

Some recent books, including Elaine Pagel's *Beyond Belief*, seem to accuse the Christian Church of unjustly rejecting the Gnostic Gospels and trying to deprive us of the benefit of reading them. Is that what happened?

There was great theological diversity in early Christianity, with each group having and reading gospels which portrayed Jesus as agreeing with their theology.

Besides the "proto-orthodox," from which all modern forms of Christianity developed, there were also:

- Jewish-Christians Adoptionists, who kept Jewish Law and thought all Christians should, and believed Jesus was adopted as God's Son at his baptism;

- Marcionites, who believed Jesus was not Jewish and Christianity should be purified of everything Jewish, including the Old Testament; and

- Gnostic Christians, who believed Jesus came to give people the knowledge (gnosis) of their spiritual nature and how to escape this material world

and return to the Ultimate God.

None of these groups would read literature from other groups. Instead each group had its own literature.

When "proto-orthodox" Christianity was chosen by the emperor Constantine and became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the proto-orthodox were in a position to destroy all the copies of literature representing other forms of Christianity. And orthodoxy was quite successful. Very little literature from competing forms of Christianity survived (mainly quotations in books written against them). Only since 1945, when thirteen books of (mainly) Gnostic writings were discovered buried in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, have we had complete (or nearly complete) copies of a large numbers of gnostic works.

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Was the Church right to destroy all the non-orthodox Christian literature? They certainly felt they were right to prevent people from reading those works and foolishly believing them.

Did the destruction of the non-orthodox literature deprive people of knowledge of what Jesus actually said and did? In the case of gnostic literature, probably not.

While there may be some authentic Jesus traditions in the Gospel of Thomas, gnostic thinking has very little likelihood of going back to Jesus or to the early Palestinian Church, according to most scholars. It does seem to be present fairly early, though, as 1 Corinthians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and the Epistles and

Gospel of John seem to oppose gnostic ideas.

The upshot of all this? There is very little likelihood that any distinctively gnostic portrayal of Jesus (Jesus saying anything gnostic) is historical. Jesus was a first-century Jew, and the Jesus of gnostic literature seems entirely foreign to that environment, while the Jesus of the canonical gospels (perhaps especially the Synoptic Gospels) says things that "make sense" and "fit" the Jewish cultural and religious setting of 1st century Palestine. While the canonical gospels contain elements that some scholars doubt go back to Jesus and represent later developments in Christian theology, most historians agree that they are our best sources for the life and teachings of Jesus and are more historically credible than any of the gnostic gospels.

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