

THE Gnostics AND JESUS

BY TIM KELLER, Redeemer Report, March 2004

For some months I have been getting questions about the "Gnostic gospels" and *The Da Vinci Code*, so it seems right to give readers of this newsletter a bit of guidance. This is by no means a definitive response or analysis—it is more like pastoral counsel— but I hope it will clear up a few things.

The Gnostics' Jesus

In 1945 a red earthenware jar was found buried near Nag Hammadi, a town in upper Egypt. Within thirteen papyrus books dating from A.D.350 were discovered. The writings were those of believers in the philosophy/religion of gnosticism. Gnosticism is heavily influenced by the Hellenistic understanding that the material world is evil and the spirit is good. Gnostics believed that the ultimate supreme God did not create the world, but rather a lesser god, a 'demiurge,' created the world poorly and imperfectly. The result was a material world filled with decay, weakness, and death. But Gnostics believed that human beings, though locked in this material body, have a spark of the higher spiritual reality within. This spark, if fanned into a flame, can liberate us and help us evolve back into spiritual perfection. This happens through a process of self-discovery, in which you discover your divine identity, you separate from the world by 'stripping off' the consciousness of the physical body, and you finally experience the kingdom of light, peace, and life.

The writings of Gnosticism were much wider than the Nag Hammadi texts, but what makes the NH texts different is that, as Craig Blomberg writes, they use the purported conversations of Jesus with his disciples as *"little more than an artificial framework for imparting Gnostic doctrine."* (The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, p.208) The most well known of these Gnostic-Jesus texts include "The Gospel of Thomas," the "Apocryphon of James," "The Gospel of Phillip" and "The Gospel of Truth."

The teachings of the gnostics' Jesus flatly contradicts the Jesus of the Bible. The Gnostic-Jesus says, *"When you come to know yourselves... you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty."* (Thomas-3) This reflects the Gnostic concept that self-consciousness of one's own divinity (rather than a new awareness of sinfulness and need) is the first step to salvation. The Gnostic- Jesus also says, *"When you disrobe yourselves and are not ashamed, and take your garments and lay them beneath your feet like little children, and tread upon them, then [shall ye see] the Son of the living One, and ye shall not fear."* (Thomas-37) This and the other 'undressing' saying (Thomas-21) urges us to 'disrobe,' to trample underfoot and despise the physical nature.

The most interesting statement of all is Thomas-71 where the Gnostic-Jesus says: *"I will destroy this house and no one will be able to rebuild it."* This is a clear contradiction of Jesus' saying in John 2 that though others would destroy his body, he would be resurrected. This reflects the gnostic disdain for the very idea of the resurrection. Since, in their view, the material world is an evil thing we must be freed from, the bodily resurrection is completely rejected. According to the gnostics, Jesus was not raised bodily, and neither will we be.

Lost Gospels?

Helmut Koester of Harvard has argued that the Nag Hammadi Gnostic-Jesus texts were written very early, almost as early as the Biblical gospels themselves. And Elaine Pagels, who did a doctorate under Koester at Harvard, has popularized this view in *The Gnostic Gospels* and the more recent *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*.

But this is very much a minority view across the field of scholarship. N.T.Wright says, "*It has long been the received wisdom among students of early Christianity that the Gospel of Thomas...found at Nag Hammadi...is a comparatively late stage in the development of Christianity.*" (New Testament and the People of God, p.436) The great majority of scholars believe the Gnostic-Jesus texts to have been written 100-200 years *after* the Biblical gospels, which all were written within the first 30-60 years after Jesus' death. Why this consensus?

As N.T. Wright points out in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, the early Christians were all Jews. Jews had a thoroughly different world-view than that of the Greeks or the gnostics. They believed firmly that this material world was made good (see Genesis 1) and that despite sin God was going to renew it and resurrect our bodies (Daniel 12:1-2.) Jews had no hope (or concept) of disembodied souls living apart from the body. What does this mean? We know from the Pauline letters, some written only 13 years after Jesus' death, that all the early Christians claimed to have met Jesus and that he was still alive. But it would have been impossible for Jewish believers to claim "Jesus is alive" without also believing he was raised physically from the dead.

Helmut Koester and others posit that the first Christians believed, as the gnostics, that Jesus was only 'spiritually risen' and decades later the idea of a bodily resurrection developed. But N.T. Wright shows that Christianity could never have arisen as a movement among Jews unless the original believers knew Jesus had been raised bodily from the dead. This means in turn that the attempt to create a Gnostic-Jesus must have been much later. The writings could not have represented an early but repressed true version of Jesus-faith. Wright asks: "*Which Roman emperor would persecute anyone for reading the Gospel of Thomas [since it so closely reflected Greek thinking]?...It should be clear that the talk about a spiritual 'resurrection' in the sense used by [the gnostic writings] could not be anything other than a late, drastic modification of Christian language.*" (Resurrection, p.550.) There is far, far more that could be said in criticism of the thesis that the Gnostic-Jesus is older than the Biblical Jesus. But I'll stop here.

The Da Vinci Code and Misogyny

The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown has become a best seller and, though it purports to be nothing but fiction, it takes up the basic ideas of The Gnostic gospels makes them the premise of the story. The story assumes that Jesus was not resurrected and did not claim to be God, but rather married Mary Magdalene. His true, original teachings are found in the gnostic writings. The Biblical gospels were written later and the original truth of Jesus' life and teaching was repressed by the church.

What can I say? It's only a novel —so how can you criticize it? It tries to make the case that the Gnostic-Jesus was the one who lived, not the real Jesus. But as we showed, the scholarly world sees very little evidence that this is the case. There are plenty of other incongruities and oddities about The Da Vinci Code, but I'll just mention one. The story lifts up the Gnostic gospels as the "truth" and depicts the church as a repressive regime that wants to hide the importance of Mary Magdalene as one of the early disciples. This gives the impression that the gnostic gospels are more pro-women than the Bible or traditional theology.

But the last saying in the Gospel of Thomas is far more misogynist than anything found in the Bible. *Simon Peter said to them: Let Mary go forth from among us, for women are not worthy of the life. Jesus said: Behold, I shall lead her, that I may make her male, in order that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who makes herself male shall enter into the kingdom of*

heaven. (Thomas-114) This saying reflects the low view of women in the Gnostic philosophy. It is ironic that the author of the Da Vinci Code thinks the Gnostic- Jesus was friendlier to women.

No changed lives

Thirty years ago when we were in seminary my wife and I (like all graduate students of Bible and theology) studied the Gnostic writings. A simple reading of the texts shows they reflect a vastly different world-view than that of the Bible. Even young seminary students could see it was an effort of a different religion to co-opt Jesus—and the effort failed miserably. That is a historical fact. Few took the Gnostic-Jesus seriously. There was no explosive movement of changed lives that resulted from these writings as like that with resulted from the proclamation of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And there won't be any explosion of changed lives today.

In the end, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, as the old proverb says. The Gnostic-Gospels fail in their fundamental definition —they are not **gospels**, good news. Instead of being the declaration of what God has done to accomplish salvation FOR us, they are just the same old same old—a rehash of self improvement techniques and (sometimes) good advice about ethical living. This is NOT the good news that transforms lives. It is merely, like all other religions besides the true Gospel, a do-it-yourself-salvation based on teachings which must be obeyed in order to reach enlightenment. Nothing could be farther from the true Gospel, the news that Jesus, by his life and death, has actually SAVED us and given us new life, free for the taking.