

Canonization Revisited:
A Response to the Proposed Nag Hammadi Version of a New Christianity

Now that scholars have begun to place the sources discovered at Nag Hammadi, like newly discovered pieces of a complex puzzle, next to what we have long known from tradition, we find that these remarkable texts, only now becoming widely available, are transforming what we know as Christianity.

Elaine Pagels. *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*

Even if by “transforming what we know as Christianity” Elaine Pagels means “an all-together makeover of Christianity,” her grand assertion about the impact of the discoveries at Nag Hammadi in 1945 is *still* no exaggeration—at least not according to her description in *Beyond Belief*. For only a half-century ago (much less for mainstream culture), if someone were to ask, “what is authentic Christianity,” the discussion would have inevitably led to a conversation about Eastern Orthodoxy vs. Western Christianity, or perhaps about Roman Catholicism vs. Protestantism, or yet again about any one of the variations of say Presbyterian Christianity compared to any one of the variations of the Baptist, or Seventh Day Adventist, or Mennonite, or Congregationalist, or Methodist, or Pentecostal, or Charismatic, or Church of England versions of Christianity-- to name but *a few* of the Christianities that exist in the modern world today. And yet, for all their substantial differences in form, all these “Christianities” share a relatively broad consensus concerning the fundamentals of Christian faith that is predicated upon a single and shared standard, or *canon*. And because of this shared canon, notwithstanding all their differences, we can still speak of them all together as a single Christianity! And yet, according to many scholars like Elaine Pagels, all this has changed with the serendipitous discovery of a library of Coptic texts in Upper Egypt near the village of Nag Hammadi in 1947.¹

In other words, before Nag Hammadi, all discussions about Christianity would have inevitably assumed a set of twenty-seven ancient books compiled into a recognized New Testament *canon* against which the claim of authentic Christianity could be measured.² And on the basis of the traditional New Testament *canon*, there would have been relative unanimity of agreement about such things as whether or not we should even be concerned for a *set of beliefs* as an expression of authentic Christianity, and if so, whether or not these beliefs have been entrusted to a divinely sanctioned community or “ecclesia” in order to guard and nurture a confessional consensus leading to Christian practice. As to the content

¹ The fifty-two Coptic scrolls, only five of which are called “gospels,” were translated into English in 1977. c.f. James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977). For the authoritative account of how these scrolls were discovered, see James Robinson, “The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 42 (1979), p. 206-224.

² As noted by Harry Gamble, “the English word “canon” is a transliteration of the Greek *kanon* which... signified “reed” as a tool for measurement or alignment. From this literal sense there arose metaphorical applications of the term... to mean “norm,” or “ideal standard, a firm criterion against which something could be evaluated and judged.” (c.f. Gal.6:16, “Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this *kanon*.”). Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon, Its Making and Meaning*, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1985) p. 15.

of that faith itself, again based upon the twenty-seven books of the traditional New Testament *canon*, each of the above mentioned Christianities would have shared in common the same basic view of such things as the nature of the world, the Kingdom of God in the world but not of the world, the general meaning of Jewish history in relation to Christian history, the person of Christ and the meaning of his existence on earth, the idea of salvation, the problem of sin, human nature, eschatology, etc. But now, predicated upon a new perspective based on Nag Hammadi being promoted by some today, all of this has supposedly changed and the above assumptions are in need of revision- or so it is argued.

Backed by a post-modern sympathy “that all transcendent claims can be reduced to politics,” Timothy Luke Johnson has observed that for many post-modern scholars, “there is no arena of activity free from human self-interest, even religion.” Johnson further explains how “the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ so prevalent in the academy, detects whose interest is at work in any historical development, and the demand for the ‘recovery of other voices’ is thought necessary for a more liberating politics in the present.” He continues, “the recent recovery of the original Gnostic compositions, has provided the wedge to challenge the traditional canon, and with it, the traditional construction of Christian identity... The implicit argument embedded in much scholarly and popular work is that historic orthodox Christianity is little more than a power-hungry conspiracy.”³ And so, “writing with the ‘instincts of a novelist,’ one reviewer has noted how Elaine Pagels brought the Gnostic heretics to life and made them likeable... “as the forgotten victims and heroes of a class war waged by the politically powerful bishops.”⁴

In brief, the basic argument regarding this new perspective on Christian canonization is basically this: That based upon Nag Hammadi, we now know that there were *two* versions of Christianity that developed along side of each other during the first through third centuries. And here’s the catch, it is said that the more authentic and true version was later suppressed in the fourth century for political reasons. In other words, the catholic (small “c”) Christianity that has enjoyed relative cultural hegemony from the fourth century until now has now been exposed as the political propaganda that it really was (is)—this by the discovery of the more pure and authentic interpretation of Christ that fell victim to the patriarchal power plays of the fourth century bishops.

And in perfect coincidence with the emergence of a post-modern sympathy, we are now poised to *makeover* Christianity into the more inclusive and individualistic version that blend together the east with the west. As one recent introduction to a Nag Hammadi text has reasoned, in the *Secret Gospel of John* we can draw “connections to Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, kabbalistic Judaism, and Sufism...

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, “A new Gnosticism: an old threat to the church” *Commonweal*, Nov 5, 2004. *FindArticle*, Copyright 2005 (hereafter “New Gnosticism”).

⁴ Peter Jones & James Garlow, *Cracking the Da Vinci’s Code*, (Cook Communications, 2004) p. 158-159. (hereafter “Jones”). For another response to Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, see: Bock, Darrell L., *Breaking The Da Vinci Code : Answers To The Questions Everybody’s Asking*. (Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 2004).

[an] ardent call for self-awareness and introspection, and the empowering message that divine wholeness will be restored not by worshipping false gods in an illusory material world but by our recognition of the inherent divinity within ourselves.” We are therefore called not to a savior, but to a “deeper insight” wherein “the distinction between savior and saved ceases to exist” such that “you must save yourself and in doing so save God.”⁵

Armed then with the post-modern “hermeneutic of suspicion” the Nag Hammadi texts can be read to coincide with the oppression of women and the modern use of religion for the purpose of political imperialism by the right. Case in point—here is the way Elaine Pagel’s relates what happened then in the suppression of her proposed better version of Christianity out of the Nag Hammadi variety with what is happening now. Speaking of the third century Bishop Irenaeus:

What was discovered in Egypt includes over fifty of the gospels and writings that he (Irenaeus) tried to banish and discredit. And it's no accident—and no surprise, when you think about it—that Irenaeus' kind of Christianity—authoritative, simple, hierarchical—is what many Christians, including many politically minded Christians, still declare is the “only true Christianity” today. For with the surprise conversion of Emperor Constantine in the year 312 the situation of Christians transformed from that of an illegal group to becoming the religion of the empire. Constantine apparently found in it a new way of organizing—and justifying—the politics of imperialism.⁶

And here we have it, a new perspective on canonization wherein the Bible is portrayed as the product of a political conspiracy, opening the way for yet a new Bible based upon the ancient texts once discarded by the power elites of the 4th century. Indeed, almost single handedly, it has been suggested that Pagels “moved the lost Nag Hammadi texts, perhaps the real heroes of the *Da Vinci Code*, from the ivory tower into the public square.”⁷ What was accidentally discovered in 1946 at Nag Hammadi was studied by a generation of scholars to eventually trickle down into the popular culture-- not least of which was Elaine Pagels who from a graduate seminar at Harvard eventually produced her 1976 publication of the immediate best seller, *The Gnostic Gospels*. Only a year later, the production of an English translation of all fifty-two Coptic scrolls was published in 1977.⁸ And of course, all of this eventually ending up in Dan Brown’s ardently popular *The Da Vinci Code*— soon to become a movie—which showcase as the real hero the Nag Hammadi texts as being read in over 28 languages by well over an estimated 40 million people. For every time it is proclaimed by Brown’s Teabing to Sophia: how “many scholars claim that the early church literally stole Jesus from his original followers, hijacking his human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own

⁵ *The Secret Book of John: The Gnostic Gospel, Annotated & Explained*, Translated and Annotated by Stevan Davies (Skylight Paths Publishing, 2005), “Introduction,” p. NA.

⁶ Elaine Pagels, *The Politics Of Christianity: A Talk With Elaine Pagels* [7.17.03] Edge Foundation, Inc Copyright 2003.

⁷ Jones, p. 158-159.

⁸ James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977)

power,” the unsuspecting encounters a kind of evangelistic zeal rarely before experiences since the erd century.⁹

So the question that all of this raises is the question of *canon*, and especially whether or not Christianity is in need of a wholesale *makeover* based upon the proposed new canon of the Nag Hammadi type. Toward a proposed resolution, we will first reconsider the historical realities involved with canonization in the first through fourth centuries, and especially whether or not those engaged in the proposed new canon are guilty of an “exercise in revisionist history” as for instance has been argued by Emory University’s Luke Timothy Johnson.¹⁰ Secondly, we will reconsider the proposed Christianity of the Nag Hammadi type in comparison to the canonical New Testament type. Toward this end, we will mostly contrast the *Gospel of Thomas* as a relatively early expression of Gnostic Christianity given its proposed significance by those who advocate a Christian *makeover*.¹¹

Of particular significance in this comparison will be the question of salvation, especially in so far as the reader is given the opportunity to judge for him/herself what most makes sense of the human journey and quest. Altogether, we will be targeting the various presuppositions, both pertaining to *canon* and *redemption*, as a basis for forming a value judgment concerning the Nag Hammadi version of Christianity. For while conceding to the premise that Nag Hammadi Christianity “lost” in the battle for canonicity, we will not concede either the timeline or the motives that are recommended to us by the proponents of the Christian makeover, but will instead join with a chorus of other biblical scholars in concluding that they “lost because they deserved to lose... and they deserve to lose again,” both for historical and salvific interest.¹²

New Testament Canonization and the Proposed New Canon

According to Dan Brown’s caricature based on the new perspective in canonization, the canonical New Testament ought to be discarded as “a product of man, not God,” as “false testimony,” and as compiled and edited by “men (emphasis on “male”) who possessed a political agenda to solidify their power base” as then “commissioned and financed” by Constantine in order to shore up his

⁹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, (New York: Doubleday, 2003) p. 233. (hereafter, “Brown”).

¹⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, “Gnostic longings” *Commonweal*, May 23, 2003. *FindArticles* Copyright 2005. (hereafter “Gnostic Longings”).

¹¹ Admittedly, there is some disagreement about whether or not the *Gospel of Thomas* is Gnostic. And yet for the purpose of this paper this is beside the point. Rather, given that it is interpreted as such by those who propose the Christianity makeover, it will therefore be useful to compare and contrast for the sake of discerning the Gnostic vs. the traditional Christian understanding of grace in the gospel. Moreover, “a few recognized scholars today claim that the *Gospel of Thomas* is the second earliest Christian writing in existence, earlier than Mt, Mk, Luke and John... And yet, other scholars, even those who first begin to study the Coptic Gospels, don’t agree. (c.f. Bertil Gartner, *The Theology of the Gospel According to Thomas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 11. Also, for a discussion on the dating of the *Gospel of Thomas*, see below on Elaine Pagels perspective as published in her *The Gnostic Gospel* (1979), p.xvi.

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), p. 277.

political base. Here again, the impression given of the early Christian period of canonization is that the true and more authentic Bible was discarded and replaced by a new Bible after the image of the elite power brokers of the fourth century. But good news according to Brown, “the gospels they attempted to destroy have been discovered as apart of an ancient library of Coptic Scrolls and highlight the glaring discrepancies and fabrications of the modern Bible.”¹³ In other words, Dan Brown’s *Teabing* represents to the unsuspecting reader a *top-down* history of canonization wherein the traditional canon is exposed as an organ of propaganda driven by politically imperialistic motivations for the centralization of power.

This increasingly popular version of canonization is noteworthy in that it expresses a revisionist perspective that some reputable scholars have been advocating in academic contexts for some time now.¹⁴ For instance, Bart Ehrman in 1993 described the premise of the new perspective on canonization that “during the first two and a half centuries, Christianity comprised a number of competing theologies, or better, a number of competing Christian groups advocating a variety of theologies. *There was as yet no established “orthodoxy,” there was no basic theological system acknowledged by the majority of church leaders and laity.* Different local churches supported different understandings of the religion, while different understandings of the religion were present even within the same local church.” Admittedly, says Ehrman, “this is not to say that historians of early Christianity have always shared this perspective. To the contrary, it represents a distinctive shift in thinking, effected only in relatively recent times.”¹⁵ And yet, according to Ehrman, ever sense Walter Bauer in 1934, “the classical understanding of the relationship of orthodoxy with heresy met a devastating challenge” when Bauer argued that “the early Christian church in fact did not comprise a single orthodoxy from which emerged a variety of competing heretical minorities. Instead, early Christianity embodied a number of divergent forms, no one of which represented the clear and powerful majority of believers against all others.”¹⁶

In other words according to Ehrman, until recently it was all but assumed that “orthodoxy” represented “the teachings advocated by Jesus and his apostles” which were generally understood and accepted very early on, “which in turn spread throughout the world by Christians of the first generation,

¹³ Brown, p. 241, 342, 234, 234, 234 respectively.

¹⁴ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*. (New York : Random House, 1979), Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, (New York: Random House, 2003), Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities, The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Richard Valantasis, *Gospel of Thomas* (London; New York : Routledge, 1997), Ray Summers, *Secret Sayings Of The Living Jesus; Studies In The Coptic Gospel According To Thomas*, (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1968), Marvin W. Meyer, *Secret Gospels : Essays On Thomas And The Secret Gospel Of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, c2003), Bertil Edgar, *Theology Of The Gospel of Thomas*. Translated by Eric J. Sharpe. (London, Collins, 1961), Stevan Davies, L., *Gospel of Thomas And Christian Wisdom* (New York : Seabury Press, 1983), John Dart, *Unearthing The Lost Words Of Jesus : The Discovery And Text Of The Gospel of Thomas*, Introduction by John Dominic Crossan (Berkeley, Calif. : Seastone, 1998).

¹⁵ Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture, The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 4, 5. (hereafter Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption...*) *Emphasis mine.* c.f. Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities, The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) where this perspective is assumed in the advocacy for “other Christianities” as discovered in Nag Hammadi.

¹⁶ Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption...*, p. 7. (c.f. Walter Bauers’s *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei Im Alttesten Christentum*).

and was attested by the vast majority of believers in all periods.” Accordingly, “heresy” was “always secondary to the truth and derived from it by a kind of corruption or perversion” viewed as representing a “minority opinion... a contamination of the original teachings of Christianity by ideas drawn from the outside.”¹⁷

While advocating for the new perspective on canonization, Ehrman gets it right in so far as his description of the new vs. old perspective in canonization. Stated succinctly, if the new perspectives advocate a “top-down” understanding of canonization, the more traditional perspective advocates a “bottom-up” understanding. As represented by New Testament Scholar Kurt Aland, “there was no less than seven stages through which the New Testament had to pass before the present uniformity was arrived at.”¹⁸ And contrary to the new perspective, the focus of the seven stages is on the growth of consensus that was altogether in tact prior to the end of the second century even. For instance, Kurt Aland’s description of the seven stages led him to conclude:

*It goes without saying that the Church, understood as the entire body of believers, created the Canon. But this Canon grew in fact from the bottom upwards, in the communities among the believers and only later was officially legitimized from the top. It was not the reverse; it was not imposed from the top, be it by bishops and synods, and then accepted by the communities.*¹⁹

And so, if the new perspective wants us to focus on the fourth century and especially the various synodical maneuverings by ecclesiastical powers that were backed by Constantine in order to consolidate political power resulting in the suppression of the opposing interpretations of Jesus for political reasons, the more traditional or “old perspective” wants us to focus on the first two centuries and especially, in the words of Kurt Aland, “the generally accepted *regula fidei*” (“rule of faith”) that was already in tact well before the end of the second century even.

The “rule of faith” according to Aland, was “the single most important standard... the norm by which everything was measured—even the books of the emerging New Testament, so far as any doubts still remained about their general validity.” And this *regula fidei* says Aland, “goes back to the times of oral tradition” and “represented the deposit of the community’s heritage of faith which is in process of formulation.” Subsequently, “the question as to whether a writing under an apostolic name can really be accepted by the church is answered in the last resort by asking whether its contents are in accordance with this canon” (e.g. the orally transmitted “rule of faith”).²⁰ Moreover, it is further explained by Aland how this *regula fidei* was “one of the authoritative norms in which the church of the second century sees the guarantee of pure doctrine: at its side there stood the multiple unbroken chain of Episcopal office-

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5, 6.

¹⁸ Kurt Aland, *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (London, Mowbray, 1962) p. 9. (hereafter Alan, *Problem...*)

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 16, 17.

bearers which in theory goes back to the Apostles and thus—again in theory—ensures the unchanged tradition of the inherited faith and doctrine from one generation to another.”²¹ In other words, the principle of apostolic succession by means of a succession of office-bearers was directly tied to the succession of a “rule of faith,” not vice versa, even if later the office bearers formally recognize what was in place prior to themselves as a “rule of faith.”

By this brief summation of the two perspectives, a central question is exposed representing two very contradictory responses. According to the new perspective, the “rule of faith” was not established until the fourth century in the Council of Laodicea in A.D. 350. According to the traditional perspective, the “rule of faith” was already established, if but orally, even toward the end of the second century! Which is it? Is it true or not, for instance, that by the fourth century *there was as yet no established “orthodoxy,” there was no basic theological system acknowledged by the majority of church leaders and laity*” as concluded by Ehrman?

The whole question, it seems, turns on the issue of the Old Testament! In short, against the assumption of the new perspective, there is a conspicuous absence in their description of anything “Jewish” relative to the history of Jesus himself, his targeted ministry to the Jews, and especially his use of the Old Testament together with his earliest followers, as a canon *already* assumed. I use the word “suspicious” in that this new perspective is perfectly reflected in the Hammadi texts which in turn corresponds to the teachings of Marcion in the mid-second century-- teachings that were overwhelmingly rejected by an ecumenical consensus that evidently existed *before* the third century even. And to be clear, the significance of this consensus was to establish the continued validity of the Old Testament “rule of faith” as a basis for interpreting the ministry of Jesus and all subsequent teachings by his followers.

It is universally acknowledged, for instance, that Jesus did not emerge into a religious nothingness, but into the distinctive religious context of Biblical Judaism. According then to the canonical New Testament, the assumption of the Old Testament *regula fidei* is proven in Christ’s words, “do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the Prophets [the OT Canon summarized], but to fulfill it,” even as in many ways emphasized throughout both the canonical gospels and epistles.²² Christ’s ministry was primarily directed to the Jews (Mt.10:6,15:24), even if his message and commission interpreted the Messianic expectations of the Old Testament as a mandate to include all nations (Mt. 12:18, 21, 24:14, 28:16-20, cf. Gen.17:4ff, Dt.26:19, 28:1, Ps.2:8, Is. 2:1-2, Joel 2:28ff, etc) as to create a “kingdom not of this world,” albeit contrary to some of the post-Maccabean Jewish perspectives that sought after a geo-political “of this world” interpretation of the Messianic expectations of the Old

²¹ Ibid., p. 18.

²² Mt. 5:17. c.f. Acts 2, Eph. 3:1-6, 1Pet.2:9, Rev. 14:8.

Testament. Moreover, one could argue that the foundational premise of every Pauline text, if not also Petrine texts, as represented in the canonical New Testament is basically “there is therefore no new religion here, but a religion in succession to the religion of the previously established and confessed canonical Old Testament.”

To be sure, the objection could be raised that this begs the question in that it assumes the perspective of the canonical New Testament (contra the Nag Hammadi collection). Yes it does. But here is the present point-- this “battle” was waged *not* in the fourth century, but in the middle of the second century, wherein the “winners” were *not* the politically advantaged by any stretch of the imagination, but where instead those most persecuted under the political oppression of pre-Constantinian imperialism. That is to say that the first real battle for scripture was around A.D. 140 relative to the teachings and proposed written canon of Marcion (A.D. 90-160). It was Marcion’s contention *then* that only certain Pauline texts together with portions of Luke should become a written *regula fidei*, albeit in so far as these texts were stripped of their Jewish aspects.²³ And yet, as noted by Harry Gamble, while “this teaching won many adherents, it also evoked sharp criticism and by the late second century was broadly repudiated as heretical.”²⁴ In other words, the teachings of Marcion, viewed by most scholars to be in league with many early Gnostic Christian teachers,²⁵ and sympathetic to the perspective of Nag Hammadi, were by the late second century condemned as outside of the *previously* recognized “rule of faith” or “canon,” albeit one that was not yet formally recognized and sealed in a compilation of early writings. Before anything “top-down” was in play, the issue of *regula fidei* to included the Old Testament “rule of faith” was established by “the bottom-up” and a consensus that was formed albeit without political or synodical backing. According then to the traditional perspective, the rest is more or less history—one of fine tuning and formally recognizing the *regula fidei* as eventually codified into the twenty-seven books of the canon.

Therefore, even before the commencement of Kurt Aland’s seven stage process of canonization as we will be briefly review here, there was the *regula fidei* of the Old Testament canon that was being used to validate the messianic claims of Christ by the early eyewitness of his ministry, a ministry that was primarily, and providentially, in, with and to the Jewish community. According then to the principle of succession *already* established by the Old Testament canon, Aland’s “stage one” commences as “the oral tradition of Jesus’ teachings stood alongside of the OT.” They circulate orally, but they are also written down in collections of sayings from which quotations are taken” and “toward the end of this

²³ As further clarified by Bart Ehrman, Marcion, the contemporary of Justin, “began to advocate a well-defined canon of Scripture that conformed closely to his own theological agenda... a radical Paulinism that was divested of any trace of Judaism... a canon comprised of 10 Pauline epistles, purged of all Jewish traits and one Gospel, evidently a form of Luke.” Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, p. 20.

²⁴ Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, p. 44.

²⁵ Including Basilides (117-138), Valentinus (135-165). c.f. Gamble, p. 44.

period (A.D. 60's) the letters of Paul also exist, just as do the Gospels."²⁶ These writings and epistles are being circulated and read in services throughout the east and west.

"Stage two" of the canonical process corresponds to the teachings of Justin Martyr in the early second century. During this stage, "the group of the twelve Apostles (in which Paul is automatically included) now takes its place beside the former authorities of the Old Testament and the words of Jesus such that an appeal is made to the apostles and their instructions. Gradually "the first New Testament writings are given a place of authority approaching that of the Old Testament—the gospels come first, the Pauline epistles follow."²⁷ Ignatius of Antioch (A.D.35-107), Polycarp (A.D. 69-115), The Epistle of Barnabas (A.D.120) and Second Clement (A.D. 140) all referred to various New Testament books as "Scripture."²⁸

The "third stage" according to Aland commences in about A.D. 150 whereby the formation of the written Canon begins "in a real sense." By this time, the four gospels are complete and the Epistles acquire an equal standing in principle. For example, the Murotorian fragment, an annotated catalogue of authoritative books of the latter half of the second century witness to the four-Gospel collection in the west. Moreover, Marcion mentions the Morotorian list as his contemporary, and with the exception of Hebrews, James and 1 and 2 Peter, it is said to include references to all the NT books including the four Gospels by name or inference.²⁹ Has noted already, it is during this stage that Marcion's proposed canon neutered of all Old Testament influence is soundly rejected by a solid grass roots consensus as to the nature of the *regula fidei*.

"Stage four" is according to Aland reached around 200 AD. With Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria—the Canon of the four Gospels is fully recognized.³⁰ And "beside it stand as a second group the writings of the Apostles" wherein "the Pauline epistles constitute the core of these writings." The "reading of these documents in worship becomes customary and the recognition of canonical validity... which in turn leads to the demand that everything which does not possess this canonical validity be excluded from being read in the service."³¹ This represents a significant turning point in the canonization process, for already by A.D. 200, there is a written canon based upon an early first century *regula fidei* consistent with the Old Testament that is being used to distinguish the authentic form non-authentic interpretations of Jesus ministry and the meaning of salvation. And as will become plain in the second part of this essay, those "other Christianities" that are purported to be a valid interpretation of Christ are shown to be wholly incompatible with what has now already been codified

²⁶ Aland *Problem*, p. 9.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 9

²⁸ Jones, p. 125.

²⁹ C.f. Gamble, p. 34-35.

³⁰ C.f. Greek manuscript (P45) that is dated around A.D. 200 which has all four Gospels listed together.

³¹ Aland, *Problem*, p. 9.

as a “rule of faith” in distinction from other false “rules of faith.” And again, this is some one hundred and fifty plus years *before* Constantine and the so-called imperial synods.

“Stage five” is said to last through the second half of the third and into the fourth century. I Peter and I John have now won a firm, generally recognized position beside the four Gospels and the Epistles of Paul, even as 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude are striving for recognition with only partial success. Most significantly, the east and west are more or less coming together in adopting the same canon, except the Eastern church recognizes Hebrews and rejects Revelations, while the western church does the exact reverse.

Finally, in A. D. 350 “stage six” brings us to the first formal synodical decision with a claim to authority for whole provinces of the church. For in the sixth canon of the Synod of Laodicea the Old Testament scriptures are drawn up and the canonical New Testament consisting of the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the so called “catholic epistles” (James, 2 epistles of Peter, three epistles to John and Jude) and the fourteen epistles of Paul including Hebrews is adopted such that only Revelations is excluded. The exact same list is found in Cyril of Jerusalem (Cat. IV 36,) and in Gregory of Nazianzus (c.f. Zahn ii, I, 216) by A.D. 367. Moreover, during this same time Athanasius, as a member of the Eastern church, sets the Apocalypse beside the other 26 books in A.D. 367. Therefore by A.D. 367, all twenty seven books of the New Testament are accepted either by Synodical recognition (Laodicea) or by persons in both the eastern and the western church.³² Later, Augustine and Jerome in A.D. 393 at the Synod at Hippo Regius and again at Carthage in 397 and 419 recognized all twenty-seven books on behalf of the Western church.

The “seventh stage” is according to Aland focused on the Eastern church. Notwithstanding Athanasius’ endorsement of the Western canon, it would not be until well into the ninth century even that large portions of the Eastern church would formally recognize a twenty-seven book canon of scripture, even as such the absence of the four smaller Catholic Epistles and Revelations are missing in the Syrian church, even as the East-Syrian Nestorian Church is in possession of a canon without the Epistle of Jude and Revelations.

In sum, it can be said that twenty three or so books were well established as “canon” *prior* to fourth century, even as the remaining five or so by the end of the fourth century. And in continuity with the “succession principle” in relation to the Old Testament canon, there is a distinct view concerning the nature of the world, a history of redemption, a conception of salvation regarding human estrangement from God and future expectations that carefully function as the standard hermeneutic by which to interpret the meaning of Jesus ministry. If ever there was a “battle” it was concerning the claim that Christ and the apostolic interpretation of him was in succession to the Old Testament. In keeping

³² Ibid., p. 10.

with this hermeneutic, the history of canonization as reported by Eusebius in the first half of the fourth century was self-consciously placed “within a stream of tradition that runs back through a series of earlier writers such as Origen in the third century, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria in the late second and early third centuries, through Justin even to the oldest surviving account of Christianity’s early years, the New Testament book of Acts itself. It could therefore be concluded with Aland,

The significance of the fact that in the last years of the fourth century the Canon was, in principle, definitely closed, ought in no way to be minimized. But its significance should not be overestimated. For the Canon of the New Testament, as the Church established it at the end of the fourth century, was already five-sixths complete by about the year 200 and was already accepted without debate in the entire Eastern and Western church. And this five-sixths embraced all the most important scriptures of the New Testament.³³

This then has been a “broad stroke” response to the new perspective, notwithstanding the significant other events that took place in the early centuries leading eventually to the canonical New Testament. It begs for an entirely different understanding of Constantine, one contrary to the hermeneutic of suspicion that so eagerly desires to see a political power play at every turn of history. As restated by Peter Jones, the canonical tradition was affirmed “by the time Constantine converted to Christianity and made it the faith of the Empire” and “with the new aid of state assistance a universal council could be convened to discuss issues of doctrine in relation to various theological challenges.” And yet, “far from being politically imperialistic, these councils were ecumenical in the truest sense... wherein the church also brought order to the church’s beliefs concerning the New Testament.”³⁴ And contrary to the revisionist interpretation that is promoted by some recent scholars with a bias for Nag Hammadi, it should therefore be concluded with Kurt Aland and others that:

In establishing the Canon, the Church authorities of the second and succeeding centuries only *subsequently* ratified the decisions which had already been reached by the Christian communities, or more exactly, by the individual believers. The organized Church as such did not create the Canon; it recognized the Canon which had already been created. It is only from the second half of the fourth century onwards, in connection with the closing of the Canon, that the Church authorities began to have any effect.”³⁵

Were there “other” interpretations even in the second century? Yes. But were they compatible with the *regula fidei* that was already in play and in continuity with the Old Testament as established *before* the second century even? No! This then brings us to our next topic of

³³ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁴ Jones, p. 147.

³⁵ Aland, *Problem...* p. 18. c.f., Luke Timothy Johnson’s review of Elaine Pagel’s, *Beyond Belief*, where he states, “Like many before her, then, Pagels seeks to secure her present commitment to a Christianity that is about “experience”—and to some vague extent about “spiritual practices” as well. Such experience is honored in those early expressions of Christianity that, she proposes, were rejected in favor of the canon of Scripture and the rule of faith (or creed). Welcome to another exercise in revisionist history.” Johnson, “Gnostic longings.” P. NA.

consideration. What of redemption is there in the Nag Hammadi texts and how do they compare to the redemption that is expounded in the canonical New Testament?

A Comparison of Nag Hammadi Christianity in the Gospel of Thomas and Canonical Christianity

Many people have seen Christianity as monolithic, as if it were a tradition that just keeps accreting and building and basically saying the same thing. We now see that Christianity, like Judaism, like Islam, is enormously diverse in its beginning and could have turned out very differently from what we see now. Some of the most fascinating discoveries in this find include the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of early sayings attributed to Jesus—it starts out with the words "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke and which the twin Thomas wrote down." The teaching we find in the Gospel of Thomas is very much like some of the teaching in other Christian texts, like the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in the New Testament. But some of it is radically different. Some of it looks like Buddhism, and may have in fact been influenced by a well-established Buddhist tradition at the time that these texts were first written. There were Buddhist missionaries in Alexandria, coming from Egypt, at the time.³⁶

These are extravagant words by Elaine Pagels concerning the meaning and value of the Gospel of Thomas. And yet, they are increasingly *not* exceptional. For instance, In *Lost Christianities, The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Bart Ehrman (chair of the religious studies department at North Carolina University) observes how “relative to Christianity, the most significant manuscript discoveries of modern times is the discovery of a library of texts in Upper Egypt near the village of Nag Hammadi—as significant for early Christian studies as the Dead Sea Scrolls were for early Jewish studies... And among the books of the Nag Hammadi library, none has provoked such attention and created such intellectual fervor and excitement as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the single most important non-canonical book yet to be uncovered, a collection of the sayings of Jesus, some of which may be authentic, many of which were previously unknown.”³⁷

The *Gospel of Thomas* consists of 114 sayings that are mostly introduced by “Jesus said...” There is no narrative to speak of-- no birth narrative, no baptism, no description of miracles, no descriptions of travels, no trails, no crucifixion or resurrection—nothing of a historical narrative of any

³⁶ Elaine Pagels, *The Politics Of Christianity...* p. NA.

³⁷ *Lost Christianities*, p. 51. There is little debate concerning the dating of the Coptic manuscripts themselves, placing them at around A.D. 350-400. And yet as Elaine Pagels’ observes, “scholars sharply disagree about the dating of the original (Greek) texts.” Perhaps some of them are not later than A.D.120-150 since Irenaeus of Lyons can acknowledge in A.D.180 that heretics (the so called alternative Christianities) “boast how they possess more gospels than there really are” as already having a “wide circulation—from Gaul through Rome, Greece and Asia Minor.” Elaine Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, p. xvi. Quoting Irenaeus *Libros Quinque Adversus Haereses* 3.11.9. For discussion on dating, see also J. M. Robinson, Introduction, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, (New York, 1977) p. 21-22. For other studies on the *Gospel of Thomas*, c.f. Richard Valantasis, *Gospel of Thomas* (London; New York : Routledge, 1997), Ray Summers, *Secret Sayings Of The Living Jesus; Studies In The Coptic Gospel According To Thomas*, (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1968), Marvin W.Meyer, *Secret Gospels : Essays On Thomas And The Secret Gospel Of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, c2003), Bertil Edgar, *Theology Of The Gospel of Thomas*. Translated by Eric J. Sharpe. (London, Collins, 1961), Stevan Davies, L., *Gospel of Thomas And Christian Wisdom* (New York : Seabury Press, 1983), John Dart, *Unearthing The Lost Words Of Jesus : The Discovery And Text Of The Gospel of Thomas*, Introduction by John Dominic Crossan (Berkeley, Calif. : Seastone, 1998).

kind. And the sayings themselves represent no real organizing pattern. And yet what makes the *Gospel of Thomas* especially interesting is that over half of the sayings are similar to sayings in the New Testament Gospels.³⁸ The fact that some of the sayings are shorter and simpler than the canonical counterparts have led some to believe that the *Gospel of Thomas* is earlier than, or contemporary with, the writings of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Bart Ehrman, for instance, has observed that many of the sayings in *The Gospel of Thomas* “are pithier and more succinct than their canonical counterparts,” suggesting that “Thomas presents a more accurate version of the comparable sayings than say Matthew, Mark and Luke.”³⁹ Examples cited include teachings on the Mustard Seed (Saying # 20 and Mk.4:30-31), the “Blind leading the Blind (Saying # 34, Mt.15:14) and some of the beatitudes (Saying # 54 and Lk.6:20). Moreover, given that there are few “word for word” agreements to support Thomas’ dependence on the synoptic gospels, “most,” according to Ehrman, “think instead that he was working with oral sources... some similar to Synoptics, some like the Synoptics with a twist, some not like the Synoptics at all.”⁴⁰ This perspective would place the *Gospel of Thomas* in the late first century even.

Other scholars with Quispel et. al. (who first published *The Gospel of Thomas*) believe that the *Gospel of Thomas* dates back to around A.D.140 as substantiated by Greek fragments that date back to that period.⁴¹ This then could suggest a dependence upon, and even response to, the canonical gospels. For instance, many sayings will begin in a similar fashion as the canonical gospels, but will then deviate significantly to another direction or meaning, such as saying #2 that begins like Mt. 7:7-8 “Seek and you shall find” but then concludes with saying that those who “find” will “become troubled.”⁴² Moreover, there are a significant number of sayings that will sound altogether different than what Jesus said in the canonical gospels.⁴³ These sayings portray a salvation that is already within humanity needing to be discovered and is in stark contrast to the stress of canonical Christianity wherein salvation comes to humanity from another realm. It could therefore be concluded that the *Gospel of Thomas* was compiled later than, and in some measure dependent upon, the canonical sources, albeit with a Gnostic emphasis.

As summarized by Harry Gamble

Where the parallels are close, in most cases there can be little doubt that the form presented by Thomas is secondary. In other cases, however, comparison suggests that logia in Thomas derive from a source common to it and the canonical Gospels. It would appear that the compiler of the Gospel of Thomas who seems to have written in Syria about A. D. 140 also made use of the Gospel of the Egyptians and the Gospel according to the Hebrews. Although the Gospel of Thomas is based largely on a selection of material from the church’s gospels, more than once its author gives a Gnostic twist to

³⁸ 79 of 114 by one account. C.f. *Lost Christianities*, p. 55.

³⁹ *Lost Christianities*, p. 56.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 58.

⁴¹ Pagels in *Gnostic Gospels*, p. xvi. C.f. M. Malanine, Puech, G. Quispel, W. Till, R. McL. Wilson, *Evangelium Veritatis* (Zurich and Stuttgart, 1961), Introduction. C.f. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, p. 53.

⁴² C.f. Saying 72 compared to Luke 12:13-14, Saying 113 compared to Mk.13:4 or Luke 17:20-21 to name but a few.

⁴³ C.f. sayings #3, 11, 37 and 70 pertaining to a Gnostic conception of salvation without a savior—see below.

*canonical sayings in Jesus as well as incorporating sayings from other sources.*⁴⁴

It is therefore significant to recognize the very different and even incompatible teachings of the *Gospel of Thomas* in comparison to the canonical Gospels, especially in so far as the *Gospel of Thomas* is popularly being interpreted as a sample of *Gnostic Christianity*.⁴⁵ For to the degree that the salvation offered in the *Gospel of Thomas* is of an entirely different sort than what is advocated in the canonical gospels after the expectations of the Old Testament, it begs the question regarding the validity of one or the other, not both. For even Andrew Harvey, a zealous advocate for the *Gospel of Thomas* concedes the point,

There appear to be at least two divergent streams of Christian tradition in the first century, streams that made use of the kinds of sayings we find in the *Gospel of Thomas* and in the canonical gospels. It is very likely if not certain, that at least one of them did not originate with Jesus himself.⁴⁶

First, that the *Gospel of Thomas* is even about *some* kind of salvation, and that this salvation has to do with eternal life even, is made plain in saying #1 where Jesus is remembered as saying, *Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death*. Throughout therefore the *Gospel of Thomas*, the promise of never tasting ultimate and everlasting death is held out as an ultimate goal.⁴⁷ And of course, in this regard there is general agreement with canonical Christianity.⁴⁸ But for all practical purposes, this is where agreement ends and mutually incompatible systems of beliefs begin. And to be sure, *Gnostic Christianity* is an alternative system of “beliefs,” not *Beyond Belief* as Pagels has argued. It is an *alternative* belief as related to a very different conception of both the problem related to death, and the solution that leads to life. However then one understands the ultimate “problem” and “solution,” it will involve the inter-relationship of mutually exclusive beliefs as pertaining to cosmology, sin, anthropology, soteriology and of course Christology. As acknowledged by Ehrman: “here is a gospel that is concerned for salvation,” and yet as we will see, “it is a salvation that did not consider Jesus death and resurrection to be significant.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Harry Gamble, *The Canon of the New Testament*...p. 85-86. Three examples of giving a Gnostic twist to canonical sayings noted by Gamble are sayings # 37, 77, 112.

⁴⁵ C.f. footnote # 8. The two primary sources for this interpretation in this essay will be Elaine Pagels in both her *Gnostic Gospels*, and *Beyond Belief* and Bart Ehrmans, *Lost Christianities*. In support of a Gnostic interpretation, it is noted first that a majority of the documents discovered at Nag Hammadi are closely tied into one or another of the various forms of religious belief and identity of Gnosticism. Secondly, and against those who fear that interpreting Thomas from a Gnostic perspective requires one to import Gnosticism into a text that does not itself show signs of Gnostic perspectives, it is argued by Ehrman that “there are Gnostic perspectives in the text and that a Gnostic understanding of Thomas” even as this “helps to explain some of the more difficult sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas*.” *Lost Christianities*, p. 59.

⁴⁶ Andrew Harvey, “Forward,” *The Gospel of Thomas Annotated and Explained* by Stevan Davies (Woodstock Vt: SkyLight Paths, 2002) p. xxii.

⁴⁷ Sayings #18, 19, 85, 111.

⁴⁸ John 8:52, ‘Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.’ C.f. John 11:26 “and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

⁴⁹ *Lost Christianity*, p. 58.

The Problem According To Gnostic Christianity:

According to Gnostic Christianity in comparison to Canonical Christianity, the ultimate problem that leads to death is fundamentally cosmological vs. moral. If for example the canonical conception of “sin” pertains to a moral problem of pride such as to mistaken our *image glory* for intrinsic *glory* itself (or a glory that is derived from being made in the image of God vs. that glory that is not derived or contingent upon any other⁵⁰), then Gnostic Christianity assumes the exact opposite problem as pertaining to the “sin” of false humility. And yet, this begs the question as to why our true exalted identity has been lost according to Gnostic Christianity. The answer is perfectly illustrated in one of the few dialogues recorded in the *Gospel of Thomas*.

According to saying # 13, it is purported that Jesus said to his disciples, *"Compare me to something and tell me what I am like."* And after Peter responds *you are like a messenger*, and Matthew responds *you are like a wise philosopher*, Thomas confesses, *teacher, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like*. Here again, it is a knowledge that is a secret as to imply a knowledge that is ordinarily veiled. Regarding the nature of the veil itself, notice how Jesus' response is to compare Thomas's problem with the problem of drunkenness.

Jesus said, "I am not your teacher. Because you have become drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended."

Elsewhere in the *Gospel of Thomas*, to be “drunk” is likened unto to a spirit entrapped within the impoverishment of a material world and worldview even. In saying # 28 for instance, being “drunk” is akin to being intoxicated by the *world of flesh* wherein Christ stood in their midst, even as this made *humanity blind in their hearts and unable to see, for they came into the world empty, and they also seek to depart from the world empty*. Immediately after this statement in saying # 29, Jesus said, *"If the flesh came into being because of spirit, that is a marvel, but if spirit came into being because of the body, that is a marvel of marvels*. In other words, the “spirit” is prior to the “body” as related to a true anthropology, even as the flesh (body) obscures this reality. As commented by Ehrman, “it is like being drunk and not being able to think straight, or being blind and unable to see.” It is to be intoxicated with a philosophy that is bound to materiality as its ultimate beginning. As further explained by Ehrman, the overarching worldview of the Gnostic Christianity reflected in the *Gospel of Thomas* is that

The material world we live in is awful at best and evil at worst, that it came about as part of a cosmic catastrophe, and that the spiritual beings who inhabit it (e.g. human spirits) are entrapped or imprisoned here. Most of the people imprisoned in the material world of the body, however, do not realize the true state of things; they are like a drunk person who needs to become sober or like someone sound asleep who needs to be awakened. In fact, the human spirit does not come from this world, it comes from the

⁵⁰ c.f. Rom. 1:18ff

*world above, from the divine realm. It is only when it realizes its true nature and origin that it can escape this world and return to the blessed existence of its eternal home.*⁵¹

In short therefore, the Gnostic system of belief starts with the premise that all things created in the natural realm of material existence is the problem in that it obscures divinity, not least of which our own! The created order of corporeal existence is a world that veils the real world. As such, the material realm of nature is something we need to escape, if not something to be destroyed altogether. According then to saying # 37, coming to the realization of the worthlessness of this material world, is like being *stripped of our clothing without being ashamed, and you take your clothes and put them under your feet like little children and trample them*. The result? According to the same saying, *Then [you] will see the son of the living one and you will not be afraid*. Here again, we are to be stripped of the material world in order to see true reality as pertaining to our own divinity. The material world, in that it obscures this reality, needs to be trampled.

Finally, the problem according to the Gnostic system of beliefs is predicated upon a cosmological dualism between the material and spiritual, body and soul respectively. As summarized by Johnson:

Although it is impossible to systematize these revelations--indeed, much of Gnostic literature remains unintelligible to us--they have certain common traits that, when combined, form an alternative version of Christianity. These common traits all arise from a fundamental dualism that privileges the spirit and deprecates the body. For the Gnostics, what is precious and salvageable in humans is the divine spark of spirit within them, the piece of the divine that somehow got lost and trapped in bodies. This material world, indeed, came about through the ignorance or malice of a lesser god.⁵²

Throughout then the *Gospel of Thomas*, just as we were once a unified spirit, the problem according to Gnostic Christianity is that we are now “entrapped in a body” and have become “two things—body and spirit—not one. The spirit must escape and then it will be one again.”⁵³ Thus, salvation is portrayed as becoming “one” again in order to be reunited with the divine realm.

When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom].” (Saying #22)

Albeit parenthetically, we should notice how according to the *Gospel of Thomas*, it is evidently more of a problem to be female than male in the process toward oneness in spirit. For in relation to the meaning of salvation, it is taught that a woman must first become a male in process to the ultimate

⁵¹ *Lost Christianities*, p. 59.

⁵² Johnson, *New Gnosticism*, p. NA.

⁵³ *Lost Christianities*, p. 61.

discovery of her divinity as again reiterated in saying #114.⁵⁴ According to Bart Ehrman, this teaching assumes a Gnostic conception that “people generally understood gender relations—male and female—as not two kinds of humans, but as two degrees of human... this is supposedly in keeping with the Greek and Roman world where women were widely understood to be imperfect men, even that a woman was an underdeveloped man.”⁵⁵ In essence, it was believed that women were more material than men, as to be further away from the knowledge of the divine spark within. In order then for a woman to be saved, she must first pass from “lower to higher forms of identity, ultimately to the self-awareness of divinity itself.” Accordingly, salvation for the *Gospel of Thomas* “presupposes a unification of all things so that there is no up and down, in and out, male and female, and requires that all divine spirits return to their place of origin. But for women to achieve this salvation, they must first become male. The knowledge that Jesus reveals allows for that transformation, so that every woman who makes herself male, through understanding this teaching, will enter then into the kingdom.”⁵⁶

The Gnostic Solution:

If according to *Gospel of Thomas* the ultimate human problem is to be intoxicated by the “flesh” (meaning corporeal materiality) as to obscure our true divine identity, the solution in the *Gospel of Thomas* is to know oneself truly which is first to be *disturbed* by our materiality, even if to *marvel* at our spirituality. (Saying #1) Why is it that the *dead are not living and the living will not die* (saying #11)? Because according to Ehrman, “the dead are merely matter, and yet what is not matter but spirit can never die.” In other words, to *know the world* is to *discover the body*, and *whoever has discovered the body, of that one the world is not worthy* (Saying #80). And yet, *when you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty* (Saying #3). As summarized by Elaine Pagels, the “secret of gnosis” according to the Gnostic gospels in the *Gospel of Thomas* is “that to know yourself, at the deepest level is simultaneously to know God.”⁵⁷

Accordingly, the *Gospel of Thomas* will suggest a very different soteriology than is presented in the canonical gospels, one that is decidedly more “Gnostic” in tone pointing to the discovery of something we have within ourselves as the basis of our salvation. For instance:

⁵⁴ According to Myer, saying #114 was added to the *Gospel of Thomas* at a later date. In keeping however with saying #22 it reads, “Simon Peter said to them, “Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life.” Jesus said, “Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.”

⁵⁵ *Lost Christianity*, p. 54.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵⁷ Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, p. xix.

When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty."
(Saying 3)

Or, Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you [will] kill you." (Saying 70)⁵⁸

What both of these sayings have in common is a salvation without a savior, classically understood. In fact, there is not even one reference to "savior" in the entire *Gospel of Thomas*. Rather, everything needed for salvation is portrayed as already within us. It is "when you know yourself" as to "bring forth what is within you" that a person is saved. And if what we need to save us is not *already* within us, then what we do not have *already* will kill us. Salvation as such is not something that comes to the world from God, but rather is something already in this world, albeit obscured by the material world, and needing to be discovered in order to leave this sad world. Jesus is purported as saying, *the heavens and the earth will roll up in your presence, and whoever is living from the living one will not see death* (saying #111). In other words, it is in the discovery that we are "living from the living one" (God) that will result our *not seeing death*. Likewise, it is when we recognize in ourselves one *who came into being before coming into being...* that we *will not taste death*.⁵⁹ Where then is the kingdom of God?

According to saying # 49, *you have come from it, and you will return there again*. Therefore,

If they say to you, 'Where have you come from?' say to them, 'We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established [itself], and appeared in their image.' If they say to you, 'Is it you?' say, 'We are its children, and we are the chosen of the living Father.' If they ask you, 'What is the evidence of your Father in you?' say to them, 'It is motion and rest.' (Saying 50)

As then related to Christology proper, Jesus is no different by nature than all the rest of humanity, just further advanced in his self-discovery as to guide others. And as revealed in secret to Thomas, to "drink" of the teachings or worldview of Christ according to saying # 108, *is to become like me [Jesus]; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to him*. Here again, Jesus is not uniquely divine, but is divine in the same sense that all humanity is divine, even if Jesus is a spiritual guide to this reality. According then to the Gnostic framework, Jesus was a man who for a time was possessed as it were by an emanation sent from the realm of divine fullness to disclose a secret- one that was secretly passed down by means of unconventional secret bearers, those who with the help of Jesus had discovered their own divine spark within. How then can Christ enter into this world of matter and not be tainted by it? Some took the line of Marcion—that Jesus was not a flesh and blood human but only appeared to be so (E.g. "in the "likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom.8:3) taken literally). Others

⁵⁸ All quotations from the *Gospel of Thomas* are taken from "The "Scholars' Translation" of the *Gospel of Thomas* by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer taken from *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*. (Polebridge Press, 1992, revised, 1994).

⁵⁹ Saying # 19.

believed that Christ was a divine emissary from above, totally spirit, that he only temporarily entered the man Jesus in order to convey the knowledge.

As such, the work of Christ, as related to his person, is not the work of savior by means of a unique “God-man” in relation to his unique mediatorial role as to reconcile God to humanity. Rather the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* is a spiritual guide targeting our need for spiritual enlightenment into the reality of our own divine identity. As noted by Pagels, “orthodox Jews and Christians insist that a chasm separates humanity from its creator: God is wholly other, the Gnostic contradict this: self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical.”⁶⁰

In summary therefore, and according to Peter Jones, the gist of the Gnostic conception of salvation, especially as reflected in Elaine Pagels *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* is that “the Gnostic Jesus comes from the same message as the serpent, not to free us from our sin, but to free us from our ignorance. We do not know who we really are. He brings us Gnosis knowledge. And the knowledge is this—we are divine!”⁶¹ It is noted in the *Gospel of Thomas* for instance that *Adam came from great power and great wealth, but he was not worthy of you. For had he been worthy, [he would] not [have tasted] death.*⁶² In other words, Adam, and all of humanity after him, should have listened to the serpent’s liberating revelations concerning our true identity— even a divine identity according to the *secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and recorded by Didymos Judas Thomas*. This “secret” according to Thomas is viewed as an elitist knowledge set in contrast to canonical Christianity.

Here again, the teachings are contextualized within Thomas’s dialogue with Jesus. And in response to Thomas’ confession of ignorance concerning the true identity of Jesus, we are told that *Jesus took him, and withdrew, and spoke three sayings to him*. Reminiscent of Matthew 16 wherein Peter is granted “to know” what others do not, here it is Thomas, not Peter, who is granted the insiders scoop, even as it will remain an insider’s knowledge for the select few. And so, according to the *Gospel of Thomas*, when Thomas came back to his friends they asked him, “What did Jesus say to you?”

Thomas said to them, "If I tell you one of the sayings he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me, and fire will come from the rocks and devour you."

Evidently, it is part of the nature of salvation to remain a secret to some, and especially to those representing canonical Christianity! And most notably, they are sayings that if known by Matthew (as per Matthew’s gospel?) and Peter (as per the gospel of Mark?) would put Thomas and his followers in harms way (an illusion to the second century condemnations against Gnostic Christianity and perhaps even Marcion?)

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. xx.

⁶¹ Jones, p. 166. C.f Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York : Random House, 1988).

⁶² Saying # 85.

As explained by Ehrman, “the Gnostics considered themselves to be the spiritual elite, who could confess the creeds of other Christians, read the Scriptures of other Christians, partake of baptism and Eucharist with other Christians, but who believed that they had a deeper, more spiritual secret understanding of these creeds, Scriptures and sacraments... they not only reinterpreted the gospels in their “secret” ways—but used their own writings as if always from a private, exclusive encounter or revelation from Christ.” And “the key to Gnostic salvation is to find the secret that will enable us to find our way back” through the veil of our material realities to “the fullness realm” of true deities from whence we originated, a realm of an ultimately unknowable God in himself.⁶³ As we shall see, both the problem and solution in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* is diametrically opposite the canonical gospel.

The Problem According to Canonical Christianity:

In stark contrast to Gnostic Christianity, the ultimate problem for humanity is presented as a moral problem vs. a cosmological problem, as to recognize no distinction between any class of people, as will hold true for the solution as well.⁶⁴ For according to the apostle Paul, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”⁶⁵ Contra the elitist nature of Gnostic knowledge as obscured by materiality, canonical Christianity presents the knowledge of God as universally available, even as God has gone to great extremes by means of both natural and redemptive history to make himself known to all people everywhere! For instance, the canonical gospels will assume the Old Testament *regula fidei* as told in Psalm 119 wherein *the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.* Moreover, as repeated over and over again by the Old Testament prophets, all of the redemptive activity of God is set into the context of God’s self-revelation in order that “the nations shall know that I am the LORD.”⁶⁶

Rather than an insider’s knowledge, the Bible presents the knowledge of God without exception as universally known! Accordingly, the New Testament proclaims that *what can be known about God is plain* to humanity, *because God has shown it to them.*⁶⁷ Therefore, the “problem” that is addressed in the canonical version of Christianity is *not* a problem of cosmology as related to epistemology. The truth

⁶³ Lost Christianities, p.126.

⁶⁴ C.f. Romans 3:22, 10:12.

⁶⁵ Gal. 3:28

⁶⁶ c.f. Ezekiel 36:22ff. “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name...I will sanctify my great name... and the nations shall know that I am the LORD.”

⁶⁷ Romans 1:19ff.

about God is pouring in to us from all dimensions if we only have our eyes open to see it. In the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush aflame with God;
But only those who see take off their shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

According then to canonical Christianity, and contrary to the problem that is presented in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, the problem is not cosmological but moral. It is not that God has kept himself hidden or that the identity of Jesus is somehow obscured by human materiality such that the “good news” is kept as an insider’s privy. Rather, the story is told that because humanity is made in the image of God, this image was mistaken out of false pride (vs. false humility) such as to confuse the *imago dei* with *dei* itself. It is precisely the Gnostic way of salvation that is the problem! For notwithstanding the uniquely exalted status of humanity in the image of God, humanity succumbed to pride as to assume to itself what can only be assumed of God—the status of divinity—again the very thing that is being advocated by the Gnostic gospels. Indeed, this was the temptation of the serpent and the temptation of Babel and continues even to this day according to canonical Christianity consistent with Old Testament *regula fidei*.

Therefore, the “sin” of canonical Christianity is not false humility, but false pride. And its effect upon God, who is wholly other in all aspects of his being, is the very thing so offensive to the true God as to effect our communion with God. It is representative of a misplaced love as reflected in a disregard for the living giving law of God. As explained by the apostle Paul, even though *all humanity knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him*. The result is that humanity exchanged the *glory of the immortal God for an image*.

In keeping then with the Old Testament *regula fidei*, Jesus is portrayed as continuing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets wherein with Isaiah, Jesus could say of those who rejected his message that *while seeing, they do not see*, even as the parables of Jesus were meant to enact this idea after the tradition of the prophetic enactment prophecies of old.⁶⁸ Why doesn’t humanity “see?” According to Jesus, it is because only the *pure in heart that see God*, as to require a special grace of illumination by the Holy Spirit. (c.f. 1 Cor. 2:14ff) And yet, for the present purpose it is important to observe how this salvation is presented as anything but a secret. It is rather something that is “a lamp,” wherein *no one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lamp stand, so that those who enter may see the light*. What then was the solution according to the canonical Jesus?

⁶⁸ c.f. Pss. 119:1-4, Roman 1:18ff, Mt. 13:13ff, Luke 8:16.

The Canonical Solution:

If Gnostic Christianity envisions a salvation without a savior, canonical Christianity is replete with references to salvation by means of a savior who comes from another realm to humanity. And in so far as this salvation from heaven is related to the coming of God to humanity, it is a salvation that is perfectly aligned with the experience and expectations derived from the Old Testament conception of God as Savior.⁶⁹

More specifically, canonical Christianity will teach that the ultimate solution to “death” is related to an objective and historical work of God as ultimately accomplished in the person and work of the historical Jesus. This of course will assume a problem that cannot be resolved by humanity acting on behalf of itself, even as this is related to the problem itself in regards to the conception of sin. And with God acting for humanity, the principle of grace is introduced. It is a soteriology that focuses upon something that is objectively accomplished for humanity, freely offered and only subjectively received by faith. Accordingly, Jesus is presented within canonical Christianity as the Jewish “Christ” whose significance is directly related to his unique person in relation to his unique work after the priestly pattern of canonical Judaism and its sacrificial system. Humanity as such, is viewed as passive in salvation, again except in so far as humanity is subjectively involved in the reception of the benefits of Christ’s work by faith-- which is itself a disposition of “self-renouncing faith” for salvation.⁷⁰ Therefore, a good summary of the whole scheme of salvation according to canonical Christianity can be found in Ephesians, where after summarizing the initiating activity of a Triune God according to chapter 1, the apostle Paul writes in chapter 2,

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.⁷¹

To be sure, there is a “revelation” involved, as to target a great “mystery” even. And yet, the canonical mystery is resolved outside of humanity per se, as “set forth in Christ” (Eph.1:9) who is uniquely God and human. As such, Jesus, the person, is presented as uniquely qualified to the work of mediator between God and humanity by means of his priestly and sacrificial work as was ultimately

⁶⁹ The term “savior” appears 51 times in the New Testament. C.f. Luke 1:47, 69, 2:11, John 4:42, Acts 5:31, Philip. 3:20, Titus 1:4, 3:3, etc. Old Testament references to Yahweh as “savior” include 2Sam.22:3, 17:7, Is. 43:3, 11, Hos. 13:4, etc.

⁷⁰ See for instance Rom. 3:25 as related to the priestly and sacrificial aspects of the Levitical Priesthood in Lev.16, especially 11-17 pertaining to the “mercy seat” or “seat of atonement” referenced in Rom. 3. C.f. Hebrews 2:17, 3:1, 4:14ff, chapter 7-10:12.

⁷¹ Ephesians 2:4-10. NRSV

accomplished by his historical death and resurrection and continued by in his ascension ministry on behalf of humanity acting in and through the visible means of grace in the church.⁷² It is a grace entirely accessible to humanity. And it is a mystery that is not secret by virtue of anything cosmological, as for instance to do with materiality such as to obscure spirituality. Rather, it is a “mystery” that is progressively been revealed throughout the redemptive history of canonical Old Testament and most fully exposed in the redemptive activity of Jesus as the Christ in relation to the canonical New Testament. As then revealed in the person and work of Christ, humanity is able to see beyond our subjectivity to that which is objectively outside of ourselves as the basis for eternal life, even if again to impact our subjectivity in the experience of grace.

In other words, according to canonical Christianity there is something about the “problem” that requires an all together objective solution, one that is apart from anything accomplished in, with or by humanity, even if subjectively received by faith in order to enjoy the benefits. On the other hand, in Gnostic Christianity, the whole of salvation is something entirely subjective, as pertaining to a problem of knowledge about oneself needing then to be exposed by the aid of Jesus who is the ultimate spiritual guide to this higher knowledge of oneself. There is, in short, a passive dimension to salvation according to the canonical gospel, one that will lead us to discover a sovereign grace that is unto salvation, even if received as a gift by faith. On the contrary, there is no such sovereign grace that is exhibited on behalf of, and for, humanity as exhibited in canonical Christianity, according to Gnostic Christianity.

And if the whole scheme of Thomas is the journey to oneness with our divinity by throwing off all things material and created, including gender. The salvation of canonical Christianity will want to redeem *all* things material and created. For instance, the picture one gets of creation in canonical Christianity is an expectantly longing, after the likeness of a woman in childbirth, for its own restoration and “new birth,” even as salvation ends not with the destruction of heaven and earth, but with a renewed heaven and earth.⁷³ As pertaining to the peculiar idea of gender inequality in Gnostic Christianity, there is neither “male nor female” in the canonical gospel (Gal. 3:28), even as this is related to equal access to the one mediator between God and humanity in the person and work of Christ by faith alone. (Gal. 3:19, 23ff).

Therefore, notwithstanding that some have viewed the teaching of 1 Timothy 2:11ff as pertaining to an oppressive concept in the Bible, as if women are “saved by childbirth.” The vision of Christianity that is expressed in this passage actually assumes the whole of the Old Testament story of redemption as to include the vital role of women! More specifically, the tri-fold reference of “creation,

⁷² 1 Tim. 2:5-6.

⁷³ c.f. Romans 8: 22 “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. See also, 2Pet. 1:3 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

fall and redemption” in 1 Tim.2:1 Iff is most likely meant to be interpreted as a single trajectory directed to the redemptive-historical meaning of salvation that is accomplished from out of the seed of women! That is, a redemptive historical reading of 1 Timothy 2:1 Iff suggests that the redemption accomplished by God through the “seed of the women” in child birth is a promise that was first realized typologically through Eve (named “mother of life” as evidence of Adam’s faith in the promise of salvation), as then continued in redemptive history in the birth of Seth-- especially as Seth sets up the history of the elect in Genesis leading to the salvation of Israel by Moses, etc.

In short, whereas the Gnostic gospel wants to differentiate between male and female as to place women at a greater distance from the divinity within, canonical Christianity recognizes the crucial role of the "matriarch" as related to the "promise" in Genesis-- where the true heir of the promise was always carefully protected through the mothers line. Salvation then is not by virtue of becoming an androgynous deity rid of all things “created, material and gender.” Rather it is to redeem all things material and spiritual to a glorified state in a bodily resurrection wherein the soul that is temporarily separated from the body at death is ultimately reunited after the return of Christ. There is in short a continuity between this material world and the next.⁷⁴

Conclusion:

In sum, the Gnostic vision of salvation represented a radically different view of the world than canonical Christianity. Notwithstanding then the things already noted, perhaps what is most absent, given the assumptions of the Gnostic Gospel, is the absence of “grace” if by grace it is assumed a kind of favor that is bestowed upon those that ill deserve it. At best, Jesus sets us on a never ending journey of self-discovery, where again in the words of one proponent of the Nag Hammadi variety of Christianity, we are called not to a savior, but to a “deeper insight” wherein “the distinction between savior and saved ceases to exist” such that “you must save yourself and in doing so save God.”⁷⁵ Jesus is merely a helping guide to our own burden of self-discovery. And if this whole scheme sounds familiar but not according to traditional Christianity, Elaine Pagels will direct us to an ancient convergence of east with west (a convenient post-modern dictum to be sure). Accordingly, British scholar of Buddhism, Edward Conze has noted “that the living Buddha appropriately could say what the *Gospel of Thomas* attributes to the living Jesus.” And the similarities are not, according to Pagels, a coincidence. For it is pointed out

⁷⁴ 1 Cor. 15:42, “So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

⁷⁵ Introduction to the *Secret Book of John*

how “Buddhists were in contact with the Thomas Christians (Christians who knew and used such writing as the *Gospel of Thomas*) in South India.”⁷⁶

To be sure, even a cursory review of the Gnostic teachings of Thomas compared to canonical Christianity reflects two very different, mutually incompatible gospels. And especially concerning the issue of a *regula fidei* consistent with the Old Testament, Peter Jones has noted how “the most striking theme common to all fifty-two texts discovered at Nag Hammadi is the rejection of the Genesis creation account” and the subsequent history of redemption that this brings about. According to Jones’ rather strident evaluation of the recent commentaries on Gnostic teaching, “Yahweh of the Old Testament is presented as the first and mightiest of all oppressive patriarchs.” He is the “heavenly “ counterpart of all blustering macho brutes who think they know everything because they are male.” Creation itself is perverse such that the “true believer must be liberated from such earthly constraints... and laws,” even as “Yahweh made up the law for the purpose of an unholy oppression.” In this way of thinking, “there is no sin” and “the fall of Genesis. 3 is really a liberation, and the serpent of the garden speaks wisdom.”

Assuming then a very different, even opposite problem, a very different solution is required—and consequently a very different conception of the person and work of the historical Jesus. For if the Gnostic version of Christianity will focus on an entirely subjective aspect within humanity that is according to the principle of a human search, the canonical focus is on an objective work of God in “the Christ” on behalf of humanity as related to the historical Jesus according to the principle of grace unto salvation. It has been argued that, whatever else is true about the *Gospel of Thomas*, it cannot be read as an alternative *tradition* concerning the teachings of Jesus *along side* of the canonical *tradition*. It is either an alternative *interpretation* of an otherwise pre-existent orthodox tradition, or it is the pre-existent orthodox tradition that was later rejected and supplanted by the power elite of the fourth century in order to bolster a political platform. Which is it? Which “gospel,” according to which “canon,” represents the real Jesus? Our answer has argued for the “Jesus” that is consistent with the *regula fidei* in succession to the Old Testament that predates even the earliest proposed dating of Thomas, against which all successive traditions and texts should be measured?

This then raises the question as to why the renewed interest in Gnostic Christianity and the corresponding new perspective on canon. And to be sure, the allure of Gnostic Christianity, and especially if supported by a proposed new canon of scripture dating back roughly to the same period as the traditional canon ought not to be underestimated, especially in the post-modern contexts such as urban centers and university towns. For within this allure are sympathies that are now wholly familiar

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. xxi. C.f. p. xxi for a summary of this theory. Also E. Conze, “Buddhism and Gnosis” in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina 13-18, Aprile 1966* (Leiden, 1967), 665. Note also comment by Hippolytus, REF 8. 15.1-2 to this effect as noted by Pagels.

to these contexts—most especially, the hermeneutic of suspicion and a tendency toward revisionist historiography that embraces the idea of pluralism and the desire for inclusivity of other world religions. AS then observed by Luke Johnson,

One “shared perception of the educated is that all transcendent claims can be reduced to politics. There is no arena of activity free from human self-interest, even religion. The “hermeneutics of suspicion,” so prevalent in the academy, detects whose interest is at work in any historical development, and the demand for the “recovery of other voices” is thought necessary for a more liberating politics in the present. “

Moreover, Johnson also acknowledges that the brilliance of the Gnostic position lay in its ability to claim a form of Christianity that was more inclusive (it was universal in scope) and at the same time appropriately exclusive.” In other words, “the Gnostics achieved “true” Christianity precisely by transcending it.”⁷⁷ Moreover, as again noted by Johnson,

The pervasive prejudice against ecclesiastical institutions is exacerbated when bishops and priests are regularly exposed as less well read than the laity and, alas, not markedly more moral. In recent years, the same anti-institutional bias has strengthened an antipathy toward canon and creed. For many of the educated elite calling themselves Christian, it is now axiomatic that the New Testament canon is a political tool and inadequate to a fully mature spirituality. For some Christians, especially those for whom history has become the criterion of all truth and who have embraced the various versions of the historical Jesus, the Nicene Creed is increasingly unintelligible and alien, easily regarded as another instrument by which the ancient episcopate distorted Christianity.

In short, the Gnostic gospel supported by a Gnostic canon is perfectly suited to justify both what the canonical version would describe as the inherent temptation of original sin toward “thinking more highly of yourself than we ought, but also to the post-modern subjectivist and individualistic trend that seeks for a religion that is wholly anti-institutional. Notwithstanding these inherent and cultural inclinations, the canonical understanding has several things going for it relative to engaging the sympathies of even post-modern contexts. First, there is the yearning for an ancient precedence for faith that the Gnostic gospel cannot satisfy but that the canonical gospel can in continuity with the Old Testament *regula fidei*. Second, there is the offer of grace as predicated upon the objective and salvific work of a savior that is all together absent in the Gnostic version of Christianity. And third, there is the hopeful and positive perception of all things material and created, as to be included in the canonical conception of redemption in the resurrection that is wanting in the Gnostic conception of redemption. And finally, there is need to reaffirm the canonical understanding of “God with us” by means of the organic union that is offered to all who by faith are engrafted into the very life of God that is as accessible as the nearest sacramental church, wherein Christ fills all in all!

AS again observed by Johnson,

⁷⁷ Johnson, “Gnostic Longings,” p. NA.

If Pagels had aimed for something beyond easy (and by now stereotypical) revisionism, she might have shown how in the best realizations of Christianity the most robust spiritualities have not been replaced by but rather have thrived within the framework of the creed and canon. Alternatively, she might have used her undoubted knowledge of Gnostic texts to provide a full and responsible report of the sort of Christianity they really represent, or indicate how a community without institution, without canon, and without belief, could have provided an enduring framework for the sort of imagination for which she longs.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Ibid.