

## THE COPTIC Gnostic TEXTS FROM NAG HAMMADI

Andrew Helmbold

From the second until the fourth century the Christian church was engaged in a life and death struggle with a hydra-headed heresy known as Gnosticism. Out of this struggle came at least three important results: (1) The canon of the New Testament, (2) The creeds of the early church, (3) catholic Christendom. Until recently our resources for the study of early Christendom's great rival were exceedingly meager. They consisted of fragments of Gnostic works found in the church fathers, the statements of the fathers themselves, and three Gnostic codices: (1) Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae of the 5-6th century, containing the two *Books of Jeu* and an untitled work, (2) Codex Askewianus, of the 4th century, containing the *Pistis Sophia*, and (3) Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae 8502 of the 5th century containing *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Apocryphon of John* and *The Wisdom of Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> From these sources scholars have endeavored to reconstruct the origins, the theology or mythology, and the praxis of Gnosticism, and to evaluate its relationship to orthodox Christianity and other religions.

New light has been thrown on these subjects, as well as on many related topics, by the discovery in 1945, of a complete Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt.<sup>2</sup> This discovery has been hailed by some as the greatest manuscript find of the century, while others a little more cautious say it is at least as important as the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>3</sup> Because most of the texts are still unpublished, the importance of the find has not yet reached the general public, or even most of the scholarly world. Especially in the field of New Testament studies, they should cause a drastic revision of many theories now current.

The discovery consisted of thirteen codices dating from the 3rd and 4th centuries. Eleven still retain their soft leather bindings. Ten are almost complete, one has considerable lacunæ, two are fragmentary. Out of an original total of about 1000 pages, 794 are still intact, while additional pages are partially preserved. One codex fell into the hands of a dealer in antiquities and was purchased in 1952 by the Jung Institute of Zurich. One other was purchased in 1946 by the Coptic Museum at Cairo. The eleven other codices were eventually transferred to the Coptic Museum in 1952. Now a group of international scholars is at work editing and publishing the texts.

The thirteen codices contain 48 or 49 writings, of which only four are duplicates or triplicates.<sup>4</sup> Only two of these texts had ever been edited. In effect, we have at least 42 completely new writings to study. Of course, some of these were previously known from citations or references in the church fathers, but now the actual works, *in toto*, are brought to light. Possibly every Gnostic work mentioned in the fathers is included in the find.

By literary categories, the library consisted of Apocryphal Gospels, Acts and Epistles, Apocalypses, doctrinal treatises, Hermetic works, cosmogonies, etc. Classified linguistically, ten (at least) of the codices were in the Sahidic dialect, two others were thought to be an unknown dialect, but it may be Sahidic *mit Achmimisch einfluss*, while the Jung Codex is written in sub-Achmimic. However, scholars are inclined to posit Greek originals behind most if not all of the texts. More study of them may or may not prove the correctness of this view.

The Jung Codex consisted originally of 136-338 pages. There are 100 pages in the volume at Zurich while another 8 pages belonging to it repose in the collection at Cairo. This Codex contains five works: (1) *The Letter (or Apocryphon) of James*,

(2) *The Gospel of Truth*, (3) *The Epistle to Rheginos*, (4) *The Treatise on the Three Natures*, (5) *Prayers of Peter and Paul*. Its provenance, unlike the other codices, is from the philosophical Gnostics—the Valentinians. In fact, Dr. Quispel thinks *The Gospel of Truth* was written by Valentinus himself, and his colleague, Dr. Van Unnik, dates it ca. 140 A.D., before Valentinus broke with the church.<sup>5</sup> *The Gospel of Truth* has been edited and translated into the major scholarly languages<sup>6</sup> so it is available for study by interested persons (but kept tantalizingly from us by its prohibitive cost!)

*The Gospel of Truth* is not a Gospel, but a homily or treatise. It leans heavily on the New Testament, not by quotation, but by allusion, drawing frequently from John, Hebrews, and Revelation. It is informed by a Stoic conception of God as the All. It has no eschatology, no ethics, no Old Testament basis or bias, no harmatology—only *agnoia* & *pláne*. It describes Gnosis as a psychological experience, real or imagined, whereby “man is re-established in himself, again remembers himself, and becomes conscious of himself, of what he really is by nature and origin. In this way he knows or reknows himself in God, knows God, and becomes conscious of himself as an effluence from God and a stranger in the world. He thus acquires, with the possession of his ‘ego’ and his true and ontological being, the meaning of his destiny and the final certainty of his salvation, thus discovering himself as a being who, by right and for all eternity, is saved.”<sup>7</sup> Man is saved by the coming of a redeemer who is the manifestation of Truth, who abolishes ignorance. No wonder Irenaeus took up the cudgels (Adv. Haer. III, 11, 9) against such an incomplete if not totally false gospel.

The recovery of this text overthrows two theories previously advanced. Johannes Kreyenbuhl proposed in 1900 in *Das Evangelium der Wahrheit. Neue Losung der johanneischen Frage*. 2 vol. that the canonical Gospel of John is identical with *The Gospel of Truth*. Although the Gnostic work borrows from the Fourth Gospel, it is totally different in content and spirit. The other theory of G. A. van ben Eysinga is to the effect that the canonical Gospels are the “outcome of an historicization of an un-historical Gnostic Alexandrian Gosepl.”<sup>8</sup> Somewhat of “demythologization” in reverse! However, the recovered *Gospel of Truth* shows that the process flows the other way—the Gnostic works being dependent upon the canonical Gospels.

*The Gospel of Truth* shows that Valentinus derived his system from the New Testament, not from Pythagoras and Plato, as Hippolytus supposed (vi. 16). However, it presents Valentinianism in its formative stages, not in its full-blown development.

*The Apocryphon of James* has been discussed by Drs. Puech and Quispel in *Vigilae Christianae*, viii. (1954) and more recently in the same periodical (vol x, 1956) by Van Unnik, professor of New Testament Exegesis at Utrecht. The latter holds that it is not Gnostic at all, but simply unreflecting, vague Christianity. He dates it ca. 125-150 A.D. He finds in it relationships to the *Ascensions of Isaiah*. It claims to be a letter written by the Lord’s brother to an unknown person and contains revelations made to Peter and James by Christ before His ascension. It describes itself as an “apocryphon”, i.e., good tidings reserved for the inner circle. This group is described in *The Gospel of Truth* as the “perfect,” the Divine “Seed,” the “Children of God,” etc. The Letter, like many of the writings, is a translation from a Greek original. It opens with the common formula of Greek epistles.

Besides the Jung Codex, Doresse lists only one other work as written in sub-Achmimic.<sup>9</sup> However, other scholars have taken two codices to be in an unknown dialect. There is a corpus of Hermetica in Codex XI (Doresse, Codex VI). The re-

mainder of the texts are all Sethian, i.e., Barbelo-Gnostic. This is the vulgar Gnosticism which was Christianity’s great foe in the early centuries.

Unfortunately, aside from *The Gospel of Truth*, the only other texts published to date are those reproduced photographically in the *Coptic Gnostic Texts in the Coptic Museum at old Cairo*, Vol. I. This contains the last two pages of the *Discourse of Rheginos concerning the Resurrection* lost from the Jung Codex, six other pages from that codex, some fragments from another codex, and five of the seven works contained in Codex III (Doresse, Codex X). They are: *The Apocryphon of John*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Phillip*, *the Hypostasis of the Archons* (i.e., the *Book of Noria*), and an untitled book devoted to Pistis Sophia. At present the *Gospel of Thomas* is being edited and translated and will be available next year. The scholars who are working on the text report that it is not identical with the Apocryphal Gospel of that name, but is a complete collection of the *Logia* of Jesus. Its beginning is like that of Oxyrhynchos Papyrus No. 654. Dr. Quispel now ventures the suggestion that these *Logia* may have come from the *Gospel of the Hebrews* which evidently was used by Tatian, along with the four canonical Gospels in compiling the *Diatessaron*.<sup>10</sup> About half of its 114 *Logia* are of a type which fit into the jig-saw puzzle of textual criticism. More anon!

*The Apocryphon of John* has been known from the mention made of it by Irenaeus, ca. 180. In 1895 an actual copy of it was discovered in the Codex Berolinensis 8502. However, the text was never published until Walter Till edited it in 1955. This text agrees with one other contained in the Nag Hammadi corpus (Puech & Doresse #I), but varies considerably from that published by the Coptic Museum, and from the third copy found in the Gnostic library (Puech, Codex #VIII, Doresse, Codex #II). No agreement has yet been reached on the date of the published text, but perhaps a date around 350 A.D. will fit the circumstances. The composition, however, goes back much earlier, as indicated above.

This work claims to be a revelation of Jesus to John of the secrets of this world, past and future. It very evidently was one of the major works in the Gnostic theology. It has an entire scheme of cosmology replete with the typical Gnostic emanations characterized by the weird names given to them in this work. It presents the typical Gnostic dualism with the creation of this world through the Demiurge, i.e., the God of the Old Testament, called in this work, “Yaldabaoth.”

With six of the forty-five works now available for scholarly study, what has been presented that has a direct bearing on Christian scholarship at this time? Aside from the rather complicated problem of the interrelationship of the various religions of the early Christian era, i.e., Judaism (both orthodox and heterodox), Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Manichaeism, Mandeism, Neo-Platonism, etc., on which this corpus throws considerable light, these texts are of primary value to us because of their bearing on many theological and critical theories of our time.

First of all, it should be pointed out that we can accept the accounts of the church fathers as substantially correct in their presentation of gnosticism. For example, Tertullian’s report of Valentinus is now confirmed by *The Gospel of Truth*. Now we can discount the previous discounting of the Fathers as being biased.<sup>11</sup>

Coming to the subject of the canon of the New Testament, we see that all of the books of the New Testament, except the Pastoral Epistles, are alluded to in *The Gospel of Truth*. This means already at 140 A.D. these N.T. books were considered authoritative. This is the death blow to any dating of the Gospel of John in the 2nd century, since Valentinus used it widely. We note, too, that Hebrews and Revelation, two of the *antilegomena*, occupy an important place in *The Gospel of Truth*, showing

their acceptance in the Western Church at this early date. Not until the time of Irenæus do we have as extensive a witness to the books held to be authoritative as we find 40 years earlier in *The Gospel of Truth*.

The eventual value of these writings for textual criticism cannot yet be assessed. However, if other works are as helpful as *The Gospel of Thomas* gives promise of being, they should be very important. Quispel rightly points out that the *Logia* in this work show strong affinities to the so-called Western text of the New Testament, i.e. Codex Beza (D), the Old Latin, the Syriac Curetonian and Syriac Sinaiticus manuscripts. About 150 A.D. Marcion used a widely variant western text. Justin Martyr about the same time used the western text of the Gospels. Now another authority for that text is available. I hope it will not be published too late to be used in the new International Greek New Testament.

Among other examples of the value of the *Logia* for textual criticism, Quispel cites *Logia* v#9, relating to the parable of the sower. As Wellhausen had already pointed out, it makes more sense to read with the Western text, "some fell UPON the road." This is what *The Gospel of Thomas* reads here. It may come from the ambiguity of the Aramaic 'al 'urba which can be translated *on* or *beside* the road. Justin has *éis tén ódon*. (cf. Black: *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*)<sup>12</sup>

However, the primary value of these texts to us seems to lie in what they have to say regarding the relationship of Gnosticism to Christianity. It has been the vogue to trace Christian doctrine, especially that of the fourth Gospel, back to a pre-Christian Gnostic Redeemer, and an Iranian Saved Saviour. These texts should answer once for all, whether or not Gnosticism is basically Iranian dualism. All indications to date are that neither Harnack ("Gnosticism is the acute Hellenization of Christianity") nor Reitzenstein (Gnosticism comes from Iranian dualism) were correct in their estimates of its origins. Whether or not Robert M. Grant is correct in tracing it to a failure of apocalyptic in Judaism remains to be seen. *The Apocryphon of John* contains some undoubted Jewish elements, but there are also traces of Egyptian and Greek ideas as well. What can be clearly seen at this juncture is that Gnosticism was, among other things, a mythologization of the historical facts given in the Gospels.

This is of major importance in the light of Bultmann's theory that the Gospels mythologize what actually happened in the life and death of Jesus. If he is correct, then Gnosticism is the mythologization of a myth! Bultmann, following Reitzenstein, finds the basis of Johannine Theology in a pre-Christian Gnostic Redeemer. Quispel now calls this into question, showing that the three pillars of the theory are overthrown: (1) The Iranian Gayomart, (2) *Anthropos* held captive in matter, (3) The Manichaean doctrine of *Urmensch* falling and returning once again to his primal state. All of these, Reitzenstein said, came from Persian religion. Quispel says the first is from Pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis*, the second has been shown by Peterson to be Jewish Tradition, while these Nag Hammadi texts show that the Manichaean *Urmensch* was borrowed from the Gnostics, not from Persia.<sup>13</sup>

In *The Gospel of Thomas*, *Logia* v#65 deals with the parable presented in Luke 20:9-19, the parable of the husbandman. In the Gnostic work it is completely different from the synoptic version. Yet even in the Gnostic work, the death of the son occupies the central place. As Quispel points out, there is no Hellenistic "mythologizing" here. This phenomenon is contrary to the whole methodology of *Formgeschichte*. Since the parable is in Mark, which is considered to be the earliest Gospel and to have been written at Rome, Quispel asks How 'Pella' (i.e. Jewish

Christians) and the congregation at Rome could have invented the same story.<sup>(14)</sup> He concludes by saying, "In a sense *The Gospel of Thomas* confirms the trustworthiness of the Bible."<sup>15</sup>

This is but a brief introduction to the rich and varied contents of the ancient library from Nag Hammadi. Once again, it seems, the Lord has the Devil at work wheeling stones to build His sanctuary. At any rate, we can agree with Puech's citation of Exodus 7:3: I will . . . multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt."<sup>(16)</sup> (17)

1. Standard text editions of these are: C. Schmidt, *Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache aus dem Codex Brucianus*, TU 8, Leipzig, 1892; C. Schmidt, *Pistis Sophia, Coptica II*, Copenhagen, 1925; Walter Till, *Die Gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502*, Berlin, 1935. English translation of the untitled work is done by Ch. A. Baynes, *A Coptic Gnostic Treatise contained in the Codex Brucianus*, Cambridge, 1933, and Codex Askewianus is translated by G. Horner, *Pistis Sophia*, London, 1924. Till's work includes German translations of the three texts.
2. Most concise account of the discovery in English is by Victor R. Gold, "The Gnostic Library of Chenoboskion," *Biblical Archeologist*, XV (1952), pp. 70-88.
3. cf. Arthur Darby Nock, "A Coptic Library of Gnostic Writings," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. IX (1958), pp. 314-324. "This" discovery may fairly be set on a level with that of the Dead Sea Scrolls." (p. 315). Henri Charles Puech, "Les Nouveaux Ecrits Gnostiques decouverts en Haute-Egypte" *Coptic Studies in honor of Walter Ewing Crum*, Boston, 1950, pp. 91-154 says, "truly one of the most surprising and one of the most important discoveries which have been made in Egypt in the course of recent years." (p. 154) (tr. by present writer).
4. Gold, *ibid.* gives a partial listing of the texts. For a complete listing see Puech, *ibid.*, or Jean Doresse, *Les Livres Secrets des Gnostiques d'Egypte*, Paris, 1958. Puech and Doresse disagree on the total number of texts and use different systems for numbering the codices and texts. Till uses a third system in referring to the *Apocryphon of John* variant text, while the Cairo Museum's volumes of texts use a fourth enumeration!
5. Gilles Quispel, "The Jung Codex and its Significance," p. 50 of *The Jung Codex*, tr. and ed. by Frank L. Cross, London, 1955. In addition it contains contributions by Puech, "The Jung Codex and the other Gnostic Documents from Nag Hammadi," and W. C. van Unnik, "The 'Gospel of Truth' and the New Testament." cf. p. 99, 103f for Van Unnik's dating.
6. *Evangelium Veritatis*, ediderunt M. Malinine, H. C. Puech, and G. Quispel. *Studien aus dem C.G. Jung Institut*, VI, Rascher Verlag, Zurich, 1956. The volume includes an introduction, 24pp. of plates, transcribed Coptic text which facing French translation, German and English translations and indices of Greek and Coptic words.
7. Puech, *Jung Codex*, p. 29
8. Quispel, *Jung Codex*, p. 49
9. *op cit.*, p. 166
10. Quispel, "The Gospel of Thomas and the New Testament," *Vigilae Christianae*, XI, pp. 189-207.
11. Van Unnik, *Jung Codex*, p. 123
12. Quispel, *V. C.*, XI, p. 201
13. *Jung Codex*, p. 76f.
14. *V. C.*, XI, p. 206
15. *V. C.*, XI, p. 207
16. *Jung Codex*, p. 34
17. After this paper was prepared, I received word from Cairo Museum that the second volume of photographically reproduced texts is now in press. Welcome news indeed!