ei, ei os ei (or: (Son) forever, Thou art what Thou art, Thou art who Thou art)! III.65,26-66,22

Concluding Remarks

It is important to know that not all Gnostic texts are so bizarre. Many of these texts do contain passages that are more benign. Some texts, like the *Gospel of Truth*, contain much that is Christian. Some consider the *Gospel of Truth* to be a Christian document. Some second century

Christian texts contain some gnostic passages. If we consider Clement of Alexandria, we realize that in some regions Gnosticism affected the presentation of the Christian message. As I have stated elsewhere:

Although Clement is clearly on the offensive against gnosticism, it is also clear that some of his views are not consistent with other early writers. This is something a problem with Clement of Alexandria. He represents a time in the development of Egyptian Christianity when the church was recovering from what appears to have been a 50-60 year period when gnosticism was the dominant force. <http://www.churchhistory101.com/century2-p6.php>

It is easy to see why these Gnostic texts, and the groups that used them, were not able to gain a large following. The orthodox church did reject these texts and these teachings, but the main force that stopped the spread of Gnosticism was the movement itself along with the Gnostic message. Like many of the thousands of “independent” Protestant churches of our day, many early Gnostic groups were not actively connected to any other group – their basic teaching made them secretive and distinctive. These organizational characteristics made it difficult for such Gnostic groups to survive. With the exception of Marcionism,⁴ Gnosticism and the “Gnostic gospel” did not have enough inherent power nor attraction as a movement and thus died out. The texts, and the Gnostic teachings, were just overly bizarre.

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⁴ Marcion's canon consisted of Luke's gospel and Pauline letters, but he edited them extracting anything that reminded him of the early Jewish roots. Marcion's movement was fairly strong and widespread. Churches following his teachings remained intact until the beginning of the fourth century.