

# VOICES *of* GNOSTICISM



Miguel Conner

Interviews with Elaine Pagels, Marvin Meyer,  
Bruce Chilton, Bart Ehrman, Karen King,  
Stevan Davies and other leading scholars



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# Voices *of* Gnosticism

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Voices *of*  
Gnosticism  
Miguel Conner

*interviewing*

Stevan Davies • Bruce Chilton

David Fideler • Bart Ehrman

Birger Pearson • John Turner

Einar Thomassen • Elaine Pagels

Jason BeDuhn • Karen King

Jane Schaberg • Marvin Meyer

April DeConick

Foreword by Andrew Phillip Smith



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And what is the light? And what is the darkness? And who is the one who has created the earth? And who is God? And who are the angels? And what is soul? And what is spirit? And where is the voice? And who is the one who speaks? And who is the one who hears?

*Testimony of Truth*

It is through me that Gnosis comes forth. I dwell in the ineffable and unknowable ones. I am perception and knowledge, uttering a Voice by means of thought. I am the real Voice.

*Trimorphic Protennoia*



# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the ancient heretics who inspired this program, as well as the modern heretics who supported it all these years. I would also like to thank my family for their support, even when they looked at me perplexed for obsessing over seemingly irrelevant ghosts of a bygone era; and especially my very aeonic and Catholic wife, Saraphinah, who taught me that love should have been the victorious author of a history that didn't have to be so. Lastly, I'd like to thank my publisher, editor, friend and perennial guest, Andrew Phillip Smith, for opening the doors of Gnosticism for me years ago with his writings and then granting me the opportunity to open the same doors for others by taking a chance with this book.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Michael and Maria Conner, beloved Father and Mother, who gave me life and gave me a great life so that I may hopefully lead others to a greater life as well.

Aeon Byte is, as always and forever, dedicated to those seeking to write their own gospel and live their own myth, as Gnostics throughout history have been loved and hated for doing.

# Foreword

Whether we are interested in the ancient Gnostics as a source of spiritual inspiration or simply as a fascinating historical phenomenon we must acknowledge that there is a single fountainhead of all our knowledge of them: scholarship. Though often maligned for its concern with minutiae and insistence on critical standards, academic scholarship provides us with our only useful information on Gnosticism—a religion itself concerned with a particular kind of knowledge which has a very different source and application to that produced in the universities. Paradoxically, if we wish to understand the worldview of those groups and individuals who focused on mystical practices, revelation, grand metaphysical speculations, and interpreted scripture in ways that went against the grain of orthodoxy, our best chance is to begin with a completely different kind of thinking that emphasises sobriety, critical methodology, dialectic, peer review and full formal citation of references. It was an illiterate Egyptian peasant, Muhammad Ali al-Samman, who discovered the cache of the Nag Hammadi codices in December 1945. But it was scholars who recognised their significance, restored and preserved the pages, transcribed and translated the texts and through time-consuming research and debate revealed their meaning and background.

Of course, scholarly publications and academic papers

aren't for everyone. As a writer on Gnosticism I see it as my function to stand midway between the academic and the seeker, communicating the results of scholarship yet making use of whatever spiritual intuition I have to give the reader a reliable account of these ancient heretics while imbuing the history with personal meaning. I would guess that Miguel Conner sees himself as having a similar role, acting as a conductor to summon the lightning from the rarefied atmosphere of academia down to earth.

Many of the scholars in this volume are able to address the general reader directly—witness their presences in the bestseller lists. Others are specialists, carefully mining their chosen areas of expertise. It is testimony to Miguel Conner's unobtrusive skills as an interviewer and his own thorough knowledge of Gnosticism that both specialists and popularisers and those who are both at once (perhaps the majority in this book) speak lucidly and accessibly to the reader in these interviews.

The scholars included in this collection are an open-minded lot. They are content to discover the opinions and viewpoints of the Gnostics came through and allow the smothered history to re-emerge. Those who are Christian believers are able to put aside their theological preferences and investigate these other forms of early Christianity that are considered heretical. Some of them even see in the Gnostic writings the possibility of a leaven that could invigorate the somewhat stale and heavy dough of modern

Christianity.

We know of the Gnostics from two broad sources, their surviving writings and the hostile accounts of the church fathers (and Neoplatonists). It is to their own writings, preserved mainly in the Nag Hammadi library, which was discovered in 1945, that we must turn to read their own genuine mythologies and opinions. Yet we are dependent on the church fathers, however obnoxious and vilifying and spurious they may be, for information regarding Gnostic individuals and groups. We will find no explicit mention of Valentinus or Valentinians, or Simon Magus, or even of anyone who calls himself a Gnostic, in the codices. It is this state of affairs that has determined the possibilities and problems of historical reconstruction. In the interviews with Birger Pearson (on Gnosticism in general), Stevan Davies (on Gnosticism and the *Gospel of Thomas*), John Turner (on the Sethians) and Einar Thomassen (on the Valentinians) there is much food for thought regarding the origins of the Gnostics and the specific beliefs and practices of the different groups. Recent scholarship has seen a radical re-examination of the very usefulness of the terms Gnostic and Gnosticism, exemplified by the work of Karen King. Elaine Pagels, whose book *The Gnostic Gospels* has done so much to popularize Gnosticism, joins King in questioning the category of Gnosticism.

Miguel has also interviewed scholars who, while they

may touch on Gnosticism, are chiefly concerned with other aspects of early Christianity. These interviews dovetail nicely with those that deal with Gnosticism proper and remind us that the Gnostics were not the only worthies in early Christianity. Bart Ehrman, one of the most popular scholars of Christianity, specialises in textual criticism and is able to clarify the vicissitudes of the developing texts in the New Testament canon—and the Gnostics drew heavily on the canonical gospels and the letters of Paul in addition to the Torah. David Fideler ventures into rarely explored territory, revealing the existence of Greek gematria in the gospels, while Bruce Chilton shows us how a responsible form of spirituality existed in the teachings of Jesus.

As the Gnostics fade from history we find the Manichaean religion (ably described by leading expert Jason BeDuhn) absorbing certain of their mythologies and outlook. The reappearance of Christian dualism in the sects of the Paulicians and Bogomils, quite likely influenced by Manichaeism, finds its culmination in the medieval Cathars, who suffered a deliberate and final extermination via the Albigensian Crusade and the Inquisition.

In the developing traditions of mainstream Christianity Mary Magdalene was identified with the woman who was a sinner and thus transformed into a whore. In the Gnostic texts she is an important disciple of Jesus, privy to secret knowledge but bullied by misogynistic male disciples, typified by Peter. Karen King and Jane Schaberg are two

scholars who have been keen to deconstruct the received view of Mary and emphasize the healthier Gnostic traditions.

Lest we think that all is back-slapping and mutual appreciation in the august halls and ivory towers, the most recently discovered Gnostic text, the *Gospel of Judas*, is the subject of controversy. Marvin Meyer, one of the best known scholars of Gnosticism, sees Judas as a heroic figure in his own gospel, while April DeConick finds him to be an agent of the demiurge. References to the *Gospel of Judas* are threaded through many of these interviews, and the controversy gives important insight into scholarly methods and opinion.

Meandering through this anthology of interviews is one of the best ways I can imagine to get to know the discoveries and questions and controversies and firm foundations of scholarship on Gnosticism and early Christianity. Use the interviews to salt your own historical or spiritual quest. Listen to what these experts have to say—read and re-read them, understand their ideas, agree with them, disagree with them, find contradictions, make objections—but above all use them to engage yourself directly with the legacy of the ancient Gnostics.

# Introduction

Just eight episodes.

Eight episodes should have been enough to grant an ancient heresy a chance to make its case on what it really stood for to an increasingly interested public. Freethought Media, an Internet bastion for humanism and fringe ideologies, accepted my proposal, agreeing likewise. I would produce eight episodes spanning ten hours; they would be consecrated with an equitable balance of lambent scholars, best-selling authors from the pastures of the Esoterica, and theologians of various liberal Christianities. The Gnostics would be given a voice. Perhaps it would be loud enough to clear a thickening tabloid din and a haze of misconceptions on the heels of *The Da Vinci Code* media-machine, *The Matrix* trilogy behemoth, the weed-like growth of Gnostic-themed churches and their magnetic clergy, and the earthquake release of the *Gospel of Judas*. Within a few months, I recorded and edited the interviews, garnished each with edgy yet sophisticated introductions in order to attract a younger audience, and conjured the politically incorrect name of *Coffee, Cigarettes & Gnosis*. The episodes were slowly herded to Freethought Media, becoming part of their regular and eternal rotation. Before iTunes podcasts and YouTube seminars had become viral, a *complete* audio resource on Gnosticism would be available for the first time in the solar systems of cyberspace.

I never knew how wrong I was.

The Gnostics weren't done speaking. They had so much more to say. After each introductory topic was completed, overlooked inflections of this misunderstood apostasy demanded to be heard. Their vocalizations rose like a choir, almost in unison, loudly proclaiming their essential role in the very founding of Christianity, the formation of Jewish mysticism including the Kabbalah, and the infrastructure of a large amount of occult, philosophical and even political schools of western civilization. Gnostic theology, history and its very culture was a harmony as intricate and layered as that of the major religions whose thunderous vociferations had silenced them almost for good. Like the rest of the world, I had missed a vast amount of their keynotes, all because of centuries of mainstream Christian polemics, quixotic legendry, synthetic lineages, and secret society propaganda. But the Gospel of Judas, along with the progressively deciphered Nag Hammadi library and other apocrypha, revealed a far different opus from the edited librettos of orthodox churches or esoteric folklore.

Thus, I continued producing episodes of *Coffee, Cigarettes & Gnosis* to allow the Gnostics to intimately relate their rise and fall in the earthly courts of the Abrahamic god and his new dispensation. Surely the archetypal iconoclasts—as they were known throughout history by scores of heresy hunters—would fall silent after



they had divulged who they truly were, what they believed in, and what exactly was their robust legacy. But their descant continued, episode after episode, week after week, the first eight a distant accomplishment. Freethought Media collapsed, and I migrated the show to my own website I called thegodabovegod.com, an obvious allusion to the alien deity the classic Gnostics attempted to understand in their secret lodges. As the program grew in reputation and audience, *Coffee, Cigarettes & Gnosis* metamorphosed into *Aeon Byte*, a name representing everlasting, idealistic truths lodged into the nebulous and ephemeral Information Age. I truly believed then as I do now that the ethos of Gnosticism could be crystallized into a modern context that could offer viable spiritual or intellectual possibilities for those interested in alternative theologies.

And the Gnostics must have approved because they continued to speak.

I would like to believe that this was also a venture of serendipity and providence, even embracing a romantic notion that the Gnostics were channeling a formerly small podcast to forever embed their encompassing odes in what was becoming the most popular medium on Earth. After all, reputed scholars and experts were readily available from their abrading schedules to share what the Gnostics had relayed to them after years of tireless research. They were always eager to bestow their analysis concerning the

latest shifts in scholarship or breakthroughs in textual analysis as I was to record it, even to return again when they had discovered overlooked data that altered prior conclusions. We all wanted the same thing, including the audience, and that was to hear the entire sonata of the Gnostic symphony.

What everyone could agree on for certain, even those who subscribed to conservative doctrines, was that the Gnostics never possessed a unified or monolithic theology. They had an underlying structure of themes, but these were just a bedrock to build cities of theosophical inquiry without much legalistic zoning. Even divorced of all sensationalism, there is hitherto enough mystery surrounding the Gnostics that one may wonder if these lords of mythopoeia really wanted their audience to know their exact origins and creeds. Was Gnosticism a Platonic pre-Christian cult or a later Neoplatonic Christian sacrilege? Did they really rebel against a cosmos they disdained, or were they merely detached curates with a penchant for poetic exegesis? Was Gnosticism an independent faith or really a mystic cabal that attached itself to the underbelly of the immediate dominant religiosity? Did the Gnostics truly have core tenets or did they just re-interpret Holy Scripture as a form of coping skill in a vastly shrunken, post-Alexander the Great world? Was the centerpiece of their existence the unique experience of Gnosis, that intimate knowledge of the

otherworldly, or were they simply blending faith, reason and apocalypse into varying anthems to inspire their sophisticated congregations?

Sometimes it seemed the Gnostics contradicted each other and boasted little loyalty for dogmatic allegiances. But there was indeed, as mentioned before, a precise cadence and an entire thematic worldview that separated them from the other religious affiliations of the Roman Empire and beyond. There was a core and a framework to Gnosticism. There was a solid melliflence with a dualistic theme of existentialist despair yet ultimate, ecstatic liberation.

This book offers the clearest sound on who the Gnostics were and what they have been trying to tell us for almost 2000 years.

The reader will encounter the academic sapience of some of the finest scholars in the field, many of them directly involved in the translation and publication of the Nag Hammadi library. All of them have dedicated a plurality of their lives interpreting the frequently hysterical minds of church historians and heresiologists. These academics have the finest-tuned ear when it comes to absorbing and connecting the fragmented stanzas of the Gnostics who were seemingly muted after the matrimony of Christendom and the Roman state. These brilliant individuals will accurately present to the reader the possible and pulsar origins of Gnosticism across the

ancient Levant. The reader will also gain a front seat to spectate the ascension of the mercurial Gnostic sectarians—the Sethians, the Valentinians, the Manichaeans, the Mandaeans, and others—as well as the incendiary theologies that threatened to wrench the very cornerstones of an emerging Orthodox Church that would later cast a dominating, somber shadow over western civilization.

These scholars, gripped with the same ambition and enthusiasm I had in my project but with far more erudition, will speak to the reader not with just arid lectures on the Gnostics and the Greco-Roman matrix they sprouted from, but in the arena of conversation and dialectics that fully engage mind and imagination. They will reveal dynamic revelations that seemed to come to them on the spot, risky but sound theories they had not made fully aware to the public, and often humorous or solemn reflections about the nature of their difficult avocations. As the Gnostics disseminated through them, I could almost picture my guests walking the same dangerous paths as these disenfranchised mystics millennia ago across sundry landscapes where they were equally rejected by Christian, Jew, and even Pagan.

But even this book will still not reveal Gnosticism's full elegance and elegy, since the sands of Gnostic studies are as shifting as the Egyptian sands that gifted the world with so many Gnostic writings. The Gnostics are only recently intoning with reliable salience throughout the Nag

Hammadi library (already decades old in its publication), the *Gospel of Judas*, and even older texts like the *Gospel of Mary* or the *Book of Jeu*. And again, perhaps the Gnostics only want to be understood, appreciated, or accepted to a certain extent. After all, one of their vital messages is that it is sometimes necessary for individuals to write their own gospels and live their own myths, as they were wont to do.

Regardless, this book and *Aeon Byte* itself owes it all to the kindness, patience, and receptiveness of each guest. Whether these patrons were baronial savants, worldwide authorities, or best-selling professors who had ignited the interest of the general public, they were extremely down to earth, humble, animated, and at times willing to disclose their own deepest instincts not shared in classrooms or manuscripts. Our interviews were on occasion analogous to two friends having a hard-earned drink at the end of the day, engaging in passionate discourse and then being overwhelmed by some melody breaking through the crowd. And both of them feeling they were hearing something important, timeless and ultimately didactic. Just as April DeConick could jest about the romantic practices of the allegedly spartan Gnostics, Bart Ehrman could use self-deprecating humor about his status as a celebrity (while off the air admitting he was more interested in getting back to the monastic life of research). Just as Jane Schaberg could bemoan how modern culture had

corrupted Mary Magdalene as keenly as traditional Christianity, she could too sense the seminal essence of Mary Magdalene radiating throughout contemporary art, even, of all places, in The Passion of the Christ.

For all of this I could never be grateful enough. These gentle intellectuals took time from their demanding profession and took a pilgrimage to *Aeon Byte* in order to leave something valuable and lucid in the information pandemonium that is the Internet. All the academics interviewed in this book will never be fully appreciated by a civilization of spiritual materialism and lack of endurance for long journeys into the hazardous mines of religious truths.

In a sense, though, the scholars you will read have made a difference. Their ideas have expanded the perception of early Christianity and Judaism into dimensions never dreamt of before. Their advancements have not only aided in the boosting of alternative Christian churches, they have also softened many conservative Christian denominations. Their intense scrutiny of the popular *Gospel of Thomas* has made it palatable and acceptable to some Mormon Churches, liberal Roman Catholic groups, and even rebellious Baptist satellites. The same can be said about the *Gospel of Mary*, *Thunder: Perfect Mind*, the *Secret Book of John* and other Gnostic scriptures that have as well found a home in heterodox Jewish organizations and neo-pagan sects. In addition, my

guests' insights have uncovered a transcendental, universal flavor to the Gospel of John and the Pauline corpus that resounds with many ecumenical Eastern faiths.

I am just as devoted as I was over four years ago with my eight episodes, hopefully as devoted as all my guests, and will continue until there is a silence I have a feeling will never truly arrive. In the meantime, we continue with the same goal while the Gnostic choir continues to rise:

And that is to not only give the ancient heretics a voice, but to make sure that we listen to them in the sharpest possible way and effusively appreciate their amazing compositions.

These are the voices of Gnosticism. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

# Stevan Davies

Stevan Davies is the author of *The Secret Book of John: Annotated and Explained*, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom*, and *The Gospel of Thomas: Annotated & Explained*, as well as Professor of Religious Studies, Misericordia College, Pennsylvania.

It would be close to a fool's errand to try to find a better authority on the *Gospel of Thomas* than Stevan Davies. His explorations into the "Fifth Gospel", as it is commonly referred to, has vastly expanded its theological understanding and interest to both academia and mainstream society. Furthermore, *The Secret Book of John: Annotated and Explained* is arguable the best primer to what many have called the complete Gnostic gospel.

Thus, it was certainly serendipity when Davies agreed to be part of the first eight episodes meant to be a plenary, audio introduction to Gnosticism. There was miscommunication on our scheduling, the phone connection decided to regress to cold war standards, and the equipment was plagued by poltergeists. But we forged ahead into what would be a very stimulating and comprehensive conversation. Not only was Gnosticism proper a daring venture back when the program was called *Coffee, Cigarettes & Gnosis*, but so was technology. And it still can be today in the quicksand of an ever-changing Information Age.



Besides getting our feet wet with the theology and history of the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Secret Book of John*, we contrasted the two idiosyncratic communities behind their conceptions. As an added luxury, Davies discussed the *Gospel of Judas*, the similarities between Gnosticism and eastern philosophies, and many of his galvanizing insights into embryonic Christianity. I could almost hear above the faulty technology Davies' mind grinding out new conclusions as we took a probing tour into early Christendom when it was so full of potential and so lacking in uniformity. And I think he surprised himself at some of his deductions, but not me because I had studied his gallant material.

Ironically, Davies does not believe the *Gospel of Thomas* was Gnostic, but Christian mystic literature, perhaps Egyptian. This view is held by many scholars and disputed by others. Davies also considers that some Gnostic factions were pre-Christian, like the authors of the kernel *Secret Book of John*, and that the *Gospel of Thomas* might be the earliest of all Christian texts. These issues only augment the mystery of the Gnostic tradition and its satellite schools that flourished in the Greco/Roman World in the first and second centuries. And the following guests would take their diverging stances and make just as cogent arguments.

Just in my third interview I was realizing that agreement on Gnosticism in academia was far from unanimous.

Davies also taught me that one didn't just have to read between the lines but actually underneath them, deep in layers of history and anthropology and sociology. Gnosticism wasn't just a religion, but a penetrating movement of lush philosophies and enterprising concepts. Considering the impact the *Gospel of Judas* was having after just being published, the continuing tsunami of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and the keen observations of Professor Davies, I knew this was as true in their heretical heyday as it is true in our modern times.

Stevan Davies was interviewed on May 28, 2006.

**MC:** The question I've been asking my previous guests, because there's a lot of lay people who will be listening in, is: could you give a brief definition of Gnosticism?

**SD:** I think that Gnosticism is about discovering the way that God has turned into you, and then realizing that if you can describe how it is that God turned into you, you can reverse the process. I think that's what it is about.

**MC:** That's a really good answer.

**SD:** Yes, that's actually in the *Secret Book of John*, and I discuss it in my Skylight Paths book *The Secret Book of John Annotated and Explained*. When you understand how the problem arose, of the spirit being trapped in the human body in the world, then you can reverse the process. That seems to be the reason why they're so obsessed with creation mythologies. It's not for its own sake, speculating about how the world came into being, it's the idea that you would want to reverse the process and send the world back into God where it came from.

**MC:** So, salvation is basically finding the knowledge to get back to God?

**SD:** I think that's true. It has been said that the knowledge of Gnosis relates to the theory that your spirit is really a divine spirit. But it's more than that, it's not just realizing that this is the case, it's knowing how that came to be the case that they seem most interested in.

**MC:** And you think that's what the Gnostics decided? Do you think that they had secret information about the book of Genesis, or do you think they just decided they were going to take it and read it in a radical way?

**SD:** I don't think they had any secret information. Religions love to claim secrets. If you look at books in the New Age section of your local bookstore, half of them have secrets and mysteries in the title, just as a lot of the Gnostic stuff has secrets and mysteries in the title. Even in the canonical gospels Jesus is talking about the mysteries of the kingdom of God, and on the TV channels, like the Discovery Channel, everything's the secret of this, the mystery of that. So I think that the idea of secret knowledge was as appealing then as it is now. But I don't think it was really so secret, I think that they publicised their beliefs. They certainly wrote obsessively about them. They put out an awful lot of different pieces of literature.

**MC:** But isn't there the rule that cannot be broken in Judaism that you cannot change the Torah? Do you see the *Secret Book of John* as a midrash?

**SD:** What I think is that whoever put the *Secret Book of John*—which is also called the *Apocryphon of John*—together believed in the mythology of the Jews and believed that the structure that you find in the Genesis story was correct. They believed in the Genesis story, but

they looked on Moses as an interpreter of the story not as its author. The funny thing is they're not looking at Genesis as the book of Moses, and therefore somehow Moses must be the infallible interpreter, but rather they accept the general pattern of the Genesis story and think that Moses misunderstood it. The story is right, but Moses' interpretation is wrong. In the *Secret Book of John* it says, more than once: "not as Moses said but..." So it's giving you a different view of the circumstances than Moses gave, but it's a different view of the same underlying story.

**MC:** But in your book you say that the *Secret Book of John* was first a Jewish work, and it was later Christianized.

**SD:** Yes, well there is a debate as to whether you could say it was Jewish, or was it anti-Jewish. I think that the only people in the world who really had a serious concern for the Jewish Torah were the Jewish people. So I don't envision a bunch of pagan people, or any non-Jewish people, suddenly getting obsessed with revising the Jewish scriptures. I think Jewish people worked with the Jewish scriptures.

If you take a book like the *Secret Book of John*, it's clear that the basic structure and story doesn't have anything to do with the Christian story. But there's a frame at the beginning of the book putting it in a context of Jesus talking to John, and then the conclusion of the book returns to that frame and concludes with Jesus talking to

John. And that makes it a thing relevant to Christianity, but the basic book isn't really Christian at all.

**MC:** Yes, that is true. In fact, something you pointed out which was amazing, is the name of the Pharisee whom John meets at the beginning of the book sounds very much like Ahriman.

**SD:** Yes, Ahriman is Persian, the Zoroastrian god representing evil. I believe that if you look at the Letter of James in the New Testament, the Letter of James is a pretty interesting piece of writing. It's entirely a Jewish sermon about doing good, helping others, advocating very reasonable morals. I think that there's nothing specifically Christian about that either. If we look at two opening sentences, the first sentence of it and the first sentence of what is now chapter two of the Letter of James, I think that's another example of a piece of Jewish writing that was Christianized by adding a framework around it. Two sentences were added with the words Jesus Christ in them, and now you have a Christian document. But the contents of it would not originally have been written by a Christian person. It was probably written by a rabbi at roughly the time of Jesus.

**MC:** Why do you think the church would have been attracted to such a Jewish piece of work?

**SD:** There's nothing uniquely Jewish or Christian about it.

I mean, the specific Christian vocabulary is showing up in just two places. The ideas would be acceptable to both religions. The *Secret Book of John* seems to be something that was in existence before Christianity. There's an issue as to whether it's chronologically prior to Christianity or ideologically prior. In other words, it's pretty clear that the basic Gnostic myth existed, and then the Christians took it and adapted it to Christianity, and there you do have a chronological sequence. But whether the basic Gnostic myth existed before Christianity existed is a different question. And that's where the debate is. There is no conclusive evidence that there was Gnosticism before there was Christianity, but to some degree common sense leads one to suspect that there was.

**MC:** And what would be the dating of the *Secret Book of John*? I know in your book you mention that it was probably a Jewish Gnostic work written towards the end of the first century and then later Christianized. When did this happen?

**SD:** The Christianisation of it, when this framework was added to it—and a few other Christian elements pop up in the middle of it, added by scribes—maybe that's happening towards 130, 140, early second century. But this is all just speculation. If somebody digs up a copy of it in Greek with a date of 50 b.c.e., I wouldn't be surprised. Right now there's no evidence to support that early a date,

though.

**MC:** Isn't the first time we hear about the *Secret Book of John* through Bishop Irenaeus around 180 c.e., which is basically the first time we hear about the canonical gospels and the *Gospel of Judas*?

**SD:** That's something I was looking into. It's not as clear as people say it is that the *Gospel of Judas* was mentioned by Irenaeus. In other words, if you've got a *Gospel of Judas* manuscript, and Irenaeus mentions the *Gospel of Judas*, you naturally think, well, A equals A. But not so fast. The way he describes the *Gospel of Judas* doesn't really look like the contents of our *Gospel of Judas* manuscript. I suspect that there was more than one document called the *Gospel of Judas*. Maybe Irenaeus is talking about something else. I suspect the *Gospel of Judas*, the one we have, may have been written around the end of the second century sometime. So it doesn't really make a lot of difference if Irenaeus mentioned it, but I suspect that Irenaeus is referring to some other text with the same title.

**MC:** You are obviously well known for your expertise on the *Gospel of Thomas*, shown by your book the *Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom*. What would you say is the dating for the *Gospel of Thomas*?

**SD:** Non-affiliated Christians like myself, who are people



not affiliated with any Christian church particularly, tend to date it a bit earlier, somewhere between 70, even 60, which is where I would put it, and 90 c.e. Late-middle or end of the first century. The people who are more evangelical, more Biblically oriented, more church-based tend to be trying to date it towards, say, 130, 140 c.e. So the dating becomes a bit of an ideological struggle. Evangelical Christian scholars seem to be very threatened by the idea that any Jesus traditions could be in existence that are not in the Bible. The Bible should be everything we have. An effort is made to say that the only information about Jesus in *Thomas* worth anything, is what *Thomas* took out of the Bible, and therefore *Thomas* is irrelevant for new knowledge of Jesus. Others, including myself, think *Thomas* has a pretty decent claim to be about as authoritative for Jesus' historical teachings as the biblical books are. Some of what is in *Thomas*' gospel is independent, true and authentic Jesus material, some of it isn't, and it needs to be sorted out. I would say it is wrong to say that *Thomas* is dependent on the New Testament, and therefore without significant value.

**MC:** Would you consider the *Gospel of Thomas* some sort of Gnostic gospel, or some sort of Q document, or Q gospel?

**SD:** I don't think it's a Gnostic work, in the sense in which we have talked about it in this conversation, with the

descent of God into this world, God being trapped in this world and having to return out of this world, with a definite negative valuation on this world. *Thomas* doesn't have anything like that. In fact, Thomas contradicts that. Thomas talks about the presence of the kingdom of God in the world, that the kingdom is here, the kingdom is now, the kingdom is within you. There's none of the Gnostic opposition to the world and no concern with cosmology and the mythological origins of it. So, frankly, I don't think it's Gnostic.

**MC:** That is true, but at the same time, the *Secret Book of John*, what I like about it is that you put a very positive view on it, because you show us that there is a plan set in place and everything's okay throughout the whole mythology of the flood and the creation of Adam, so if you look at the *Secret Book of John* there is that kind of reassurance.

**SD:** There is a rescue effort going on, as if someone has fallen overboard into the sea and has to be dragged out. That's what has happened to the spirit of God, it has fallen into this world and has to be dragged out. In Sethian Gnosticism it's somewhat questionable as to whether this world exists at all. If the world exists through a mistake on the part of God, in other words, that Sophia the wisdom of God has made a cognitive error that brought the world into being, then as soon as we realize the erroneous

nature of the world, it vanishes. This is stated very nicely in the *Gospel of Truth*. Once you realize the truth, the error just disappears, and the physical world is an error. As soon as you realize the truth, puff! the world is gone. Which relates to some degree to the Advaita philosophy of Hinduism, where the world is an illusion.

**MC:** So if the *Gospel of Thomas* isn't Gnostic in the same way that the *Secret Book of John* is, what is it really about? Is it another kingdom of God sect? Or where did they get their ideas from exactly?

**SD:** From the first couple of chapters of Genesis. The first chapter is the seven days chapter and God says everything is good, and everything's just wonderful, and then God rests. No problems. Chapter two begins a different creation story, from a different tradition, one that contains the fall. Adam's been driven out of the garden and Eve's been driven out of the garden. So you have two creation stories. That can raise the question: whatever happened to the first creation? This is a good legitimate Jewish mythological question. If you have man made in the image of God, and then in chapter two man is made of the earth and then falls into sin, what happened to the image of God? It didn't just cease to exist. Well, I think that the Thomas people, the Thomas Christians, were saying that the first creation, the perfect creation, continues to exist forever, and that's the kingdom of God, and people don't

know it's here. So the goal of secret knowledge in Thomas, so to speak, is to uncover the presence of the kingdom of God in the world, which has been hidden there in the beginning. And it's still there.

**MC:** So, it's possible that the first chapter of Genesis might have been handed down orally or brought down from another kingdom other than Judaea?

**SD:** We are taught from birth practically, and in Sunday school—well Christians are anyway—that Jesus is Jewish and that Jesus is Galilean. But Jewish comes from the word for Judaea, and Judaea is a different country to Galilee. So the simple idea of Jesus as Judean: no, he's not Judean, he's from Galilee. And Galilee borders on Syria to the north, which is a rather different culture. So I suspect that Jesus is influenced by a Syrian culture in the north as well as Judean culture, and that the Thomas traditions may be coming in more on the Syrian wavelength than the Judean wavelength.

**MC:** And can you tell us more about this Galilean/Syrian world view or religion?

**SD:** People are made in the image of God from the beginning and recapture that image state. It's much less focused on fall and sin and the need for retribution and so forth. It is much more focused on the idea of human beings divinized. I believe, mainly based on intuition, that

the *Odes of Solomon* represent a Syrian religious ideology that existed before Jesus himself, a pre-Christian sort of Christianity that may have influenced Paul.

The question that divides the *Thomas* ideology from the *Secret Book of John* ideology is about the nature of the world. Is the world a cosmic mistake filled with demons, which is the *Secret Book of John* notion, or is the world the good place of the first seven days of creation, which is the *Gospel of Thomas* notion. And those are pretty different views, but they seem to share the idea of human beings being apparently divine.

**MC:** The Syrian and, obviously, the Gnostic ideology, they sound very eastern, very Hindu. Do you think that both of these schools of thought were influenced by the east?

**SD:** Well, we have a chronological problem. The Gnostic ideas that do seem similar to Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, or to some forms of Mahayana Buddhism, they're earlier chronologically than those eastern movements. So if there was an influence, chronologically speaking it would have to be from the Gnostics onto the Hindus and Buddhists, rather than vice versa.

**MC:** Wow! I guess we are so conditioned here to assume that the east has always influenced the west, or that it is a far older tradition. But now that I think about it, Mahayana Buddhism didn't start until the end of the first century, and after Alexander the Great conquered the world, there was

certainly evidence of the world shrunk and became a sort of Internet. There's lots of evidence, isn't there?

**SD:** There's lots of Roman coins found in Southern India. And there are reports of Brahmin teachers teaching in Egypt—they are called the naked philosophers and they're from India. There really was a fair amount of contact.

**MC:** Wow, this is certainly something to look into more. What would you say are some of the Gnostic imprints on the canonical Bible we know today?

**SD:** Jesus says, "Do not look here, do not look there, for the Kingdom of Heaven is within you." Now that's a very *Gospel of Thomas* idea. But there's not much else. It seems to be pretty clearly separated, because the basic ideologies of the canonical gospel writers were not Gnostic, so they wouldn't have Gnostic materials.

**MC:** But wasn't the Gospel of John originally a Gnostic work, or did they just revere it before orthodox Christianity got a hold of it?

**SD:** That was their favorite one. Christianity today makes a big point of saying, "Look, in the Gospel of John it says that the word was made flesh." It emphasises that word "flesh" as evidence of a sort of anti-Gnosticism, but the *Gospel of Thomas* also uses the word "flesh" saying Jesus came in the flesh. For the most part, though, in the Gospel of John, Jesus repeatedly says that "I am not of this world.

You are of this world, but I am not of this world. I have come into this world.” So the Gnostics found that kind of motif very congenial to their own ideas.

**MC:** Shifting forward in the Bible, or actually shifting backwards chronologically, could you say, or would you say, that Paul could be considered a Gnostic, or proto-Gnostic if you will, and if not, what were his influences on Christianity as we know it?

**SD:** He essentially created it. He certainly wrote the letters that became the basis of Christian theology. But I don't really see much Gnosticism in there, and to say that he's opposed to Gnosticism, I don't see it, I never have seen it. Some people say that in Corinthians he's arguing against Gnosticism. I really don't see that.

**MC:** Is it fair to say if there is an argument for saying that Paul might have begun a sort of Jewish mystery religion?

**SD:** I think so. One of those things that I'm not sure what to make of, is that while we tend to think of Jesus as a Jewish teacher of moral principles and so forth, somehow very early on Christianity turned into this mystery religion worshipping a God who has come down from heaven named Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for sins, and thereafter all of these humble teachings are no longer essentially important.

People as a rule like to say that Paul invented this new

form of Christianity. Well, that's fine so far, but Paul doesn't think he's inventing anything, he thinks he's joining a movement, and he gives a little biography at the beginning of Galatians where he says, you know, "I used to persecute these churches, these churches in Judaea, the churches of God in Judaea," but then he had his conversion experience going to Damascus, and suddenly he's joining the same churches as he had persecuted. And it struck me that we have scholars in our time saying, "Paul invented this," and "Paul invented that," and he's saying that he didn't invent anything.

Paul thinks that there was an existing movement, and he joined it. And the movement is a movement containing churches up and down Judaea all the way down to Damascus. And this Christian movement is in existence within two or three years after Jesus dies, which is when Paul was doing his persecuting. So this is all just a puzzle. Where did the network of churches come from? It seems that Jesus left behind a much more organized network of churches than he's usually given credit for. And this is the movement that Paul says he's joining. It could be that the view of the cosmic Christ that Paul has isn't Paul's invention but existed before Paul.

**MC:** So, if you think that Paul wasn't Gnostic why do you think that his epistles are so attractive to the arguably Gnostic and heretical Marcion?



**SD:** Marcion identifies the secondary and inferior God as Yaldabaoth, identifies him with the God of the Jews, the Old Testament God, and so the God of the Jews is seen to be oppressing people, destroying the world through floods and so forth, and creating a law that oppresses people. I think that when Marcion is reading Paul, he sees that Paul is opposed to the Jewish law and the idea of God as a law giver, trying to confine humanity to these legal principles, and Marcion and Paul seem to agree that this is wrong. So I suspect that in that sense Marcion saw Paul as an ally. Paul's opposition to the Jewish law correlated in Marcion's mind to Marcion's opposition to the Jewish God. Paul wouldn't have agreed with that for a minute. Marcion was completely in opposition to the Jewish God himself. Paul wouldn't have gone along with that.

**MC:** We touched on the *Gospel of Judas* earlier in the interview. Have you had a chance to read it and, if you have, what are your thoughts on this new gospel?

**SD:** I think it's an interesting document. It's got some very interesting points. It's got two places where Jesus is interpreting a vision of his followers. In one place the disciples seem to have a vision. They say, "Master, we have seen you in a vision, we had great dreams." And then Jesus interprets the vision of the disciples basically as them being slayers of children, they are people of pollution and lawlessness and error, and so forth, a violent anti-disciple

attack in the process of interpreting their vision. Judas has a vision, and then Jesus interprets Judas' vision very favorably to Judas. This literary motif of Jesus interpreting visions I don't remember seeing before. It may be familiar somewhere but I don't think so. That's certainly rare, Jesus interpreting visions. I found that pretty interesting. In the middle of the *Gospel of Judas* is a summary of the *Secret Book of John*, which I thought was kind of neat. If you have a copy—you can get a copy off the Internet—from page 47 down to page 53 is nothing but a summary of the *Secret Book of John*, or at least the same ideas. It's a summary of the basic ideas and ideology of the *Secret Book of John*.

**MC:** So it's more than safe to say that the *Gospel of Judas* is a Gnostic text, that it could have easily belonged in the Nag Hammadi library?

**SD:** No doubt about it, it's a Gnostic text. And somebody has suggested that maybe this literally was in the Nag Hammadi collection, and when the collection was sold, this book got separated from the others. But even if that's not true, it's certainly very much the same sort of thing. And like those other books, it frankly doesn't give us much historical information. I mean, we don't really learn about the first century Jesus and Judas, which, we'd like to know more about.

**MC:** And why do you think the *Gospel of Judas* had so

much attention from the press and the general public?

**SD:** It's the title. The title and the idea of the great villain being a hero. When I read the Gospel of Mark, it seemed to me that Mark could just as well have made Judas the hero of his gospel. The reason is that, if Jesus' purpose is to come to earth to suffer and die and rise again—which Mark's gospel says is the most important thing about Jesus, that's Mark's whole main point—then Judas has made it possible for him to suffer and die and rise again. And you could easily put a positive twist on it, writing that the other disciples didn't understand that Jesus needed to die. Judas would then be the only one who saw the truth! Now Mark doesn't do that, but he sure could have if he wanted to twist his narrative a little. If you have a vision of Jesus as being delivered up and suffering, tried and convicted, which is what Mark says is the most important thing about him, then you've got a problem in thinking that Judas is doing the wrong thing by facilitating that. Why is it wrong to help Jesus fulfill his mission? When the *Gospel of Judas* comes up and seems to imply that Judas was helping Jesus shed his physical form and return to heaven, Judas being a hero is not as crazy as it first sounds like.

**MC:** We've discussed how it's possible that Gnosticism influenced the eastern cultures, not vice versa. Do you see any Gnostic influences in western history after its early

days?

**SD:** There is a religion called Manichaeism which seems to me to be kind of Christian Gnosticism mixed with Zoroastrianism. It's a religion that separates evil matter from good spirit. And that kind of thing shows up in the Cathar movement in the European Middle Ages. But I don't really think that Gnosticism is about evil matter and good spirit so much as Gnosticism is about this mythology of the descent of God into our human forms. I don't see that anywhere in the last 1,000 years or so. I think it may be coming back to life in the 21st century. People are finding Gnosticism a very interesting and challenging way of looking at things. But I don't know if it was around, say, in the 1700s and 1800s. I'm not sure that anybody was thinking about this religion then. Nowadays more and more people seem to be interested. So this may be a resurgence of Gnosticism.

**MC:** I've asked my other guests, do you see Gnosticism as a fad or as a movement that maybe this time around will have enough power to stick?

**SD:** When I went to graduate school practically nobody had ever heard of it. Then ten years later, most educated people had heard of it. Then gradually, as time goes on, more and more people find it interesting. But it doesn't have the fad nature of being explosively interesting. It seems to be growing at a steady rate. I think that's a

healthy sign for Gnosticism. As time goes on, more and more people find it interesting, more and more people buy books about it, read about it, learn about it. It doesn't look like a fad to me.

**MC:** One of the reasons that I became interested in Gnosticism is that, for example, in my early days when I was looking for a spiritual alternative I tried all these esoteric schools of thought, Buddhism, New Age, Hinduism, but I found that Gnosticism was a better fit because it was able to lodge itself into my western way of thinking. Other religions are very alien to somebody from the west.

**SD:** With Gnosticism you are dealing with familiar names, you're dealing with the disciples, you're dealing with Jesus and John and Judas, Mary Magdalene. The idea of the cross and the idea of heresy, the idea of the temple, you know all this stuff, you learn all this stuff from childhood. Now, the Gnostics' interpretation of it of course is radically different. But you feel at home with the basic elements of it. If you try to learn a different religion—Tibetan Buddhism, for example, or if you go into Zen Buddhism seriously—it's awfully difficult to catch up to where a native-born twelve year old would be. A twelve-year-old Tibetan Buddhist probably knows more about their own religion than most Western scholars do, whereas with Judaism or Christianity, you've already got the basics.

Now, you may wish to reinterpret the basics in a very different way, but that's going to be a lot more convenient and familiar to you than trying to understand something else altogether foreign. Absolutely. Here we have a tradition in American Christianity of accepting all these different denominations. There's the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons and the Presbyterians and the Catholics and the Orthodox and the Gnostics, which are radically different, but nevertheless are part of Christianity. So if you say, what kind of religion are you? I'm a Gnostic Christian. That's a different social way of being than to ask, what kind of religion are you? I've converted to Kashmir Shivite Hinduism. Then you're just radically different from your peers. But if you say I am a Gnostic Christian, while you're different, but you're not so radically different. So I think that's in Gnosticism's favor as a sustainable religion in our culture.

**MC:** Well, I somehow doubt that evangelical Christians or fundamentalist Christians will ever accept Gnosticism. But what is interesting, going on to the Catholic Church, is I remember reading an essay which was actually a review of the movie *Stigmata*, which loosely deals with the *Gospel of Thomas*. You can find this on Stevan Davies' website. In this essay you actually said that the Catholic Church doesn't have a stance on the *Gospel of Thomas*. Does this still hold true?

**SD:** If you want to go read the *Gospel of Thomas* as a scholar or as a historian, or just as an interested person, the Catholic Church doesn't care. If you ask, "Does the Catholic Church approve of the ideas in Gnostic literature?", then no, it doesn't. But does it disapprove of people reading this stuff? No, they don't mind. The idea of the Catholic Church persecuting these lost gospels is fiction. It's very popular fiction, but fiction. The *Stigmata* movie had that fiction, the *Celestine Prophecies* book had that fiction, and of course the *Da Vinci Code*. The people who really hate the idea of Gnostic gospels are the evangelical Protestants. If they could burn the *Gospel of Thomas* they would. But the Catholic Church is saying, "No, if you want to study it as a historical document, that's not a problem."

**MC:** Well I think that's all the questions I have

**SD:** Well, thank you.

# Bruce Chilton

Bruce Chilton is the author of *Abraham's Curse*, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography*, *God in Strength*, *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography*, *Judaic Approaches to the Gospels*, *Mary Magdalene: A Biography*; *Revelation*, and *The Way of Jesus*, as well as Bernard Iddings Bell Professor of Religion and chaplain at Bard College, New York.

Chilton is certainly unique among the contributors of this book. Not only is he an esteemed scholar of comparative religion among academics, Chilton is also a perennial best-seller and devout liberal Christian theologian. His works are not only prime educational resources but in addition are inspirational to religious-minded and even secular-minded readers. His reputation and success in various forums certainly gives credence to this assertion.

Our interview involved his latest book, *The Way of Jesus*, a short but puissant work that proposes that the teachings of Jesus can be as relevant today as they were 2,000 years ago, especially if an individual can translate what seem to be archaic references into a modern context. Then it becomes effortless identifying Christ's timeless spiritual and ethical intent. Furthermore, Chilton's book evidences how the Jewish and Aramaic theosophical traditions, once a person negotiates its legalistic aspects,



have profound lessons on the nature of humanity and the world it has forever struggled with (certainly an issue that the classic Gnostics wrestled over in Roman days that were as capricious and torrid as contemporary times).

Chilton couched his arguments alongside the acumen of other faiths, like Hinduism and certainly Gnosticism, as well as the ideology of such social luminaries as Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King. His impetus was that there can be a profitable balance between extreme allegorical interpretation of scripture and concise socio-political knowledge of the Aramaic worldview that produced Jesus Christ and his followers. Yet Chilton stressed that, in the end, a person's conclusions must be equally practical, sacred, and salient to surrounding culture.

The interview really served as a reminder that heterodox and even orthodox Judaism were certainly vital components in developing Gnostic thought. The Gnostics relied on the wisdom, literally and figuratively, found in the Old Testament as much as they leaned on Hellenistic philosophical and theological reflection. A perfect example is the reality that many Gnostic groups contended that not all humans were endowed with the divine spark, and some could tentatively lose it forever. Chilton revealed that this belief, largely unpalatable in today's religiosity, was perfectly acceptable to Jesus Christ and Judaism as well. Immortality has to be earned, an unpleasant but perhaps necessary reality to a humanity that tends to hastily find

comfort levels that abrogate any type of personal or collective betterment.

Chilton's books and teachings have served to uncover the richness of Jewish monism and its influence on the more principled aspects of Christianity, made them digestible to an increasingly secular society. By default, his erudition borne of being both a theologian and scholar, also aids to better grasp Gnosticism within its historical and social contexts, always a daunting task considering their reach yet nebulosity in Roman times and beyond.

Bruce Chilton was interviewed on March 27, 2010.

**MC:** We have the pleasure of having Bruce Chilton to discuss his new book, *The Way of Jesus*. How are you doing today, Bruce?

**BC:** I'm very well, thank you.

**MC:** Well, thank you very much for joining the show. I really appreciate your time. What was your impetus in writing *The Way of Jesus*? More than a new way of looking at the teachings of Jesus, it seems to be a manual for the very renewal of Christianity.

**BC:** The reason I came to it is that I've been involved in research concerning Jesus for quite a few decades now, and it occurred to me that in focussing on Jesus as an object of history, as someone we can study, we were losing sight of Jesus as a subject of history, as someone who had an intent behind all his actions and all of his teaching. So I'm interested, in this book, in gathering his intent and understanding that more clearly. As you suggest, that also involves a different way of looking at anyone who is religiously engaged with Jesus. Instead of being concerned with the question, "What do you believe about Jesus?" the more important issue is, how do you go about following Jesus? What are his fundamental spiritual teachings that informed everything that he did? I took it as my task to try to identify those fundamentals.

**MC:** Yeah, and it seems that you went the traditional

Aramaic route to do this. You pretty much eschewed the Gospel of John with him being the cosmic Logos, and just stuck with the synoptics and the Aramaic teachings and the Jewish traditional viewpoints.

**BC:** That's exactly right. I think it's important when you try to understand anything in history to make sure that you're placing that person within the appropriate original context. In the case of Jesus, living in Galilee, developing within Judaism, that means that we need to take into account Aramaic sources and the way in which he spoke his own language. Fortunately, in our time, as a result of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we can now say with much greater precision just what the Aramaic language of his time was like, and what kind of theologies were available to him.

**MC:** So you don't see Jesus at all as eschatological? This seems to be a central message of his, although scholars have obviously debated this forever.

**BC:** That is a matter of deep debate within scholarship, but I would myself say that Jesus did see this world as being limited, as being finite, and he was always looking beyond this world to the deeper reality that created this world in the first place. In that sense, in the sense that he was interested in the edge, between this world and the next world, he was an eschatological teacher, although he was not someone who was involved in the desire to

provide a precise calendar for when the end of the world was going to occur. In fact, he went out of the way to insist that any such calendar was beyond human reckoning.

**MC:** Bruce, your book is broken down into what are truly seven spiritual practices. You break them down into soul, spirit, kingdom, insight, forgiveness, mercy, and glory. It seems to me that cultivating these seven grants one the power of prophecy, not in the archaic notion of being a forecaster of God, but in the way that the New Testament intended. Could you explain what this true gift is, and the culmination of actually having prophecy?

**BC:** This is a very helpful question and brings us to actually the core of the book, the understanding of what prophecy involves. There's been a tendency in western understandings of religion to become superficial in the understanding of prophecy, to see it merely as a matter of forecasting what is going to occur in human events which, as a matter of fact, in anyone's hands is no more reliable than trying to forecast the weather. Even the prophets of Israel are not fundamentally understood as prophets because their predictions turned out to be exactly accurate. More often than not they prove in fact not to be entirely accurate. For example, the prophet Isaiah famously insisted that the city of Jerusalem would never be taken by a foreign enemy. That turned out not to be true. And after

him the prophet Jeremiah forecast that the people of Judaea would be in exile for 70 years before they returned. Fortunately that was not true either.

So why were these prophets remembered if as a matter of fact their forecasts were not entirely reliable? It is because they did manage to develop an insight for how God deals with Israel. In their insight they were able to offer the people of their times an orientation into how they should act. And most importantly it's because the prophet showed people around him—or around her, because there were female prophets as well—what it would be like to be in contact with a world beyond the world, with the world of the divine. And it's because the prophet could provide evidence of contact with the divine that he or she was accepted as a prophet; and his counsel for the people of his time also became a matter of a program of ethics that could be followed. So it's a matter, at the very heart of it, of showing to people around one that there is a God and he has an intention. None of us can really gather that intention and yet by concentrating on that divine source of all of us we can in fact live better and find resources to face up to the challenges that confront us.

**MC:** And that seems to have already been happening even before the times of Jesus. Suddenly every man could touch God without going through the temple. The Gnostics were able to do that and they called it Gnosis. Saint Paul obviously talks a lot about prophecy. So isn't that one of

the central messages of Jesus, that each one of us has the power of prophecy?

**BC:** It certainly is. He is looking forward to the power of our spirit to be shed on every human being, and in having that vision of there being a universal access to the spirit, Jesus was reaching deep into the prophetic tradition of Israel, especially going back to Ezekiel. But also he was tapping into an impetus of humanity as a whole. Because the concept of the shaman, as this figure is referred to among anthropologists, who is able to have contact with the divine world in order to reshape and make more human the world in which we live is basically inherent in human culture.

**MC:** You juxtaposed Gandhi with Jesus in your book in several parts. Is one of the reasons the fact that both Jesus and Gandhi's gift to humanity wasn't just a message but to teach us how to interpret holy scripture to give that insight you write about into God's plan? In a way, it can suit our modern issues. I like this quote by Gandhi, "What cannot be followed out in day-to-day practice cannot be religion."

**BC:** Yes, isn't that a wonderful way of putting a fundamental truth? Gandhi understood that when we read the scriptures of our individual religious traditions, we are not simply dealing with texts. We are also dealing with instruments that convey to us how God wishes to interact with this world. And for that reason Gandhi insisted that

we should not become enslaved to a literal reading alone. We really need to read through the text to the intention behind it. And it was for that very reason that he could read the Bhagavad Gita, which is in terms of topic a war poem, and find within it the principle of non-violence. And he did that because he saw that in the advice that Krishna gives to the warrior there's an intent focused on the issue of coming to a place of self-control and serenity. And he believed that that was much more important than the particular conditions in which the advice was given. And in a similar way, when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was in the Torah, he refused to limit himself to just one, but he said it is to love God, and to love one's neighbor. Both of those commandments are already in the Torah, there's no question about that whatsoever. Jesus' particular insight was in putting them together and in saying that until you understand that love of God is truly not realized unless there's love of neighbor, and vice versa, you can't fully understand the intention behind the Torah. So both of these teachers are showing us something about the necessity of having an incisive grasp of the scriptures and not merely mastery of the topics that have to be covered.

**MC:** And the famous line of Jesus saying, "Turn the other cheek" has been used as a clarion call for non-resistance or non-violence, but don't you write that it's far more powerful than that?



**BC:** It works in the hands of Jesus in a much more interesting way because the intent within the context that Jesus was living in is to show to the person who is oppressive that there is in fact a better way, a more effective way than oppression. Who is it that has the capacity to slap you on the cheek and compel you to act? That's referring in Jesus' context to a particular kind of figure, namely to a Roman soldier. Roman soldiers around the time of Jesus were in fact authorised to compel people to hand over their possessions and to work often at very hard labor without any kind of recompense. And so Jesus' advice is when confronted with that kind of legalised oppression is to go along with it to the extent that it's legal and then to go beyond it in order to demonstrate to the oppressor the nature of his immorality. It's a matter of retaliating with goodness in order to show a way forward that is better for all those concerned. It's vitally important, I think, and it was correctly understood by Gandhi and by Martin Luther King to see that the purpose of Jesus' teaching is always to demonstrate to the oppressor that there is a much better alternative available.

**MC:** Bruce, how did the teachings of Jesus about the soul actually differ from the Stoic view we're accustomed to help us find and sustain lasting humanity?

**BC:** Jesus taught understanding of our basic human selves, which we can also call souls, such that they are

basically limited. The ancient Israelite conception is that human beings are dust and that they return to dust. Now, to be sure, the mortal nature that we bear is alive as long as we can breathe, and yet Jesus insisted on the notion that as created we are finite, and that we have to learn the ways of eternity. We cannot simply assume that they are given or are a part of our nature. That's what distinguished him from later Stoic teachings. Within the teaching of Stoicism there was the conception that every human being had within him a divine spark. Jesus' view was that we were capable of learning to apprehend that divine spark, but in fact it wasn't merely latent within us, it was a matter of our having actively to enter into a movement which would bring us to that eternity.

**MC:** So when Jesus talks about, what shall it cost a man to gain the world and lose his soul, or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, he wasn't exactly whistling Dixie, was he?

**BC:** No, he was not, he was grounded in the thought that, because we understand that we are mortal we are finite. We can truly lose ourselves if we do not discover a way that connects us with the divine. There's nothing within us which is inherently immortal, and therefore we must not feel secure with ourselves. The sense of being secure to oneself was, to Jesus' mind, one of the most dangerous sentiments that a person could have.

**MC:** And can you tell us how understanding spirit in its

original context can grant us a better relationship with the divine?

**BC:** Take what we were just talking about, the nature of the limits of the human soul. That makes clear the difference, not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in Jesus' mind, the difference between soul and spirit. Often English speakers confuse these two, because I do think that we have been too much influenced by Stoicism and not enough by prophecy. In the world of prophecy the distinction is this, that the soul, as we were just saying, is finite. The soul is a matter in Hebrew of *nephesh*, of breath, and therefore we know very well that when a person or an animal stops breathing then that is the end of that being. But spirit is infinitely powerful, and it might be helpful to keep in mind that the word in Hebrew for spirit, *ruach*, also means "wind". So soul relates to spirit in the same way that breath relates to wind. That is, breath is finite, wind is, functionally speaking, infinite.

Within the book of Genesis, the reference to *ruach*, to spirit, that opens the book is of the spirit of God hovering over the face of primordial waters. It imagines the entire universe as being a form of abyss, and within that what brought about shape and ultimately dry land and the possibility of life was the powerful and shaping force of spirit. In Jesus' understanding then, and the understanding of the prophets, it was exactly that primordial force which they entered into contact with, in such a way that they

could understand the ways of God for humanity.

**MC:** And as you explained, the whole concept of Satan is simply that which attempts to break you from your conception with God, isn't it? Nothing more nefarious than that really.

**BC:** In a profound sense, trivial, because Satan has no power of its own. It is rather that it can interrupt power, that it gets in the way of our understanding of the eternal. It leads us into false loyalties that get us away from the most primordial loyalty of them all, which is to spirit. After all, spirit is the very source of life. That is the point of view of the opening of the book of Genesis. And therefore everything in us that can enable us to make contact with that source is of prophetic value. And everything that causes us to forget it, and to fall into the delusion that we can live separate from God, and separate from one another, is Satanic.

**MC:** Yeah, and it seems that at first glance when I was reading your book, Bruce, that you were almost committing the heresy of adoptionism, but then I was thinking of the Pauline epistles, and Paul certainly talks that we are adopted by the spirit of God, aren't we?

**BC:** That's exactly so. Paul is quite happy to use that metaphor in order to explain how it is that we enter into relationship with the spirit. As a matter of fact, in writing

this entire book, I've started to step aside from questions such as, when Jesus became son of God was he adopted by God? Or was he born son of God? And I stepped aside from questions related to the trinity, or issues such as whether a person is justified by faith or justified by works. Now I have an interest in all of these issues. I've studied them and teach them and have written about them from time to time, but I do think that we are misled if we believe that those questions actually summarize the substance of faith.

The substance of faith in Jesus is really not what you believe about him, but whether or not you follow him, and he sets out paths of spiritual discipline for following him, which can be read from some of the most obviously authentic passages in the New Testament. And it's just those that I've decided I should focus on for the sake of this book. I think that someone can follow Jesus and say the Lord's Prayer and not have any particular belief about Jesus, and that he'd be entirely happy with that.

**MC:** And ultimately, Bruce, don't you write that spirit is connected to divine wisdom? That's one of the gifts.

**BC:** It most certainly is. In fact, one could even consider wisdom to be an alternative way of identifying the same course as spirit. In Hebrew both *ruach*, spirit, and *hokhmah*, are feminine nouns, and when the wisdom of God is referred to in the book of Proverbs, it is spoken of

in connection with the primordial act of creating the entire universe. In other words, wisdom and spirit are associated with one another. And I think the reason for their very close association is that the Hebrew Bible wishes us to understand that in its essence, although the spirit of God cannot be entirely appreciated by a human being, nonetheless, by means of our wisdom we can come to understand a great deal about it, and in understanding that we come into ourselves.

**MC:** Bruce, the kingdom of God is perhaps a central theme in the teachings of Jesus, but don't you write that the kingdom of God has many levels, and one of the main ones is an internal process?

**BC:** Yes, that process is I think profoundly important because at root when Jesus referred to the kingdom of God, what he meant was a rule that was genuinely righteous. Very often people of the modern age trip over the word "kingdom" as used by Jesus, because after all we pride ourselves in having democracies—and we should have democracies. But we need to bear in mind that in the time of Jesus the alternative to kingdom was not democracy. The alternative to kingdom was chaos, or worse still was tyranny. In other words, you used the world kingdom to mean effective government, rule that worked.

Now when he spoke of "kingdom of God" what he

meant was an effective government that was also genuinely just. The issue in Jesus' mind was: how could Israel know that, realize that. In a situation in which a very different government, namely the kingdom of Caesar, was all too obvious. And to Jesus' mind the kingdom of God began, the realm of justice started to make itself felt, when Israelites turned to God and came to understand him as being the actual source of justice within their lives. So that within themselves they would act on the basis of divine will, and make that an ethical principle that they could use in their interactions with others. That also implied that people who followed Jesus would also see themselves as being worthy of God's concern. So God was reaching out to them, transforming their lives, and in turn making them figures of transformation.

**MC:** It's interesting because when you read the *Gospel of Thomas* people are always asking, "Where is the kingdom of God and when is it coming?", and Jesus keeps telling you, "It's all around you, you just have to open your eyes."

**BC:** Exactly. It is inside you and outside you. And it goes on to say, in *Thomas*, "and men do not know it." If you would only begin by knowing, by realizing this force, which is in fact available within you, then you would be part of the positive transformation.

**MC:** Yes, and you write too that in the Lord's Prayer there seems to be a mistranslation, because we're used to it

from the King James version, and even Catholics do it, that says, "Thy kingdom come." But you write that it simply says, "The kingdom will come."

**BC:** Yeah, that's exactly right. There is an enormous sense of security in the pattern of prayer that Jesus recommends to his followers. It really is not a matter of wishful thinking. Instead he anticipates that they will have the courage to begin the prayer focused on the *abba*, the father, and then to say, in fact, father, your name will be sanctified. When we say in the traditional words, hallowed be thy name, there are two problems. One is that practically no one knows what hallowed means any more. The other is that it sounds like some kind of faint wish, that it's just people praying somewhere in the congregation, giving God his due. But when Jesus says *nethkadash shamak* "Your name will be sanctified," what he means is that God's name will be acknowledged as holy everywhere, that this is the inevitable force of the disclosure of history. And so too when he says, "your kingdom will come." It's a matter of the confidence of saying, the justice that we hunger and thirst for is in fact on the way. The issue is only which side of the curve we're going to be on, whether we're going to be on the side of the curve that sees justice realized, or that resists it.

**MC:** Bruce, when Jesus heals, he does not do it by prayer as the ancient Jews did, by asking the father to heal and to



act on their behalf, but he does it by forgiveness. He's always telling them, your sins are forgiven. What lesson is there in this nuance?

**BC:** It's a very interesting understanding of healing that Jesus developed. He was not unique in his belief that it was possible for a human being to seek for divine compassion and therefore to see the power of healing released. There were other people of the time, other rabbis, who were called hasids. Those who had attained divine compassion. But the means by which Jesus did it, just as you say, involve the person's understanding that all the force of divine forgiveness had been released on him, so that the force of sin no longer had its paralysing power. And in the most symbolic case of this, that occurs in Capernaum in the second chapter of Mark's gospel, when a person is lowered down into the room where Jesus was—because there were so many people around they had blocked the way into Jesus—when a person is lowered down towards Jesus, the issue becomes: is Jesus able to forgive sin? There are those who insist he is not. His reply is, "So that you may know that the son of Man has authority to release sins on the earth," and he says to the person who was paralyzed, "Get up and walk," and he does.

In other words, Jesus' understanding is that human illness is a consequence of sin. Not only that particular person's sin, but as we might say, the consequences of sin

is karma, to use a conception that comes from Hinduism. That is, there is a cause and effect in this life. Jesus had the insight that this cause and effect, though powerful, was also breakable, that the divine power of forgiveness is such that the consequences of sin could be released for an individual. And that if a person understood the full power of that release, the result could be healing. And it was in the many cases that we can see within the gospels.

**MC:** Yeah, because you write, sin is not something we do that you might say is wrong, but sin is something that affects so many people when we do it, it's a chain event that keeps us connected.

**BC:** That's exactly it, and I think this is among Jesus' most probing insights, that we need to be willing to use the power of forgiveness because there is an afflicted human being before us, who is obviously in need, and it's not necessarily anything that he did. It may have been a consequence handed on to him through his family or through his community, because sin is a matter of cause and effect. In fact one of its most insidious qualities is that the power of sin over time can actually be magnified, as we can see easily in many of the violent conflicts in the world today. So what it requires, according to the prophecy of Jesus, is the wisdom to intervene when that problem of cause and effect is magnified—a spiral of violence—in order to say that the initial cause is really not

at all commensurate with all the suffering that is going on. And it's simply time to stop this cause and effect. That's the divine will. Human beings are very often much more insistent upon their own vengeance than God is ever portrayed within the Hebrew Bible.

**MC:** Sin means "missing the mark" in both Hebrew and Greek, but you write that Jesus uses sin in the Aramaic context of death. Could you expand on this and how it related to the themes of *The Way of Jesus*?

**BC:** Yes, I'd be happy to. It's just as you say: if you look at the etymology of the term "sin" it should be something as trivial as missing the bullseye in archery, whether you're on the Greek side or the Hebrew side. Yet in the Lord's Prayer, and elsewhere in his teaching, when Jesus refers to sin he uses the noun in Aramaic *hobha* which means "dead". We can now say that this was a very widespread metaphor within the Aramaic language and it's also possible for us to say, historically speaking, why this language was used and it helps us better to see the social circumstance in which Jesus taught. Jesus lived in a time, especially in Galilee, when the entire territory was under the shadow of Roman rule. And Roman rule not only in the political and military sense, but also in the economical sense. When the Romans had come in and claimed the historic territory of Israel as their own, they had also decided that they would give ownership of farmlands to

wealthy aristocrats who were back in Rome. So if you had been a peasant living, let's say, in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, and on the same bit of land for generations, suddenly you would find that you owed a new landlord some form of rent for your property.

Now the difficulty about that is that most Jews living in the small hamlets in Galilee did not in fact live on the basis of currency. Theirs was not a cash economy. Instead it was an exchange economy. You would simply grow your wheat or produce your oil or shepherd your sheep, and you would be sharing those out within your community and receiving back goods and services from those around you, without currency changing hands. So when you introduce the concept of ownership and rent into such a society, the result is a situation of chronic debt, and what happened over the course of time was that peasants in Galilee had to hand over a great proportion of their produce to their landlords in exchange for being allowed to remain on their land. And yet they were still technically in debt because they hadn't paid with the currency that they didn't have in the first place. So debt was actually the social condition that Jews knew in Galilee; and it also became a metaphor for the relationship between an Israelite and God such that you could no longer pay to God what was owed him for your breaking the Torah. And you could pay back a landlord in Rome for land that you were living on. And for that very reason the conception

grew stronger in the mind of Jesus that the way forward in dealing with sin as a debt was quite simply that the debt had to be wiped out. The consequences had to be stopped only because God was going to put an end to the requirement of trying to repay what in fact could not be repaid.

**MC:** Bruce, going back to your section on forgiveness, you write in detail about this dark side of forgiveness. You use Paul as an example when he throws out a member of a church whose behavior is deleterious to the congregation. Could you tell us about the concept that is often overlooked in the whole theology of forgiveness?

**BC:** It's a very interesting one, and, as you say, it comes up in the teaching of Paul, as it does in the teaching of Peter. It's founded on Jesus' understanding that it lies within the power of the community to seek God's forgiveness for wrongdoing, and it also lies within the power of the community when a person doesn't wish to change his ways, when a person wishes to persist in doing harm, to show to that person that as long as that is the case, the way of forgiveness is not open to him, or to her. There is a way, within the teaching of Jesus, to resist the force of evil, first of all by naming it as evil, to refer to a particular act as evil by saying as long as you persist in doing this, forgiveness is not going to be an option. And this becomes an important means of shaping behavior that

will result in building up the community rather than setting people at odds with one another. And I wanted to stress that within my discussion in *The Way of Jesus* because I think there has been a tendency, especially in the past few decades, for people interested in Jesus to suppose that he had no answer for those situations in which people do harm. And such situations do emerge, it seems to be inevitable. But the fact is he did give an answer, and the answer was naming evil for what it was, and insisting to a person that persisting in evil could not result in forgiveness.

**MC:** What I also find very interesting is that Paul persecuted Christians and he was forgiven by Jesus, but as you write—and you point out very well—through his letters, his tone and his words, at the end Paul never really forgave himself fully, did he?

**BC:** I think that's true, and it is one of the sources of Paul's extraordinary energy, that he could never quite convince himself that what he had done to Christians in the earlier part of his life had been entirely forgiven. It's part of his very interesting psychological dynamic, that Paul even when aware of the depth of divine forgiveness was not fully capable, I think, of forgiving himself.

**MC:** Bruce, in this day and age we hear a lot about the prosperity gospel, and more recently the controversy on the social gospel. What are your views on these two

concepts?

**BC:** Well, at the time I wrote *The Way of Jesus* there was a little bit more prosperity going around than there is right now; and I observe that those who are preaching the prosperity gospel are keeping a somewhat lower profile, but that doesn't mean that they have disappeared. And, as a matter of fact, it is especially during times of financial hardship, as we're in right now, that there is a tendency to get us off the hook of helping the poor by saying that a person is poor, or is unemployed, or that a person is without health insurance because of something that that person did, and really that someone who was dear to God would not be in that position. It is in fact highly convenient if one is in fact prosperous oneself. But this is a highly superficial analysis. Although it appears to be attractive, what I argue in the book, and will reiterate now, even despite the financial changes involved in the time since I drafted that part of *The Way of Jesus*, is that this understanding that God rewards good people and punished bad people, so that if your economic fortunes are down you did something wrong, is really only superficially appealing. It works especially well on television, where you mostly see prosperity gospel preached, because people watch television without any great attention, and if you say it very loud and quickly, someone may very well believe you.

But there is in fact no part of the biblical tradition which

would say that this easy, superficial understanding of prosperity accords with the will of God. In fact there was always an awareness that there is a disparity between the justice of God and the way in which our fortunes work out in this world. Therefore it actually becomes the duty of someone who is thankful to become aware of those disparities as they arise and to try to stand in the gap between God's justice and the injustice of this world. So a greater awareness of the biblical tradition in fact makes us much more responsible for others. It never can serve as an alibi not to act on behalf of someone else. This to me is a kind of litmus test of that theology, if it makes a person feel less responsible, less encouraged to act on behalf of someone else then in all probability it's there as a kind of sop to spirituality, it's not spirituality itself.

**MC:** And what about the issue of a social gospel? That seems kind of prickly because obviously early Christianity started on the outside looking in. Eventually it became a civic force when Rome and Christianity were wedded. It was still very concerned about the poor and the sick. So early Christianity was all about the social gospel, wasn't it?

**BC:** It certainly was. The gospel of early Christianity was social, and it was spiritual at the same time. It was the period in which you saw prophetic movements at their height, in which you had the great debates about the nature of Christ, and how it is that God should be



conceived, and yet also if you went to an ordinary celebration of the Eucharist, or the Mass, on a weekly basis. What you would find would be people bringing into the church not only food that had been prepared, but also wheat and barley and animals and fruit and wine and oil, and the purpose of that was so that it could be distributed to the poor during the course of the week. In fact the Eucharist, or the Mass, was a method of social recycling at the same time that it was a devotional sacrifice towards God.

The people within the early church among the clergy called deacons were specifically charged with seeing through the distribution to the poor in their care during the course of the week. One of the ways that early Christianity was known in the early Roman Empire was that it was a group of people who took more care of one another and of those outside the Christian community than was seen as being normal within the Roman Empire. It was a profoundly social message. And it even resulted, according to the testimony of the book of Acts, in there being early collective wealth—what you might call communism—in the first community of Christians in Jerusalem. This was a profoundly social message, and what it suggests to me is that the modern dichotomy between social and spiritual is a mistake, and that we need to overcome that false distinction by recovering the prophetic sense of Jesus' message.

**MC:** Aside from obviously reading your very inspirational and poignant book, what do you think Christianity needs to evolve to face these very complicated time and these very complicated issues?

**BC:** I think that the fundamentals of Jesus' teaching are actually present within the Lord's Prayer. Just those important prophetic attributes that you referred to at the very beginning: the awareness of soul and spirit and kingdom, insight, forgiveness, mercy and glory are all there within the prayer and to my mind the most important thing that a person can do is to become aware that all of those powers are presently inside each and every one of us. What God wishes to do is to call them out and develop them. Jesus' entire purpose was to identify them in such a way so that everyone who follows him would develop the prophetic capacity to become an agent of the kingdom of God. If my book helps someone to do that better, that's fine with me, but I have to acknowledge that there are obviously other ways, and my main point is that whatever way you approach Jesus, if the result is that you follow him better, that was precisely his intention. The crucial issue is less what you think about Jesus than it is how you go about putting his message into practice.

**MC:** I'd like to thank you very much for coming on and giving us a very erudite discussion on your new book *The Way of Jesus*.

**B C :** Well, many thanks. It's been an enjoyable conversation.

# David Fideler

David Fideler is the author of *Jesus Christ, Sun of God, Love's Alchemy: Poems from the Sufi Tradition*, and co-author of *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library: An Anthology of Ancient Writings Which Relate to Pythagoras and Pythagorean Philosophy*, with Kenneth Guthrie.

A solar amount of energy in Christian studies has always been directed to its Judaic roots. David Fideler's works are a gravitational reminder that the Greek matrix is just as essential to the formation of the myriad cults that sprung from the persona of Jesus Christ. His seminal book, *Jesus Christ, Sun of God*, the focus of our interview, is perhaps the most complete exposition ever published on the Hellenistic wing of both Christianity and Gnosticism.

At a cursory glance, it might seem Fideler was applying modern occult exegesis to comparative religion during our interview; but his scholarship was as sober as his presentation was intoxicating. Perhaps his most captivating research centers on the overlooked Biblical prevalence of gematria—Greek number symbolism and hidden mathematics that reveal deep ontological truths. This is a cry far from New Age, since Fideler aptly revealed that *gematria* (later adopted by Judaism as the Kabbalah) was a normative tool of authors of various religions in ancient times. Furthermore, he established the obvious and heavy influence of the furtive Cults of Orpheus and Pythagoras,

heterodox Greek philosophy, and the Greco-Roman Mystery Schools. Lastly, Fideler demonstrated that Christianity began as an aqueous movement with manifold tributaries before it became calcified after the copulation between Roman state and Orthodox Christianity.

Although Fideler might come across as a Mythicist—a resurgent movement in the last generation claiming the Christ was nothing more than another avatar of the many fabled solar demigods—he certainly believed there was a historical Jesus. But like all great figures of antiquity, layers of didactic folklore were added to augment his standing and theological wingspan. The Hellenized myth of Christ was meant to *complement the Jewish message of the historical Jesus. And the invaluable wisdom of the Greeks translates better through the periscopes of mythology and speculative philosophy.*

The ancient Gnostics never had a problem re-interpreting or re-inventing Jesus Christ in order to find virgin strata of salvific knowledge (better known as Gnosis.) Fideler pointed out that neither did many early Christians theologians who to this day are revered by Orthodoxy. It was part and parcel of Hellenistic religiosity, and so was the union of math and mysticism that is seasoned throughout much of the New Testament and apocrypha.

The evolution of heretical Judaism into Gnosticism and Christianity is certainly an intriguing and ongoing venture

for academia. David Fideler's contributions signal that the Greek origins are just as alluring and categorically just as crucial.

David Fideler was interviewed on July 23, 2006.

**MC:** We are talking to David Fidler, author of *Jesus Christ, Son of God*. How are you, David?

**DF:** I'm well, how are you doing, Miguel?

**MC:** I'm fine, thank you. Obviously, the topic today is the little-known subject of gematria. Could you tell us about gematria?

**DF:** Gematria is a system of number symbolism that is used in various world religions and mystical systems, and you find it in ancient Greek, Hebrew and Arabic; and I believe that there are actually forms of it present in Vedic mathematics as well. It's a system where each letter of the alphabet corresponds with a number, and this allows people to construct forms of numerical symbolism from names and phrases. And it might seem foreign to us, but in terms of other languages it was actually something that was very common, because, for example, in the ancient Greek culture they had a separate number system, but they didn't have a number system like we do, with the Arabic numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Their number system was more compact and cumbersome, and most numerical operations used combinations of letters, because the letters of course corresponded to numbers.

Basically, if you were an ancient Greek person and you were going to add some numbers together, you would do it by using letters for different numbers, so it's just the

way they thought. And this was used in many, many different ways. Sometimes it was used just for jokes and riddles, and there are a lot of inscriptions from the ancient world where you see this being used. But, for example, certain mystical names, for example, like the Gnostics divinity Abraxas, or Abrasax, which was associated with the sun. If you take all the letters that make up this divinity's name, it equals 365, the number of days in the solar year, and so this is one example of how this symbolism was used intentionally.

**MC:** What are some other examples of gematria that you find in the canonicals?

**DF:** Well, one thing that we know from reading ancient writers is that the early Christian Gnostics used gematria. If you read the works of the heresy hunters like Irenaeus and Hippolytus—those are really the main ones, but I think even Tertullian gets into it, he repeats it as a secondary source—but mainly Irenaeus and Hippolytus, these people who've read about the Gnostics, they talk about how the Gnostics made a big deal out of the fact the name of Jesus equals the number 888. We also know about gematria in the New Testament, the number of the beast being 666. Those triple numbers were important, and there were other examples as well, but one of the things that I show in my book, *Jesus Christ, Sun of God*, is that there is a tremendous amount of documented usage of gematria



from the ancient world, and there are many examples of divinity associated with the sun that have symbolic numbers that equals 365. It was really a very widespread practice, and there are a lot of examples of it, for example from the Greek magical papyri and things like that.

**MC:** Why is 888 such an important number, or any triple number?

**DF:** Well, the way that the Gnostics described it, it seems in terms of the symbolism that anything that was repeated was seen as being more significant, was a more potent number, something like that. 888 and 666 are naturally occurring ratios in terms of music, which was one of the four branches of mathematics in the ancient world, and 666 is the ratio of the major fifth in music, which is the most powerful musical ratio. And 888 is the ratio of the whole tone in Pythagorean tuning. So those are very important musical ratios. But in terms of the 888, the Gnostics referred to Jesus as the ogdoad, which is a Greek word for the number eight. For the Gnostics, or at least this group of Gnostics, it represented a form of spiritual perfection or fullness. They referred to Jesus as being the fullness of the ogdoad, which represents spiritual principle. The number six, on the other hand, or 666 represents the material universe. So 888 represents the spiritual realm, or the realm of spiritual perfection. In terms of ancient number symbolism, among the early Christians, you have

the idea of the week being made up of seven days, and eight represents a new cycle of creation. And so those are some of the explanations that the Gnostics gave for the significance of Jesus being the ogdoad, and they associated that with 888. It is very strange when you first realize that Jesus is 888, because for hundreds of years there's been all this emphasis on 666, and that being a symbolic number, and then you discover that Jesus, the central principle of Christianity, is also attributed a number, just like 666, except it's 888.

**MC:** And you even say that even Paul uses gematria.

**DF:** Well, there are examples of gematria in the New Testament, and there are examples of gematria in the Pauline writings. One example—I think it's in Galatians—Paul talks about how the mosaic law was given 430 years ago, in the past. The actual dating system is wrong, because it wasn't 430 years—I'm not sure exactly what it was, but it wasn't that—but the Greek word *nomos*, or law, has the numerical equivalent of 430, and so when he says that the law was given 430 years ago, that is an allusion to gematria. It might just be an inside joke, but he or whoever wrote it was using gematria. Not all the Pauline epistles of the New Testament are thought to actually be written by Paul.

There are a couple of absolutely astonishing instances of gematria in the New Testament, though, and those are

examples that I thoroughly explore in my book. The first one, which is absolutely remarkable, was discovered by John Michell, and that involves the story which appears in the 21st chapter of John relating to the miraculous catch of 153 fish and the unbroken net. As you are well aware, the Gospel of John is the last of the four canonicals that was written, and this 21st chapter was probably something that was tacked on to the end of that at some point as well, so this is something that is later than the other gospels, but it's an indisputable example of gematria. Basically, the way that the story goes is that it was after the death of Jesus, and Peter and some other disciples decide to get into a boat and go fishing. And so they get into the boat, and they shove off from shore, and they cast their net, but they don't catch anything. And then they see this figure on the shore that was actually the resurrected Jesus, but they don't realize this. The fellow on the shore says to them, "Go cast your net on the right side of the boat." So they do this and they all of a sudden make a miraculous catch of fish in their net, and it says that when they counted the fish, there were exactly 153 fish. At a certain point, after this miraculous catch of fish, they realize that the figure on the shore was Jesus, and Simon Peter got out of the boat, and he swam to shore, and the other disciples with their fish in the net followed him. The thing that is remarkable about the story is that if you take the numerical equivalent of the Greek word for fish, which is used in the story, it's

*IXTHUS*, and that has the number 1224. That also happens to be the numerical value of *TO DIPTWAN*, which is the net. So "fishes" and "the net" have the same number which is 1224. And if you take that and divide it by eight, you get 153, which is the number of fishes in the net. So this number 153 was not arbitrarily arrived at.

They used that number for a reason, and people had recognised this at least a century ago, and quite possibly for hundreds of years, but probably about 30 years ago, or something like that, John Michell was studying this more carefully. What he discovered is that, not only is 153 one eighth of the Fishes and the net—this was known for some time—but what he discovered is that the story itself describes a geometrical diagram. And what you do is you draw some circles, and you set your compass as the perimeter value of Simon Peter, who is the person who decided to go fishing. And you draw these circles, which represent the apostles in a boat, and the diameter of the boat then is 1224, starting from the initial value of Simon Peter. Casting the net is a geometrical operation, and getting out of the boat is a geometrical operation. Basically it draws this diagram with a net, and each one of the lines segments on the net is 153.

This really was an incredible breakthrough because everyone knew that gematria had been used in sacred writings and mystical symbolism, and things like that, but no one really realized that it was connected with

geometrical diagrams. Actually, this had been discovered over 100 years ago, that there were connections between gematria and geometrical diagrams. That had previously been discovered, but this was an incredible discovery: that there is actually an underlying geometrical diagram complete with measures and gematria symbolism which lies behind and provides the foundation for a New Testament story.

**MC:** I have also read that the story of the 153 fish goes back to Pythagoras. Have you heard that too?

**DF:** Yes, this just clinches the case. There's the story about Pythagoras which appears in a couple of the ancient biographies of Pythagoras. Basically in that story, Pythagoras was going along on the shore and there were some people who had come in on a boat, and they have caught some fishes in a net, and Pythagoras said to these people in the boats, "Well, if I predict the exact number of fish in the net, will you do what I say?" And, sure enough, Pythagoras predicted the exact number of fishes in the net. Since Pythagoras was a vegetarian, he told the people to release the fishes. The actual number of fish in the net is not given in that particular story, but probably if you were a Pythagorean in the ancient world, you would know that it's 153 or 256, or something like that, one of those multiples of 153.

That was a really remarkable discovery, and then I also

made a discovery of a similar diagram that underlies the New Testament story, and that is the story of the Feeding of the 5000, with loaves and fishes. That is based on the same numerical sequence that the 153 fish in the net is based on, but it's arrived at in a different way. It says in the story, this is in the earliest version of the story, that there were 5000 people and Jesus and the apostles. And the way you arrive at this is, you take a square which has 5000 units and then you basically measure the square and you can do some geometrical operations. All of the elements of the story then come out of the geometry, and all of the measurements are exact, and it's the same numerical code that's used in the story of the 153 fish in the net. This is thoroughly documented in my book, and so you have two cases of these miracle stories that appear in the New Testament and are based on the underlying geometrical diagrams. And this is something very empirical, and it's not something you can really dispute when you see the geometry and how it perfectly matches up with the story and the text.

Now, the significance of the Feeding of the 5000 is that, with the story of the 153 fish in the nets, that is from the very latest gospel in the New Testament—and that 21st chapter was probably added on, so no one is really sure what the date of that might be. It could be around the year 150, or 120, or something like that, so that's fairly late. But the story of the Feeding of the 5000 is something that

appears in all three of the synoptic gospels, including the Gospel of Mark, which was the earliest one. So this is a story that goes back, without question, to the earliest Christian Communities, and it seemed the very earliest source documents for the New Testament. So it shows that gematria was being used at a very early date as foundation for creating these spiritual allegories and teachings.

**MC:** Even in your book, the authors weren't doing this as some sort of code, or as a lark, or anything, it was actually an ancient belief that geometry and math were the highest concepts before you reach the spiritual world, right? This is serious stuff.

**DF:** Right, well, in the Platonic and Pythagorean view, mathematics and geometry are related to the most essential level of reality, or being. For the Pythagoreans and later, the study of mathematics was a way of purifying the soul and your spiritual insight, and things like that. The reason that this was used is that in the ancient world, every aspect of reality was seen as having a deeper dimension. As well as the outer dimension, the exoteric, there was the inner dimension, the esoteric, and every outer manifestation is rooted in a deeper reality, a deeper truth. Gematria was a way of expressing this truth. The outer story might be entertaining, but then as someone develops deeper forms of knowledge and insight, they are able to see that there is also a deeper dimension to the

stories, and that they were basically created to express very profound symbolic truths.

**MC:** This is obviously very prevalent in the Kabbalah. Do you think that the Kabbalah borrowed from the Greeks? Or was it vice versa?

**DF:** Well, the word *gematria* is actually a kabbalistic term, and it's from the Jewish Kabbalah. It's actually borrowed from the Greek term *geometria*, or geometry. Gematria is sort of like a corruption of that. This practice in Greek was known as *isopsephism*, which means having the same number, because in this symbolism, words with the same number were seen as denoting the same thing, or being equal on a symbolic level. But the historical evidence is that number symbolism was first used by the Greeks, and at a later date, the number system, the Hebrew letters, were actually associated with numbers. So this is something that is actually later. The practice of the matter, as far as we can tell, in terms of the way it's normally used, is something that the Greeks developed, and then it was something that was taken over by the Jewish Kabbalah. The Greek version is several hundred years earlier.

The earliest example of gematria—and I don't have the source right in front of me, but it's in my book—is a Babylonian King, Sargon II, had a wall built that had a length in terms of measurement that was equal to the



numerical value of his name, and so that's not a form of mystical symbolism really, that's more a form of royal ego-tripping. I might be wrong about this, but I think that's about 1800 BC. You can find the exact date in my book. But this is something that's been used for hundreds and hundreds of years. Similar things were used in terms of building the Gothic cathedrals; they would create these structures that were symbolic microcosms and were permeated with divine symbolism. Some of these stories in the New Testament were constructed in the same way that a Gothic cathedral would be constructed, based on the proportions of what some people call sacred geometry. So too with these New Testament stories constructed in the same way, and the argument that is present in my book is that the New Testament writers really did not invent this at all. This practice had been used by the Pythagoreans in ancient Greece, because you find the same geometry, and it involves the names of the major Greek divinities, and in fact it's the same number system that underlies the 153 fish in the net and the Feeding of the 5000. And so the people who wrote the story were drawing upon this symbolic system that had been developed earlier.

**MC:** Yeah, I remember opening your book up, and what really floored me was that you come out and say, Christianity was a Greek religion. We're also conditioned to think that the only root Christianity has is Judaism and we forget about the Hellenistic influence. You definitely show

that it's so prevalent in both Gnostic and orthodox Christianity.

**DF:** Yeah, I wouldn't go so far as to say that Christianity is a Greek religion, although the Greek key element in Christianity has been underemphasized. One of the things that I really wanted to show in this particular book is basically the Hellenistic influence in Christianity, which is really overlooked, and it's a major component. Basically, Christianity as it developed as a world religion is a Greek religion. All of the theological ideas as they developed are really based on Greek sources and Hellenistic cosmological thought. The New Testament itself, at least in the form that we have it, was entirely written in Greek, and it grew up in the Greek world, the world of the mystery religions. The very powerful ideas that underlie Christian thinking and Christian symbolism really are to a large extent from the Greek world.

**MC:** You even talk about the influence, not only of Pythagoras, but before that of the Orpheus cult. You talk about how Clement of Alexandria called Jesus the new song of Orpheus. Could you tell us more about this Orpheus cult that seems to be so influential?

**DF:** Yeah, it's very complex and astonishing. Orpheus was viewed by the Greeks as being the first theologian of the mysteries. Everyone knows the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which is basically that Orpheus's wife was

abducted to the underworld, and he was given permission to retrieve her, and he was a famous musician who played the lyre or the lyra. He went into the underworld and he played his music. Eurydice started to follow him out of the underworld, and just when they got to the surface, he looked back at her, which was not permitted, and because of that she was not able to leave the underworld. You can see that he was basically trying to retrieve his wife, or the soul of his wife, and he was seen as being a sort of savior figure, and he saved her through music. In the esoteric interpretations of Orphism, the music or harmonies of Orpheus's lyre were associated with the Logos, or the cosmic pattern of harmony and intelligence that underlies the cosmos. This was a central idea in Hellenistic thought that influenced Christianity in a very profound way. The beginning of the fourth gospel says that, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God." This word that we're talking about is Logos, and Logos has all sorts of meanings. One of the few things that Logos actually doesn't mean is "word"!

**MC:** That also taught me, because again we're so trained to think that Logos is "word", and that's all it is, but you definitely show that it means so many different things other than word.

**DF:** The real meaning of Logos, it's really equivalent to the Latin word *ratio*, which has many meanings, and one of

the meanings of ratio is reason. That's where we get the word rationality. A ratio is also a mathematical proportion,  $a$  is to  $b$  as  $b$  is to  $c$ , that is the basis of gematria. All of Greek thinking was really based on ratio and proportion. Also, ratio represents intelligence, not in terms of the way that we normally think about intelligence, the ego thinking about things or analysing things, but the Greeks had this idea that behind the structure of the world is a natural harmony, an intelligence that orders things. This is actually a very valuable—and I would say indispensable—notion for us today, because in terms of theological thinking we have this unfortunate idea that God is like this ego that stands apart from the universe and draws up this plan and sets the universe in motion. The Greek idea of this is that there is indeed a living intelligence behind the universe but it's something very organic; and it's something that spontaneously springs out of the eternal level of reality. That's one of the things that's so beautiful about it, because it doesn't deny that there is a supreme principle or divine principle behind the universe, but it does away with the primitive anthropocentric notion of God being some kind of giant human ego that wills the universe into being according to some kind of blueprint. I don't mean to digress about that, but this word Logos has many, many different meanings and it can mean ratio, or an account given of something, or an articulation of something, but it doesn't actually mean word.

In any case, to go back to your question, Clement of Alexandria identified Christianity, he spoke of Christianity as being the new song, and he identified Christ symbolically as being the new Orpheus. This idea that Christianity is a new manifestation of the universal Logos which always existed in different forms. Clement of Alexandria was one of the earliest church fathers who was most influenced by Greek thought and he was very, very important and influential; and it was in ancient Alexandria that this Hellenistic idea of the Logos most profoundly influenced Christianity. But he was taking a different approach because, if you read the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is symbolically identified as being the new Moses, and Clement of Alexandria identified Jesus as being the new Orpheus.

**MC:** And even though in the beginning was the word, or, I guess, the Logos, it had many manifestations, which you show in your book, not just Jesus, but other divine mediators between the spirit and the material world. We have Hermes, Mithras, who else?

**DF:** Well, then we also have, for example, Apollo, who was the Greek god of reason and geometry and the mediation between extremes, and a lot of this gematria and geometrical symbolism was, I think, associated with Apollo, and I show that in the book. But the key idea is that the ancient people had this idea of a principle at the

heart of creation which covers both the external world as well as the human world, the soul. And so, the Logos was seen as a cosmic organizing principle and its emblem was the sun, which is the store of light and life, and you find this in Philo of Alexandria, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Hermetic writings, and on and on and on. Symbolically, in ancient religions, various divine figures are seen as representing this principle. You have Orpheus and you have Hermes, who was known as the Logos and the messenger of Zeus, Hermes Trismegistus, who was based on the earlier Egyptian divinity Thoth, who was said to be the heart and tongue of the sun God Ra, and on and on and on. In Christianity the figure of Jesus was identified with the Logos. I think it was Origen who talked about this principle as present in the soul, and some kind of spiritual rebirth takes place when the divine son of the Logos arrives in the soul. This is basically a part of the common language of the time period. You can find similar statements to that in the Hermetic writings, which are not Christian. They're pagan, but the dividing line between, for example the Hermetic writings and the Christian mystics is very, very thin.

**MC:** And David, why do you think gematria has been so overlooked? Only a few scholars like Margaret Starbird, John Michell, as you mentioned, and yourself have really delved into this ancient knowledge. Why do think it has been so overlooked?

**DF:** Let's talk about that, but there's one thing that, one important point that I think I should mention and that is that the whole emphasis of the Gnostics really was on this idea of seeing Jesus as embodying the cosmic principle, rather than as the historical Jesus. And as Christianity developed, the Gnostic interpretation fell away, and the Christian church as it developed became very conservative, emphasizing the historical dimension of Christianity.

But the Gnostic approach that he is the Logos is something that is universal and timeless, and that it's possible to have a direct relationship with that that's basically unmediated by the church or anything like that. You find that emphasis, for example, in the Gospel of John in the New Testament, and also in the Pauline writings. Paul was the earliest New Testament writer, and the thing that's really astonishing about Paul is that, even though Paul, by all accounts, knew of people who knew the historical Jesus, the astonishing thing is that Paul never once in his writings says anything about the historical Jesus aside from the fact that, I think, he refers to the Last Supper and the fact that Jesus was crucified. That's about it. And that's astonishing, that the very earliest Christian writers says nothing about the historical Jesus; and he's basically talking about Jesus as being a universal cosmic principle, really. That's really the Gnostic approach. In the Gospel of John when Jesus says, or is made to say, I am the true life, things like that, he's speaking not as a

historical entity, but as a representation of the Logos, and you find the same thing in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, where Jesus says, "Split the log and I am there." Well, that's because the Logos permeates all of creation. It's basically wherever you look. It's basically the same as the Qur'an, "Wherever you turn, it's my face." So it was really that Gnostic interpretation of Christianity that lost out, in terms of Christianity's spiritual development.

**MC:** So it focuses more on the carnal Jesus rather than Jesus as a principle of the universe.

**DF:** Right, and to get back to your question of why people have ignored gematria, well, that's complicated. One of the problems, I think, is that when people think of gematria and number symbolism, they often confuse it with numerology. There's really a difference between numerology and number symbolism. There are some areas where there is a blurring, and superstitious usages of gematria, and things like that; but when I was researching the topic what I discovered is that at the heart of it there was something that was very, very sophisticated. Aside from the fact that numerology attracts crackpots and also inspires fear on the part of people in the academic world because they don't want to be associated with it, the other reason I think is that a lot of scholars did not take the ancient writers seriously, and they don't have any way of entering into their worldview. Basically, they don't



understand the material. We're living in a different time and the scholarly approach is quite alien to the ancient writers were really thinking about.

So in order to really understand it, you have to enter into the world view of the ancient philosophers and mystics through the use of historical imagination. You need to really try and understand what they're talking about. It's all about taking the writing seriously, because if you look at it from a historical perspective, there's no doubt that this was being used; and so when I was doing this research activity as a starting point that it was something that was really worthy of serious investigation. It's a very, very important topic because if you realize that there are at least two stories in the New Testament that are based on underlying geometrical symbolism—and this is absolutely solid—by necessity it really changes our view of early Christian origins

**MC:** If you don't mind answering this as a question from one of the listeners to end things. It's from Dave Greenaway from the UK, and his question is, given the extent to which gematria pervades the gospels, especially regarding the names of key characters, places and things, do you, David, think that it suggests the whole gospel story was contrived and there was no historical Jesus?

**DF:** No, although actually, to be honest with you, when I first started doing research into this I did question the

historicity of stories about Jesus and things like that. I think that's really a natural reaction. None of the people who wrote the gospels actually knew Jesus. Even Paul, who is the earliest New Testament writer, did not know Jesus. I think that historically it's quite certain that there was a figure like Jesus, but we're definitely separated from that figure historically, because it is true that the New Testament canon cannot be read as a historical document. You're left with this question of how much material actually goes back to Jesus, what was Jesus like, things like that. Those are a very difficult questions.

**MC:** It'll be the \$64,000 question for a long time. People will be debating this when the next messiah comes around, the next Logos.

**DF:** Well, the Logos is always here, so if you just split the piece of wood you will be able to find him, if you look at it in that way.

**MC:** That's true, he gets bogged down in names and the outward physical part and we forget to look at the deeper meaning, which you do a great job of. 15 years of research, that's dedication, David.

**DF:** There's no reason to doubt the historicity of Jesus, I think that's fairly well established. The question then is how you relate to this material. I think that the only thing that can really raise Christianity is the Gnostic

interpretation, because we can never get back to the historical Jesus; but that doesn't mean that the material of Christian belief and symbols and myths are by any means worthless, but we have to look at them in terms of the inner meaning, and realize that there is a timeless and universal dimension to the Christian story and symbolism. That applies to other religions too. And the thing that this material really invites us to do is to find some way of relating to the timeless dimension of life, because otherwise we're trapped in history and according to all of the ancient philosophers and even more profound spiritual thinkers, there is a dimension of reality that isn't limited by time and space. We only become really human when we are able to realize that in some way. So I think that the important thing is to recognize that there is some sort of universal dimension and to really look for that because a historical interpretation of Christianity, and just about any other religion, is going to lead you to a dead end.

**MC:** Well, I think that that's about it, David. Thank you very much. Hopefully we can bring some more light into what I think is the very relevant topic of gematria. So thank you very much, and I certainly hope to have you on soon.

**DF:** Well, it was really fun talking with you.

# Bart Ehrman

Professor Bart D. Ehrman is author of *Misquoting Jesus*, *Jesus Interrupted*, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, and *God's Problem*, as well as James A. Gray Distinguished Professor at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Bart Ehrman has almost become a household name because of a slew of best-selling books and being a regular on the television talk-show circuit. His scholarship is not revolutionary, and he is the first one to admit this, but Ehrman is able to craft lucid books easily digestible to the general public. In addition, because his work so keenly and deeply dissects the biology of early Christendom to the point its conventional views are almost untenable to a secular-minded society, Ehrman has become a sort of bishop to the modern Atheist movement. Yet none of his fame in popular culture compromises the fact he is an august and respected scholar of comparative religion.

The interview gravitated to his book *Misquoting Jesus*, which at the time was sizzling the sales charts. There was scant Gnosticism discussed, but very little *not* covered when it came to the errant, chaotic, and often insidious manufacturing of orthodox Christianity and its canon.

Any honest discussion on the inception of the Bible has to begin with Marcion of Synope, and that's exactly where we started. Although scholars have long debated the

impact of this heretic and distant cousin of the Gnostics, there is little doubt Marcion's proclamation that he would be the first to compile an authoritative canon accelerated the coalescing of Christianity around a solid, unbending dispensation.

Ehrman moved on nimbly to expose the contrasting theologies and textual differences found within the four gospels, general creedal inconsistencies in the New Testament, and the turbulent evolution of the Bible throughout history. Almost tragically, he also unclothed the reality that nascent Christianity began as a more egalitarian and flexible tradition before it became the dominant faith in the west. Lastly, Ehrman spoke of his transformation from fundamentalist to skeptic, as well as compared the various modern Bibles. Surprisingly, Ehrman admitted how positively conservative theologians had reacted to *Misquoting Jesus*.

The underlying theme in our interview and present in most of Ehrman's works is that an original Christianity is more than likely lost to the world. So many layers of dogmatic propaganda and arbitrary editing have been heavily daubed over its ruins that all scholars can do is rebuild what they know are provisional reconstructions. There are flickers of a rudimentary Christianity, but not enough to create a bright enough beam to illuminate the authentic teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Despite criticism and accolades, Bart Ehrman is first and

foremost a scholar who desires the truth. And he has provided a trenchant bounty of truth concerning the patchwork religion that is Christianity.

Bart Ehrman was interviewed on April 15, 2007.

**MC:** First of all, Bart, thank you for appearing on *Coffee, Cigarettes and Gnosis*, it's definitely an honor having a scholar of your repute. Is it safe to say that the story of the Bible, the canon as we know it, began with the heretic Marcion and a counter blow by the Roman church?

**BE:** Well, I'm not sure if that's safe to say or not. Some scholars have claimed this, but other scholars have pointed out that the move towards having a canon of scripture actually started out before Marcion. There is some indication that people had collected writings of the apostles before Marcion showed up on the scene around 140 c.e, middle of the second century.

**MC:** So there's already a concerted effort to put the holy writings together.

**BE:** I'm not sure if it was a concerted effort, but some churches were already compiling the letters of Paul, putting them into a collection, and it may be that some churches were already collecting gospels and putting them together. What Marcion did that was unique was that he was the first we know to collect books together and to say that they were the New Testament. His collection of books consisted of ten of Paul's letters and a gospel that is very much like our Gospel of Luke. So it's similar to the canon that we ended up with, in that there is a gospel and then there are the writings of an apostle. What we have now we

have four gospels and then we have the apostolic writings.

**MC:** And there's always been a debate whether Marcion actually had an ur-Luke or whether he added to it, as with the Pauline letters. What is your position on it?

**BE:** I think what most scholars have thought is that Marcion had something like our version of the Gospel of Luke, but that he edited it and specifically he took away chunks from it. Marcion believed that Jesus was not a flesh-and-blood human being, but that he was a divine being who descended full grown from heaven, and so he couldn't include the birth narratives of Luke chapters one and two. He omitted those. Marcion didn't believe that the God of the Old Testament was actually the God of Jesus, and so any positive references to the creator God he took out of Luke and out of the letters of Paul. It looks like he had some text that looked like ours that he edited down from his theological perspective.

**MC:** And going to the topic of scribes, basically in the early days it was scribes being inefficient and harmonizing too much that created so many divergent copies rather than an assertive church trying to create one dogma?

**BE:** Yes, I don't think there was ever any systematic attempt that was made from the upper echelon down to try and standardize the text, so it's not that bishops were saying that you need to change what this text says; it was



individual scribes who for one reason or another changed the text. Often they changed it just because of an accident, they slipped on how to spell a word, or whatever. Sometimes they changed the text to make it say what they wanted it to say, but there's no evidence to say that they were doing it under any kind of compulsion from the authorities above them.

**MC:** And you mention that there are probably hundreds and hundreds of copies. The church father Origen himself complains about scribes being inaccurate with transcribing scripture. Don't you say that there's something like 200,000 different versions of all the gospels and epistles?

**BE:** No, there aren't that many different versions. We have 5,100 Greek manuscripts. The 200,000 number represents the number of changes in these manuscripts. The number is actually higher than 200,000, we don't actually know how many there are in these manuscripts, but it's in the hundreds of thousands. If you have 2000 manuscripts that all make 100 changes then that's 200,000 changes.

**MC:** You drop an amazing bomb in your book and probably the biggest one of all is the woman being stoned for adultery in the Gospel of John. You say that it probably never was in the gospel for what reason?

**BE:** Well, I think it's almost certain that it wasn't originally in the gospel. It's found only in the Gospel of John, but

the oldest and best manuscripts don't have the story. It looks like it was added later by scribes and it turned out to be a popular story, and so the later scribes copied it until it got into the kind of manuscripts that people used when the Bible was translated into English. People from the English-speaking world are familiar with it. Most people in the Greek-speaking world in the early centuries of the church had never heard this story. It wasn't originally in the Gospel of John.

**MC:** Do you think this was based maybe on oral tradition or maybe just a scribe got imaginative, or really we don't know?

**BE:** Well, we really don't know, but my hunch is that given the nature of the story it was probably floating around in the oral tradition, because several church fathers refer to the story, but it's not clear they've seen it in the Gospel of John; they might have seen it in some other books they had, or they might have just heard it. I think the story of the adulteress is just floating around, and some scribes at some point decided to put it into a manuscript.

**MC:** And the other one is the infamous Markan epilogue that we have. I know a lot of Bibles simply mark it as an addition, but doesn't that change really the whole context of Mark? Doesn't Jesus just being in the tomb make it more of a Greek tragedy than anything else?

**BE:** Well, it generally changes how Mark is portraying Jesus. Even without these last 12 verses, Jesus is still said to have risen from the dead, and so there's not an ambiguity about that. Mark understands that Jesus was resurrected. The question is, who found out? According to what looks like the original version of Mark, when the women went to the tomb and were told by a man who was in the tomb to tell the disciples that Jesus would meet them in Galilee, according to the earliest version of Mark, they left the tomb and didn't say anything to anyone because they were afraid. That's where the text ends. And so the text ends without Jesus showing up to his disciples, which is quite a stark ending in comparison with Matthew and Luke and John. So, later scribes when they read this were so taken aback they added those twelve verses. But even in most Bibles today, those verses are put in brackets off with a footnote indicating these verses were probably not original.

**MC:** So, they are not found in the earliest copies.

**BE:** They're not found in the earliest and best manuscripts, but there are other problems with these verses. The writing style of these verses is very different from the writing style of the rest of the Gospel of Mark when you read it in Greek. There are actually a lot of words and phrases that occur in these verses that don't occur in Mark otherwise. So it appears that these verses were written by

a different author.

**MC:** Another little bomb you throw, you mention that Luke, neither in his gospel nor in the *Acts of the Apostles*, never talks about the redeeming of sin at all.

**BE:** What he doesn't talk about is Jesus' death as an atonement for sin. The Gospel of Mark portrays Jesus as dying on the cross as an atonement: it is his death that puts people into a right standing before God, and so Mark's gospel where Jesus says in chapter 10, "I came not to be served but to serve and give my life as a ransom for many." So the death of Jesus is a ransom for sin. Luke doesn't have that verse, and there are other changes that Luke made in his gospel. What happened according to Luke is that people realized that Jesus was an innocent man put to death, they recognize their sinfulness before God and they repent, and when they repent God forgives them. So salvation comes from repenting and from the forgiveness of God. The cross is a motivation for repentance, but the cross is not an atonement for sin.

**MC:** That's certainly diverging from Paul. And does Matthew bring that back?

**BE:** Matthew has the death of Jesus as an atonement. So, Matthew and Mark have that, and Luke does not.

**MC:** And what about John?

**BE:** Well, John has a whole different thing going on with crucifixion. John's idea is that Jesus came down from heaven, and that he's going to go back up to heaven. The cross is sort of the way he's going back up to heaven, ascending the cross and going up on the cross and being

lifted up on the cross, and so the idea is that it initiates his return to heaven. But at the same time, John does think that Jesus is the one who died forever. He says that as the good shepherd he laid down his life for his sheep; and so I'm not sure that John has a doctrine of atonement, but he certainly thinks that Jesus' death brought about salvation.

**MC:** You seem to have a more benign look at the scribe issue than you did in your other books. When the canon was put together, wasn't the dogma already set when they were choosing the gospels? That's why the *Gospel of Peter* or the *Apocalypse of Peter* made it and were later removed. There was already a set theology?

**BE:** Well, theology was and continues to be a developing thing, a developing phenomenon, but by the time people decided on the canon, things like the Creed of Nicaea or the Apostles' Creed were already in live use, so major aspects of doctrine had fairly well been decided by the time the canon was set. The canon doesn't really get set until the fifth or sixth century, and so there were many centuries in which Christians were debating which books should belong and which ones shouldn't belong. By the second century there were a lot of Christians who are already agreeing that it was Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, while books like Thomas, Peter and Mary were not going to be included. But the fringes of the canon were open for debate for several centuries.

**MC:** Texts like the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and a few others, right?

**BE:** The *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Letter of Barnabas*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, all of these were still considered as scripture by Christians well into the fourth century.

**MC:** And in your book, although once again you give a very kind view about the plight of the poor scribes who really weren't ready, or shouldn't have been in that place until later on in Christianity, but there are some conscious changes done. Can you give us some examples of changes made to marginalize women?

**BE:** There most certainly were some. The most famous one is a passage in I Corinthians where Paul allegedly tells women that they have to be silent in the churches and if they have any questions they should wait until they get home and ask their husbands. They're not supposed to talk in church at all. And so these verses in I Corinthians 14 have been used to argue that women should not participate in the worship services. But it looks like these verses were not originally in I Corinthians 14. It looks like these verses were added to I Corinthians 14 by a fairly early scribe. So, they are probably not something that Paul originally said. If these verses were original, Paul ended up contradicting himself, because in chapter 11 of I Corinthians he says that when women pray and prophecy in church they're supposed to wear head coverings. Prayer

and prophesying was always done out loud. So it's hard to imagine why he would say that women could talk out loud in chapter 11, when in chapter 14 he says that they can't talk out loud. That's a contradiction. It's probable that Paul didn't write the verses in the I Corinthians 14 about women having to be silent.

**MC:** And also, do you think that the author of Timothy added this later on, because there's a whole section that doesn't make women seem really nice.

**BE:** Yeah, in I Timothy chapter two verse 11 and following. I think this was original to I Timothy, where women are not to exercise authority over a man, that the man is to be the authority over the woman. They are to be silent, they add to their children and that's how they are to be saved. It's not a very liberated view of women there. So, I think that was original to I Timothy, but I don't think that Paul wrote I Timothy. Scholars for over 100 years now have recognized that I Timothy is very different to Paul's other letters, so much so that it appears that he didn't write it.

**MC:** And also in the Pauline letters, in your book you put a whole list of female disciples who were definitely evangelizing with Paul, right?

**BE:** Yes, Paul mentioned a number of them in Romans chapter 16, women who were missionaries, women who



were leaders of churches, women who were deacons, one woman who was an apostle. Women were quite active in the churches of Paul, which stands in contrast to what the author of I Timothy says.

**MC:** And isn't one of the biggest changes that we see is Junia changed to Junius?

**BE:** What happens there, that's a very interesting passage, it's in Romans 15: 7. The Greek of Romans 15: 7 has Paul greeting two people, Andronicus and Junia. Junia is a woman's name, and he says that they are from the same country as him, and he calls them foremost among the apostles. That's puzzled readers for a long time. How could Junia, a woman, be foremost among the apostles? Well, in some modern English translations, her name gets changed from the female, Junia, to the male name Junius. So there it's not a woman who's being praised, but a man who's being praised. There are two problems with that. One is the Greek text doesn't say Junius, it says Junia, a woman's name. The even bigger problem is that there wasn't a name Junius in the ancient world. It wasn't a man's name. So that's a problem, not with scribes changing the text, it's a problem with modern translators not liking what the text says, and then changing it in accordance with their own perspective.

**MC:** And do you see anything in the gospels that's obviously marginalizing women?

**BE:** In the gospels? That's a good question. There are things in the book of *Acts*, where for instance you get this situation where Priscilla and Aquila, these two leaders of the church that Paul meets in Corinth. Normally Priscilla is named first, but in a lot of manuscripts you find they've actually change that, so that the woman, Priscilla, is named second. In the gospels, though, nothing comes to mind.

**MC:** Down the line, what are some of the clues in the Bible that are there to marginalize the Gnostics and other sects? I guess the Epistle of John would be the obvious one, right?

**BE:** You know, a lot of my work has been on how scribes changed the text in response to the Gnostics and other heresies. I don't think that the New Testament writings themselves were probably directed against Gnostics, because I'm not sure that Gnostics existed yet when the New Testament writings were being produced. So, there are points of view floating around that eventually became something like what we think of as Gnosticism, but probably Gnosticism itself didn't exist yet. Scribes, though, who were copying the texts in the second and third century, were very much concerned about Gnostics and sometimes changed their texts in order to make sure that the Gnostics point of view wasn't accepted.

**MC:** The example you use is in the Gospel of Luke, when

Jesus sweats blood, that's to make sure that he was human.

**BE:** Yes, there were Gnostics who said that Jesus wasn't really a human being, and so in some manuscripts of Luke we get this account of Jesus sweating blood. And the church fathers who talk about this passage point out that if Jesus could have sweated blood, then he must have been a real human being. He's undergoing severe agony. But the text probably didn't have that originally, and so it looks like something has been added to the text in order to counter this Gnostic point of view.

**MC:** Continuing down, what are some of the examples, or the main examples you see that the gospels, or the Bible itself, were used to marginalize the Jews?

**BE:** Well again, much of my work has been on not so much what the Bible itself says, but what scribes did to the Bible in order to marginalize Jews. I'll give you one example: in the Gospel of Luke, we have this prayer for the crowd. As Jesus is being crucified, he prays, "father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." That's found only in Luke, chapter 23, and when the early church fathers interpreted this verse, they understood that it was referring to the Jews, who were guilty of handing Jesus over to the authorities for crucifixion. Jesus was praying for forgiveness for the Jews. But there were a lot of church fathers who thought that God never did forgive

the Jews, because they killed the messiah. And so, it's interesting to see that in some manuscripts of Luke, that verse gets omitted, so Jesus no longer prays for their forgiveness. This would be the kind of thing where it looks like some scribe has been influenced by the anti-Jewish trend of the day and modified this text accordingly.

**MC:** And what about the scene in which the Jews says, "May his death be upon us and our generations afterwards." Do you think that was added, or that was originally part of it?

**BE:** I think that was original. That's in Matthew, when Pilate washes his hands of Jesus' blood and says, "I'm innocent of this man's blood," and then the Jewish crowds cry out, "his blood be upon us and our children." It looks like that was original to the Gospel of Matthew, and of course that was a verse that was used for anti-semitic purposes since then.

**MC:** Do you see the scribes, maybe consciously or unconsciously, slowly making the Romans from the bad guys to the good guys, like using Pilate and the centurion, whose daughter Jesus raises, is that an evolution?

**BE:** It is an evolution. You get some of that among the scribes, but you can see its most clearly when you use different gospels. The earlier the gospel, the more the Romans are at fault. As time goes on, the Romans become

less and less at fault, and so in Luke's gospel, for example, one of the later gospels, Pilate tries three times to get Jesus released, claiming that he's innocent. And as you get into the second and third century, you get these other gospels in which Pilate was completely innocent and the people who were at fault with the Jews.

**MC:** And here's a question, kind of a burning question these days, because you hear the debate about gay marriage and all that, but what is your view of Paul talking about homosexuality, for instance in Romans? It seems that there's a big debate on the words.

**BE:** Yeah, there's a problem that the words that Paul uses, they get translated as homosexuality. They don't really mean homosexuality for Paul. Ancient people didn't have a concept of what we think of as homosexuality. When we think of homosexuality, we think of a sexual orientation, and the problem is that people in the ancient world didn't think about sexual orientation. Before Freud there was no idea of sexual orientation. So, using the term homosexuality is making an ancient person sounds like a modern person. It's a problem, because Paul, as a Jew, subscribed to the law of Moses, and believed it was a sin for a man to sleep with a man and for women to sleep with women, and he's quite clear about that in Romans. But it's important to understand that he's living in a completely different age when homosexual acts were seen

very differently from the way they're seen today. That's a very complicated topic that would probably take as hours to unpack, but there's actually a lot of literature about it.

**MC:** Basically, we eventually had the Latin Vulgate put together by Pope Anastasius and Saint Jerome, and that's become the most popular Bible. But do you think that the Byzantine Greek copies might have been superior at the time?

**BE:** Well, the Byzantine Greeks certainly thought that they were superior, but the people of the Latin West came to think that the Vulgate was the superior edition. The Vulgate became the Bible of the western middle ages and remained the most important form of the Bible until the invention of printing and the use of the printing press in the 16th century.

**MC:** And it was basically Erasmus who was the first one to translate the Bible from the Greek manuscript, but you point out that he did a pretty shoddy job, which later became the King James Bible.

**BE:** Well, Erasmus didn't translate the text. He was the first to publish a Greek edition of the New Testament using the printing press, and he himself admitted that it was a sloppy production as he hurried so much in getting it done. But his sloppy production is what ended up becoming the standard Greek New Testament for many

centuries, and it's the forerunner of the Greek text that lies behind the King James version. So modern translations are better than the King James. They may not be better in their literary value, but they are certainly better in terms of the modern use of the English language and also because modern translators have access to much more of the manuscripts than Erasmus had access to.

**MC:** So the King James Bible has been slowly fixed throughout the ages.

**BE:** Oh, it's been revised over the ages it's been revised by a number of different translations. The New Revised Standard Version, which is the standard version used by the National Council of Churches, is ultimately a revision of the King James.

**MC:** Does it still have the famous Johannite comma, what did they finally take one out?

**BE:** I think it's in a footnote in I John 5, so the discussion of the Trinity isn't actually in the text. They put it in a footnote to indicate that some manuscripts have it, but it's not original.

**MC:** You have put on all these fascinating chapters on how scholars were able to find out which is the best reading. You say that the most illogical reading is probably the correct one. What are some other techniques that scholars use to get the closest reading?

**BE:** The problem appears if you've got manuscripts that have different wordings of a verse. In one manuscript the verse is worded one way, in another manuscript it's worded in a different way. The scribe has to decide which one of these manuscripts is more likely to be accurate, which one is representing the oldest form of the text. If you've got two wordings of the text, and one is difficult to understand, or maybe it's theologically problematic, or maybe it's not as grammatical, as it turns out, that one is more likely to be original, because that's the one that would have been changed by scribes. And if it has no theological problems, they're less likely to change it to make less good sense and introduce theological difficulties. So the criterion scholars use is that the more difficult reading is more likely to be the original reading. That's just one criterion scholars use. Scholars use a whole range of criteria to see what the original text was. They look to see which manuscripts have which readings, what the oldest manuscripts are, what the most widespread reading is, and various criteria such as that.

**MC:** And this was part of your evolution: I read that you were actually here in Chicago. You went to the Moody Bible Institute and you went to Wheaton college, which are the central hubs for evangelical Christianity. When did you start questioning the Bible as the given word of God and the Holy Spirit?



**BE:** Well, I went up to seminary to study with the Greek scholar Bruce Metzger. It was while I was at Princeton Theological Seminary that I started having some doubts about my understanding of the Bible as being the infallible word of God. The more I engaged in historical study, the more I started doubting whether the New Testament could be accepted as being historically reliable. It's then that I started studying these Greek manuscripts that form the basis of this book, *Misquoting Jesus*. In the book *Misquoting Jesus* I talk about how I turned from being a fundamentalist to giving up any idea about how the Bible could be the word of God because the reality is we don't have the original words of the New Testament in many places, and there are some places where we don't know what the original words were. That made me give up the idea that they could be originally divinely inspired.

**MC:** What's the earliest copy we have of any manuscript that we physically have?

**BE:** The earliest that we have is a little fragment about the size of a credit card that's written on the front and back and was discovered in a trash heap in Egypt, and it has verses from John chapter 18 on it, the trial of Jesus before Pilate. This manuscript is called P52 because it was the 52nd papyrus that was discovered in the catalogue. It's usually dated to the early half, the first half, of the second century. It was probably written about 30 or 40 years after

the Gospel of John was originally composed.

**MC:** How about the second one?

**BE:** Well, we have a few that start stacking up after that. That one's just a fragment with a couple of verses on it. We don't start getting entire books until around the year 200. So that's, you know, about 150 years after the books have been written is when we start getting complete copies of them.

**MC:** And you say in your book that no English translation that we have today is accurate. If you were to give advice to somebody, what is the best Bible in English to have, and what should they do as a lay scholar to find out their own answers?

**BE:** Yes, it's a problem because it's a reality that every translation is inaccurate, not just of the Bible, but of every book. Whenever you translate something, you lose something in translation. And so, for people who can't learn the Greek or Hebrew, the best thing is to get a good study Bible. I personally like the New Revised Standard Version, and I like it in a study Bible format, like the *HarperCollins Study Bible*. But if somebody wants to study the texts carefully, the best thing is to get a number of different translations, the NIV, the NIB, the New Jerusalem Bible, just to get good solid translations that differ from one another and to read several versions at the same time.

**MC:** What was the motivation in writing this book?

**BE:** Well, the information I set out in *Misquoting Jesus* is information that scholars have known for hundreds of years, but lay people don't know about it. This is something that most people have never heard of before, and I felt it was time that somebody explained to a popular audience what our situation is with our manuscripts. That we don't have the original text, but scholars debate what the original text said in some places, but in some places we don't know what the original text was. I felt this was important information and people ought to know about it.

**MC:** And your book has been immensely popular and definitely made the rounds. Have you had any negative feedback from the more orthodox sides?

**BE:** I've had some negative feedback, but I've been surprised how little. Almost all the feedback I get is overwhelmingly positive. I think that some evangelical Christian scholars feel that they want me to emphasize more that of these hundreds of thousands of differences in the manuscripts, most of them don't matter for anything. That's true, and I say that in my book. I think they wanted me to say that more and more and more. But that's not really a very interesting thing to say, so I wanted to talk about more what was interesting, these hundreds of changes that do make a difference about how you

understand the New Testament.

**MC:** Well, I think that should do it for today.

# Birger Pearson

Professor Birger Pearson is the author of *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*, *The Emergence of Christian Religion: Essays on Early Christianity*, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt*, as well as Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Birger Pearson is one of the original translators of the Nag Hammadi library. Our interview focused on his judicious observations gleaned after decades of being intimately acquainted with the Gnostic worldview, as well as his latest book, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*.

If John Turner is the greatest authority on Sethian Gnosticism and Einar Thomassen is the greatest authority on Valentinian Gnosticism, Pearson would be the Renaissance man on all Gnosticism, classical and beyond. The interview certainly buttressed this assumption. Not only did Pearson thread the needle between the sapience of the Valentinians and Sethians to showcase a universal Gnostic ethos, he shed a potent light on their spiritual progeny—the Manichaeans and Mandaeans.

Like John Turner, and unlike Karen King, Pearson proffered that the original Gnostics were sectarian mystical Jews who divorced the rigid Jerusalem temple culture before the advent of Jesus Christ. The concept of Gnosis

evolved from the Jewish notion of apocalypse (from the Greek for “opening up”), when humans discovered how to commune directly with the Godhead without priestly intermediaries. And the Sethians were likely the scaffold between these Jewish visionaries and Christianized Gnostics (and perhaps Orthodox Christianity itself!).

Also breaking away from King and aligning himself with Marvin Meyer, Pearson was adamant that the term “Gnosticism” remain part of academia’s lexicon. Besides the sound prospect that Gnosticism began as a separate but analogous tradition to Christianity, Pearson advanced in our interview several reasons the Gnostics had a definite paradigm that rewarded them with their own category. Furthermore, eschewing the term “Gnosticism” would sever the umbilical cord from Classic Gnosticism to Manichaeism and Mandaeism, in effect hamstringing a scholarship that greatly benefits from a historical continuum of theology even when ideal types or boxes are not agreed upon.

The interview was broad but inspected all the craftsmen and blueprints that constituted the Gnostic architecture—Marcion, Paul of Tarsus, Simon Magus and other early Gnostic sages, Philo of Alexandria, the polemics of the church fathers, the works of Plato, the *Gospel of Judas* and much more. As a fascinating bonus, he also spoke about his involvement in bringing together the Nag Hammadi library to the general public. That alone places Pearson in

a hallowed pantheon of academics that forever changed Gnostic and Christian studies, even if he undeservedly does not get the same publicity as the other major players. Birger Pearson was interviewed on September 22, 2007.

**MC:** How are you doing today, Birger? Thank you very much for joining the show and taking your time today.

**BP:** No problem.

**MC:** Okay, why don't we start with the root of everything. What would you say are the origins of Gnosticism?

**BP:** Well, why don't we back up and ask what it is. That's a very debated position right now. There are scholars, friends of mine in fact, who have written sort of nonsensical things about wanting to get rid of the term "Gnosticism" altogether.

**MC:** That's actually what I was going to ask you. What do you think of this new movement?

**BP:** Well, I don't approve of it, in any case. But I think Gnosticism existed and still exists. It's one of the things I try to show in 362 pages of my book. So now, what are the origins? Well, that's a debated point because part of the debate about the definition, particularly as baldly as Karen King puts it, is that historians of religion such as myself have set up this category of Gnosticism in order to create a barrier around Christianity. Her point is that Gnosticism, or what people call Gnosticism, never existed. That in fact it's one of the varieties of early Christianity which has just as legitimate a claim to belief or practice as any other version of Christianity, ancient and modern. So, my point is that Gnosticism did not originate as a Christian



heresy. Her point is actually what was argued by the ancient church fathers, that the earliest Gnostics known to them are all Christian heretics.

This was the standard view until the nineteenth century when historians of religion were interested in the comparative study of near-eastern and middle-eastern and Indian and other traditions began to look at the bigger picture and could see that what was described at that time by the early Christian fathers as Gnosticism looked an awful lot like some of the stuff they were uncovering in ancient Babylonia or ancient Iran or ancient India. As a result of this kind of historical scholarship, it began to be asserted that one could see aspects of Gnostic versions of early Christianity that did not appear to be part of original Christianity at all, but had been imported by Christians and, furthermore, that the Gnostic redeemer who was essentially the figure who brings heavenly knowledge, Gnosis, to human beings, could appear in all kinds of avatars. The Christians picked the figure of Jesus Christ as their avatar of Gnostic redemption, but in fact even in the most ancient sources that would have been available to the nineteenth century, scholars working in the history of religion could see that aspects of what they called Gnosticism certainly did not have Christian origins.

The real breakthrough in the study of ancient Gnosticism came with the discovery of manuscripts written in Coptic and preserved in the sands of Egypt. That's where you get

the primary evidence that scholars could now use in their comparative philological-historical research to shed new light credibly on the whole question of the origins and even the definition of what Gnosticism might be.

**MC:** In your book, don't you say that Gnosticism began as, if anything, a Jewish heresy?

**BP:** Yes, that's my view. It's not only mine but it's the view of many other people. This was already argued in the nineteenth century by a Jewish scholar by the name of Moritz Friedlander, who looked upon the Gnostic materials that he could see in the writings of the church fathers as essentially Jewish, a heretical Judaism. But that was a view that did not capture a good deal of attention and only came back to the fore with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi and other Coptic Gnostic texts where it becomes abundantly clear that the essential building blocks of Gnostic mythology are reinterpretations of Jewish scriptures, Jewish scriptural interpretation and Jewish traditions.

**MC:** But isn't Plato extremely important to its growth? Why is that?

**BP:** Absolutely. The Jewish people in question, who are instrumental in essentially what becomes a new religion, were thoroughly imbued with Platonism. From the first century b.c.e metaphysically important Platonism became

widespread and influenced other cultures, notably Jewish culture, particularly in the Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora. I say in the first century B.c.e because Platonism after Plato himself took on a sort of a skeptical stance in the philosophical school that he founded in the academy, and it was only with Eudorus of Alexandria, and others from the first century, that a renewed interest in metaphysics and religion appeared in what is now called by scholars middle Platonism.

**MC:** And what characteristics did the Gnostics borrow from Plato?

**BP:** Basically, in Platonism you've got a metaphysical dualism between the material world and the non-material, the intellectual or spiritual dimension, and for Platonists that's the real reality. The so-called Ideas—that's a Platonist term—are spiritual entities of which the material components of the universe are only copies. That is one of the main features of Platonism that Gnosticism took over. However, what the Gnostics did with that basic Platonic dualism was to reinterpret Plato to say that the material world is not at all the best of all possible worlds, but is the product of a lower malicious, ignorant deity; and that the real deity is beyond this created order and beyond the creator and the angels that work with him in the creation.

Now, here you have in the Gnostic reinterpretation of Plato also the introduction of certain ostensibly Jewish

elements. Particularly Philo of Alexandria, the first century Jewish philosopher, talks of the angels of God assisting in the creation of human beings, that is their bodily parts. That is something that of course comes out of Plato. In Plato's *Timaeus*, it's the lower gods that are assigned that task of helping the demiurge to create human bodies. In Jewish reinterpretation these lower gods become angels. In the Gnostic reinterpretation of that Jewish reinterpretation, these angels are not good angels, they're bad angels.

**MC:** And they also took other characteristics—I think you mentioned reincarnation, the body being the tomb of the soul and other things.

**BP:** Yes. Not all Gnostics believed in reincarnation; some did. And this was a feature that they would have gotten from popular Platonism and Pythagoreanism. So, it certainly isn't the case that all Gnostics believed in reincarnation. Some did, some didn't. What also is important—and this is something that goes beyond ancient Platonism—according to the ancient Platonic and philosophical beliefs of Aristotle and others, the world is essentially eternal, there is no end to it. The world knows no destruction. In Stoic philosophy there's the notion of a fiery end to the world as we know it, but then everything starts all over again, so even Stoicism has this ongoing cyclical history of the world. But what Gnostics did was to

take over an early Jewish eschatology, that the world would come to an end.

**MC:** And don't you mention too that the word "Gnosticism" was used by Plato? What was his context of Gnosticism?

**BP:** The term Gnosticism was invented in the seventeenth century. However, it is based on the adjective *gnōstikos* in Greek, and that is an adjective that was used by Plato. Plato referred to a *gnōstikos* type of knowledge or science as over against other types of knowledge or science. It's only amongst the Gnostics that the term *gnōstikos* comes to be applied to human beings or people. Now that is a notion you will not find in any of the Platonist writings.

**MC:** And did any of the Gnostic sects actually call themselves Gnostics?

**BP:** Yes. Well, most notable are the ones who are referred to by Saint Irenaeus as the *gnōstikē haerēsis*, or the Gnostic school of thought and he refers to them as people who refer to themselves as *gnōstikoi*, people with knowledge. Now, it has been asserted by some scholars that the term *gnōstikos* or Gnostic or Gnosticism does not occur in any of the Nag Hammadi or other Coptic writings.

**MC:** How did the term Gnosis come about? Does it have a precedent to the Gnostics?

**BP:** *Gnōsis* means "knowledge". In the case of Gnosticism.

Gnosis is the very basis of salvation. One comes to Gnosis by having it revealed to that person, and through that revelation is awakened from ignorance, from sleep, or from drunkenness, which are various metaphors that are used for the state of the human being before he or she received Gnosis. Once Gnosis is revealed to that person and is accepted by that person, it's ultimately the basis for integration into the world of the divine from which that person had originated. One of the essential features of Gnosis in terms of its content is that the knowledge that saves is the knowledge that the world in which we live is not the eternal world and our innermost beings are divine and consubstantial with a divine being who is beyond the world, and ultimately is not responsible for its creation.

**MC:** And what I thought was very interesting about your book is that you point out that one of the roots of the term Gnosis comes from Old Testament apocalyptic literature like *Enoch*. In other words, it's the divine revealing itself to humanity.

**BP:** Yes, there are obviously Jewish apocalyptic influences upon Gnosticism, but in the case of the verb "to know" in Hebrew, this is also a revealed knowledge, but the content of the revelations are different. The apocalyptic Judaism such as you find in *I Enoch* is different from the Gnostic version. In apocalyptic versions of Gnosis or *Da'at*, what is revealed is what will happen in the end time—what's the

nature of the cosmos and how things are going to come out, and what the status of any given person might be.

**MC:** Going back to the first-century history, could you tell us a little about the father of Gnosticism, Simon Magus? Do you consider him really the first Gnostic we know about?

**BP:** Well, he's the first one we know about. There might have been others, there may very well have been others. The most important things that you would learn about Simon Magus is that the New Testament account of his doings is skewed. That is, it is completely unreliable. What can be gleaned from the book of Acts chapter 8 is that there was a Samaritan who was performing wonders, probably in the city of Sebaste or another urban center in Samaria. His name was Simon, and he was referred to by detractors as a magus. Even the New Testament book of Acts says that he refers to himself as "the power which is called great" or "the great power". In other words, he claimed to be a manifestation of God. The great power is actually a term that comes out of Samaritan theology.

**MC:** What do you think about the theories that Simon Magus is just a codeword for the apostle Paul?

**BP:** Maybe I should have covered that in my book. In any case, where that comes from is a Jewish-Christian writing from the second century which became part of what are

called the *Recognitions* and the *Homilies* of Clement of Rome. Pseudo-Clement we call him because the real Clement lived in the first century. This basic document that stands behind the *Recognitions* and *Homilies* of Clement is written by a person or people that hated the apostle Paul. So Paul and Peter in that writing are at opposite ends of the pole. Simon Magus is the actual opponent of Peter in that writing, but in his presentation of Simon Magus, there is an anti-Pauline twist to this, the real opponent of that document was Pauline Christianity, the apostle Paul.

**MC:** And while we're on the topic of Paul, why do you the Gnostics and also the Marcionites were so gaga over his writings?

**BP:** Well, not all of them were.

**MC:** Well, the Valentinians at least.

**BP:** Well, particularly the Valentinians. For them he was *the* apostle. Marcion is a special case, although Marcion's theology was certainly influenced by Gnosticism, that is, his notion of a God beyond God. He cannot really be called a Gnostic. He was a Paulinist Christian. Faith, justification by faith, in a Pauline sense, was essential. For him the natural human being is a human being that needs to be redeemed not on the basis of a component that he has in himself—a spark of life or whatever—but this is an act of salvation and it's done completely by grace, by God, and is



not based on any kind of knowledge or anything of that sort. So in that sense Marcion cannot be included in a history of Gnosticism, only as an appendix—maybe I should have made an appendix in my book, or a special chapter on Marcion—but in any case, Marcion was not a Gnostic in the sense that I define it in my book.

**MC:** Why do you think that Valentinus and the Valentinians were really taken by Paul?

**BP:** Well, they gained a great deal of insight in looking into Paul's writings. I mean, Paul is one of the most prolific of the early Christian writers, and what he says particularly in terms of the doctrine of resurrection and this sort of thing could be subjected to a Valentinian reinterpretation such that Paul would be their authority behind their view of what salvation is really about. Of course, this isn't real Paulinism, but they had their view of how to interpret Paul, and this becomes clear in many of their writings. The *Treatise on Resurrection* for example seems dependent of a particular reading of Pauline epistles, and there's a good deal of Pauline influence in the *Gospel of Truth* as well. You ask me why they were so taken with Paul? I guess I should say I don't know.

**MC:** And leave it at that. Somehow he got to them. What I noticed too, when I was reading your chapters on Saturnilus, the first Christian Gnostic, and reading some on Basilides, isn't it true that many Gnostics did not believe

that salvation or Gnosis was for everyone? Some people got it and some didn't, and some people didn't even have the divine spark within them.

**BP :** That's right. That's particularly the case in Valentinianism, at least as it's interpreted by the ancient Christian fathers, and some scholars still hold to that view, that the Valentinians believed that certain people had no ability to achieve Gnosis, on the basis of their makeup. Now, it could be argued that what looks like predestination on the part of these Valentinian theologians was nothing more than the kind of predestination doctrine you find in the Bible—that could be argued. The ultimate proof as to whether a person is saved or not is at the end when he or she dies, whether you get Gnosis or not. So that's the ultimate proof, if a person achieves Gnosis.

**MC:** Do you see any texts in the Nag Hammadi library that point to some people having no souls and some people having souls?

**BP:** There's a passage in the *Apocryphon of John* that's sort of a catechism that describes the kind of people, and you can interpret that catechism to imply there are people whose nature is ultimately a kind of perdition. In any case, that would just be a wrinkle on ancient Jewish and Christian beliefs, that some people are saved and others not.

**MC:** You also call Sethian Gnosticism “classic Gnosticism” in your book, why is that, Birger?

**BP:** Well, actually, that’s a term I borrowed from Bentley Layton in his book *The Gnostic Scriptures*, and I refer to this in translations in several chapters in my book. He refers to that group of people and group of beliefs referred to by Irenaeus as classic Gnosticism. A lot of times this is referred to now by scholars as Sethian Gnosticism only because Nag Hammadi texts, especially the *Apocryphon of John*, have many parallels to the kind of mythological system described by Irenaeus in those chapters, in book one, chapters 29-31. Irenaeus never refers to Sethians at all, and the only reason that scholars refer to this as Sethianism is to come to some way of designating Gnostics who refer to themselves as the seed of Seth or the generation of Seth, or the children of Seth and so forth, in a spiritual sense, because it’s clear that the biblical Seth son of Adam plays an enormously huge role in that group of texts that scholars refer to as Sethian. So Sethian texts are the texts that are related to those smaller number of texts that Bentley Layton referred to as classic Gnosticism.

**MC:** And isn’t Seth instead of Jesus the mediator figure, the bringer of Gnosis?

**BP:** Yeah, and in Christian versions of Sethian Gnosticism, Seth appears in history as one who puts on Jesus, that is,

he is incarnated in some sense in the figure of Jesus. So that in Christian Sethianism, Seth appears ultimately as Jesus.

**MC:** Do you see this as an evolution from Seth to Jesus, or do you actually see that they were originally about Seth and they were later Christianized in the second and third centuries?

**BP:** I think that this is a Christianization of an earlier notion of Seth as revealer. For example, the *Apocalypse of Adam* features Seth as the recipient of a revelation he gets from his father Adam, but Seth is the one who transmits this revelation and he of course plays a leading role in that document.

**MC:** Why was it so important for the Gnostic to reinterpret the Genesis account? What were they looking for?

**BP:** I would tend to say that they looked upon their traditional scriptures with a new eyes because they didn't like the traditional interpretation. So what they did was look at the creation accounts, particularly the first few chapters of Genesis, with a new lens, and in fact they came up with what building blocks for a whole mythological system. I lay it out in chapter four of my book.

**MC:** You also talk about mythopoeia. What is that?

**BP:** Mythopoeia is a tendency to produce myth. *Poeia* comes from a Greek word meaning, "to make", so this is

myth-making. Now, why did the Gnostics make myths? And what is the nature of Gnostic myth? Well, Scholars of the history of religions refer to myth used by traditional cultures, myths of various sorts, creation myths and other kinds of myths, that stem from hoary antiquity to pre-literate times and are handed down through generation to generation. That's not the kind of myth that is involved in Gnostic mythology. Gnostics might have chosen to create myths because Plato did. When Plato wanted to give expression to certain ideas, he would create a mythos, for example his creation myth in *Timaeus*, or the myth of the cave that you find in the *Republic*. There are a number of these kinds of myths that make a certain point. That may be one of the figures in the creation of Gnostic mythology.

**MC:** So you think it's safe to say that neither Plato nor the Gnostics ever meant for it to be taken literally?

**BP:** Probably, yeah, I think that's the case.

**MC:** So moving down, towards the second century we have it seems the most influential school, the Valentinians. Do you see the Valentinians, or maybe Valentinus himself, trying to accommodate both the Catholic Church and the God of the Old Testament? Do you think he was like the Henry Kissinger of the time?

**BP:** Valentinus, according to Irenaeus, adapted the *gnōstikos* school of thought in his creation of a new

theology, a Christian theology. So in the case of Valentinus we have a Christian teacher who produces a version of Christianity that is very much based upon an adaptation of a previous Gnostic system. That's the reason you can find an interesting number of correspondences between the Apocryphon of John and the classical Valentinian myth that is attributed by Irenaeus to Valentinus's disciple Ptolemy. There are number of interesting parallels in their various myths. So for Valentinus, the most important thing was to see Jesus as the savior, as the one who provides Gnosis and salvation for his people. Not only that but Valentinus took the early Christian writings such as the gospels and the epistles of Paul, and subjected them to his theological interpretation, and intended actually to be a part of the Christian community, originally in Alexandria. What he intended to do was to have a variety of Christianity with sacraments, baptism, the Eucharist and so forth, as just another variety of Christianity you could find in that great city of Alexandria. And it's not until towards the end of the second century that Gnostic versions of Christianity in Alexandria are deemed heretical or unacceptable.

**MC:** In the Valentinian cosmology and cosmogony, doesn't even the demiurge become redeemed towards the end?

**BP:** Well, at least he assumes a level of redemption, that's

true, and he's not perceived as that malevolent being you find in the *Apocryphon of John*, for example. Although the demiurge is a lower creator and can be referred to as a foolish god, in terms of what happens, when he begins to create, nevertheless there is a certain hope for him in the end that is not given to other varieties of the Gnostic demiurge.

**MC:** In your book you also talk a lot on the Manichaeans. Why did you decide to do a chapter on the Manichaeans? That's another point of controversy, whether Mani was a Gnostic or not.

**BP:** Well, historians of religion have always included him in histories of Gnosticism, so I included him. You can see very clearly that Mani was heavily influenced by Jewish and Christian versions of Gnosticism. Although what he did of course was create a completely new mythology, a very complicated one in fact, and certainly can be seen as modeled upon Gnostic predecessors.

**MC:** And did Mani believe in Gnosis, salvific knowledge?

**BP:** Sure, that's an important part of the whole idea.

**MC:** And moving on a little bit more through history, can you tell us a little bit about the last surviving Gnostics, the Mandaeans, and maybe a little about their mythology?

**BP:** Well, the Mandaeans are an interesting case because some of their writings came to be known in the very late

eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. One of their major books the *Ginza* was translated into Latin from Mandaic, which is a kind of Aramaic. These writings became the basis of a good deal of discussion amongst historians of religion interested in Gnosticism because it can be clearly seen from these writings that there are elements that are very much akin to what you find in descriptions of Gnostic writings that are found in the church fathers. Once the Coptic stuff was discovered, then the resemblance became even more clear; and the greatest scholar who has worked on that is still alive today, Kurt Rudolph, a German scholar originally, has worked extensively with Mandaean texts and Mandaean documents. He himself has spent some time doing research in Iran and Iraq. He has pointed to the very close correspondences to the Sethian Gnostic tradition and the Mandaean traditions. And thus he is one of a number of scholars who trace the origins of the Mandaean religion back to first century Palestine.

**MC:** And in their mythology, why do you think that they make Jesus into the bad guy and John the Baptist into the real hero?

**BP:** That is a particularly interesting question. I don't know why they did that, but what it shows is that Mandaeism as a variety of Gnosticism never had anything to do with Christianity. This gives the lie to the whole idea



that original Gnosticism was a variety of Christianity, that's complete nonsense.

**MC:** And it's possible they might have actually been a sect of John the Baptizer?

**BP:** Yeah, well, there is some discussion among the scholars of early Christianity that the followers of John the Baptist continued to exist and became rivals of early Christians, followers of Jesus. And this kind of rivalry might have been involved somehow in how the proto-Mandaeans, as I call them, viewed the figure of Jesus—he's a bad guy and John is a good guy. But what's funny is that Jesus' mother remains a good girl. That's a funny thing.

**MC:** Yeah, and also, isn't the Holy Spirit bad? They turn a lot of things upside down.

**BP:** Well, that's typical of Gnostic reinterpretation.

**MC:** Yeah, see where it goes. And, lastly, Birger, how did you get involved in the Nag Hammadi library project?

**BP:** Well, I said a little bit about that in the preface of my book. I was a student in a Lutheran seminary in Berkeley back in 1959-60. I graduated in '62 and came across one of the earliest publications of a Gnostic writing from Nag Hammadi, the *Gospel of Thomas*. I got interested in this and I could read some Greek words that occurred in the text of the *Gospel of Thomas*, but the rest of it was

completely foreign. And I decided then and there that I was going to study Coptic. So I went along to Harvard and began my study of the Coptic language. As I was finishing up at Harvard I left and went to Duke University.

In early 1968 James Robinson came to North Carolina to visit people at Duke, including myself, who had been recommended to him by teachers at Harvard. So he got me involved in the project, he got the professor at Duke involved, and one of his graduate students, John Turner, who has become a leading scholar of Sethian Gnosticism in the meantime. Anyway, the three of us became involved in that project. I got a grant from the research council of Duke to spend a couple of weeks in 1968 at Claremont and worked with a bunch of other people on the project in a seminar room in the Honnold Library and we were looking at the photographs of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts that Jim Robinson had gotten in Paris. Jim had already given me 36 of these photographs before I went out to Claremont, and assigned to me Codex X to work on, which is the most fragmentary of all the codices.

**MC:** Lucky you.

**BP:** Yeah. So obviously it took a very long time before I could publish anything on that. So from 1968 to 1981 it took for me to publish Codex X. The publication also includes Nag Hammadi Codex IX, so it has both codices, three writings from Codex IX and one from Codex X.

**MC:** And you got quite a bit of the Sethian works, didn't you?

**BP:** Well, I got involved with that side of Gnosticism by looking at the other texts, of course. I was studying the other codices as well. The young scholar who was working on *Zostrianos* moved over to Codex IX. In 1968 I also got a phone call from the University of California, Santa Barbara. They wanted to interview me for a position there. So I took a Greyhound Bus ride from Claremont to Santa Barbara and was interviewed for this position. During the summer of 1969, I spent the whole summer in Claremont and was only in Santa Barbara at weekends. And then eventually the actual manuscripts began to be rephotographed and the facsimile edition was a project from UNESCO. Some of us from the Claremont team were also included in those work sessions in Cairo, so I was able to work on the actual papyri themselves in the Coptic Museum in Cairo.

**MC:** And what do you think about the new translations put out by Marvin Meyer, have you had a chance to look at them?

**BP:** I was involved in it. I've got three of the translations in that book, but also I was working with other scholars. We had meetings at the University of Laval in Quebec where we went through the whole thing, so I was involved in the editing project and the whole volume.

**MC:** I actually just got my copy a few days ago and haven't been able to open it. I was enjoying your book so much.

**BP:** Well, thank you very much. The only text that I didn't have access to when we were working on the translations was the one from Codex Tchacos, *Judas*, but I was able at the very last minute to include the *Gospel of Judas* in my book, which I would gladly revise now.

**MC:** Isn't it true that the Cainites never existed?

**BP:** They were named for Seth rather than Cain.

**MC:** They were basically Sethians, the *Gospel of Judas* is a Sethian work.

**BP:** Well, the mythology in the *Gospel of Judas* is typically Sethian.

**MC:** And do you think maybe it was Christianized, or...?

**BP:** Well, the actual mythological stuff in the *Gospel of Judas*, there's not much that's Christian to it, in fact. The figure of Judas himself is Christian, so obviously the *Gospel of Judas* is a Christian product, generally speaking. It has Judas Iscariot and Jesus, and so on.

**MC:** Well, I think that's all the time we have today, Birger. I'd like to thank you for appearing on *Coffee, Cigarettes and Gnosis*, and definitely recommend the readers to get *Ancient Gnosticism*. It's a very good work, a short work

that gives you the A-Z on Gnosticism.

# John Turner

John D. Turner is the editor of *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures and Texts* and *The Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration*, as well as Cotner Professor of Religious Studies and Charles J. Mach University Professor of Classics & History at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

John Turner is considered the greatest authority on Sethian Gnosticism in the world. He was one of the original translators of the Nag Hammadi library, and continues to tirelessly decode the enthralling message left behind by the Sethians.

Our interview was a testament of Turner's bottomless knowledge and fervor for Sethianism (with Neoplatonism coming as a close second). After each question, he seemingly plucked strands of information out of thin air and braided them into systematic yet penetrating answers. Turner presented assorted, poignant arguments that appeared unrelated and contradictory, yet quickly but effortlessly lashed them all together in intricate but crystal conclusions.

Breaking away from a majority of mainstream scholars, Turner declared that the Sethians and their orbiting cults came into being before Christianity. They conceivably began as a Jewish dissenter sect, akin to the Dead Sea

Scrolls community, that broke away from the oppressive Second Temple society generations before the birth of Christ. Their spiritual allegiance was not to the Mosaic dispensation but to Seth, the archetypal figure of the first illuminated man. These rebel, mystic Jews adopted Platonic and Pythagorean ideas and began to radically re-interpret the Old Testament, midwifing most of the concepts associated with Gnosticism proper. Some of these include the tyrannical demiurge, the aeons with the mercurial Sophia at center stage, a cosmic cataclysm, the Garden of Eden as Creation's first Hell, and a phantasmagoric savior.

The Sethians themselves were a diverse group within a fragmenting Jewish culture under the heel of Greek and Roman rule. Many later adopted Jesus Christ as an avatar of Seth or the otherworldly, spiritual Messiah. Later Gnostic factions like the Valentinians would modify and soften their cosmology and credence, as Christianity attempted to compete with the other religions of Rome vying for respectability.

Our interview tunnelled deep into many Sethian works, most of them personally translated by Turner. He deciphered the habitually-coded Gnostic praxis in their writings, separated the wheat from the chaff in the polemics of the church fathers, and even explicated the impact of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy that dominated higher religious thinking during the

experimental age of Christianity. Furthermore, Turner tackled many notions that still baffle Gnostic scholarship today, such as the supreme feminine principle called Barbelo, the cryptic Five Seals mystery, and the ostensibly libertine Barbeloite offshoot of the Sethian matrix, just to name a few examples. And the *Gospel of Judas* was placed in context as another helpful drogue in the turbid stream of Sethian history.

The interview with Turner lasted longer than most; we joyously covered a lot of heretical ground. But only the surface was truly scratched, as is the surface of the Nag Hammadi library up until today, despite decades of scholarship. Yet John Turner has probably carried one of the greatest loads and delved deeper into the Gnostic anima than any other academic. His earnest passion affirms that he is up to the task to go even further in bringing to full sunlight the legacy of the Sethians and their Gnostic relatives.

John Turner was interviewed on January 07, 2007.



**MC:** Could you give us just a brief overview of the origins and theology of Sethian Gnosticism?

**JT:** I can try. It's a rather complicated sort of thing, and, as you know, often when one deals with these kinds of materials, why, you sometimes get lost in the details. But in some way some of the details are important because Sethianism is probably, I would say, the earliest form of Gnosticism for which we have a good deal of documentation. And it seems to be a forerunner of Valentinianism, and there is some relationship between some of the elements of Valentinian mythology and Sethian mythology as well. Some people prefer to call Sethian mythology or Sethian Gnosticism classical Gnosticism. This is also the approach of Bentley Layton in his book *The Gnostic Scriptures*, which is a very nice collection of material.

**MC:** The question most people would have is: is Sethian Gnosticism the fountainhead of Gnosticism, or is it something that went after, let's say, Simon Magus and Saturnalius and Menander. Where exactly does it fall into or do we really know?

**JT:** We don't really know and that's the problem actually, with many of those Gnostic theologies that stem from the people that you mentioned. Simon Magus, of course was regarded as the arch-heretic, because he was the earliest

one whose existence the church fathers were able to establish by identifying him with the figure in Acts Chapter 8, the one who called himself "a great power". And so the heresiologists, when they deal with this, in some way model the development of Gnosticism on their own conception of the church which was, more or less, hierarchically organized and which they conceived as a sequence of bishops who presided over various provinces. So that's the way they look at Gnosticism as well, as a tree, stemming from the earliest figures they could come up with beginning with Simon Magus and then some of the other figures who *do* seem to be early although precise time of origin is undocumented. But one might think of Basilides, Menander, and others that you just mentioned. So the problem with Sethianism is that we have no figure that we can identify as the founder of this movement. None of the Sethian Gnostic documents, with the possible exception of a rather late one called *Marsanes*, seem actually to mention a specific Gnostic teacher. In a way they are wandering around in a kind of vague wonderland of ideas.

**MC:** That's a very interesting way to put it.

**JT:** In general the Gnostics, then, do not like to talk about themselves, say, as a social group and, in fact, it's even debated as to whether it's fair to say that they actually had a self-identification. So when you hear about Sethians and

Valentinians, what you're dealing with are names which the church fathers have chosen to designate them. But nevertheless, we could get at least to what I think to be the rough history of this movement. It seems to me that it's arguable that Sethianism had its origin in some kind of Jewish priestly movement. I'm thinking mainly among those priestly groups which became, rather gradually, excluded from leadership in the Temple, especially during the second and third century, second and first centuries B.c.e and the Temple was taken over by the Zadokite priestly establishment.

**MC:** Right.

**JT:** And this, of course, you probably discussed with others, things about the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**MC:** I have indeed.

**JT:** And the community would be an example of a priestly community, which simply left the area of Jerusalem, perceiving the Temple to have actually been politicised and polluted. So they then went to the wilderness, in order that they could worship God in the true heavenly Temple, rather than the—what they regarded as—the corrupted earthly Temple. And I would tend to see the antecedence of Sethianism among such groups, since it's clear that the Sethians have a great interest in the transcendent world. Their view of the transcendent world, essentially, is

centered around the notion of supreme trinity which is called often just simply Father, Mother and Child. The Father is the one that they normally call the Great Invisible Spirit, the Mother is the figure called Barbelo, a name that we can't really decipher for sure.

**MC:** Ah, that's exactly one of the burning questions I had, because I've heard so many different versions. I thought you might have the one, John.

**JT:** No, I don't really have the one. There are probably about six rather distinctive attempts to understand this name. Probably the one that people, I guess, mention the most would be that it's some kind of smoothing out of a phrase something like B-arba-Eloh, that is "In Four is God"—the idea that Barbelo originally represented the divine Tetragrammaton, God. Because during this period there was a lot of speculation on the divine name. The name was important because in these days when God was thought of as so highly transcendent, above the world of ordinary human endeavor, the question then arose then, how could God possibly relate, from such an exalted level, to humanity? And therefore there were various attributes of God, which people thought were the means by which God did in some way relate to the earthly environment.

The name of God or the temple of God, the so called Shekinah, for those who held onto the earthly Temple, the idea of the glory of God which dwelt in the Temple and so

on. It may be that the origin of the Barbelo name goes back to some idea of this sort. But it's clear in Sethianism that Barbelo was almost an entirely transcendental mother figure and acts more or less as the consort of the high deity, the Invisible Spirit. Then to complete the Trinity you have the figure of the self-generated Child, who is a very interesting figure because this is the one in which essentially a heterodox Jewish form of speculation becomes gradually identified with Christ as the Sethian tradition becomes Christianized, that is, it essentially enters into some relationship with the Christians.

In any case, I try to suggest this may have happened in roughly five or six stages, so that you begin then with this group, who—I'm not sure whether they were very aware of a distinctive Jewish identity—but I think that they certainly arose from that general milieu of worship in the heavenly Temple, which then accounts for the very heavy occurrence of acts of vision and acts of liturgical praise which occurs in the various Sethian documents. Of course one could therefore use a convenient designation, since Barbelo seems to be the distinctive name, and it's clear that the earliest reports that we have of their thinking come to us from the hands of Irenaeus, who wrote his work *Against the Heresies* probably somewhere around 175 c.e. He refers to these people simply then as Gnostics. "A multitude of Gnostics" is the term which he uses. But it soon became customary for those people who used

Irenaeus as a source to try to make Irenaeus' identifications more precise and so we find that, very early on, the term Barbeloite applied to this very first group of Gnostics which Irenaeus discusses. Irenaeus begins with a lengthy discussion of the Valentinians, and tries to say something about Valentinus and other Valentinian teachers, Marcus for instance.

But then by the time he gets to the end of the first book of his work *Against the Heresies*, in chapter 29, he talks about another multitude of Gnostics. And so this is the group that became later more precisely identified as Barbeloites. What's interesting about these people, their hallmark, seems to have been a communal rite, baptismal immersion—more than likely in ordinary water—that somehow resulted in an experience of transcendental vision, which was thought then to lead to complete enlightenment and total salvation.

This ritual was called the Five Seals and many explanations have been provided, but I'm not really positively sure myself why they actually called it the Five Seals because, depending on which of the Sethian treatises you read, you can account for the number five in various ways. But certainly the term "seal" is significant and does suggest therefore some connection with baptism which early on. For example, baptism in Christianity was always considered a sort of sealing...

MC: That's fascinating!

**JT:** An initiation, that kind of thing. So, the rite was important because it was thought of as the instrument of salvation that had actually been conferred by the divine mother Barbelo, understood as a universal mother. She was thought of as the First Thought, a kind of projection of the divine mind, of the supreme deity called the Invisible Spirit and so together with the Invisible Spirit, Barbelo then conceives the third member of the Sethian trinity, who was called the self-generated child, represented actually by the Greek word *Autogenes*, which simply means "self-generated" or "self-begotten". This child then goes on to establish the heavenly realm which consists of four angelic luminaries; and I won't go into the details of that but one of these luminaries then finally, and usually the fourth of these, becomes the resident of the figure of Sophia, whom I'm sure you and your guests have discussed frequently.

**MC:** Very much so, yes.

**JT:** Who then becomes responsible, ultimately, for the origin of the world by giving rise to the world Creator and the story continues from that point on. So, in any case that seems to represent a first stage of things, as far as I can see, in this general history of development of Sethianism. But before I stop, there's a second very important component which is probably the one that most people who read about Gnosticism are familiar with—and this is

the very large role which the interpretation of the initial books of Genesis especially Genesis 2 through 9 play in their story of primordial times. My own sense is that this comes probably from slightly different quarters than this kind of Barbeloite baptismal speculation.

**MC:** Really?

**JT:** Yes, I think so. Probably, again we can use Irenaeus as a guide because, as I say, towards the end of Book 1 in chapter 29 he discusses these Gnostics who were later identified by people like Theodoret as Barbeloites and then in chapter 30 he discusses a mythological system which likewise, he says, is typical of other Gnostics, and later on people like Theodoret and Pseudo-Tertullian identify these people as Ophites mainly, because they thought that the Ophites had a particular interest in the serpent of Paradise acting as the healer. *Ophis* in Greek, where you get the word Ophite, is a word for snake or a serpent. And so, Irenaeus discusses these views in the succeeding chapter, Chapter 30, but it's quite clear that their metaphysics and theology of the highest transcendental realm is very different than what we see in the Sethians. Sethians have the supreme trinity, whereas these people who became called Ophites actually have a supreme pentad or group of five deities—essentially four male deities and a female deity as well. The female deity proving to be Sophia, and in the Ophite system the main actor in salvation is the



figure of Sophia, whereas in the Sethian treatises the main actor in salvation is the figure of Barbelo who was distinguished quite clearly from Sophia. Barbelo and Sophia share in common their femaleness, but quite often you see that in the Sethian treatises, that Barbelo is usually called male. She's the male virgin. And in fact in later stages of Sethianism she actually becomes no longer called Barbelo but the aeon of Barbelo and aeon is a masculine term.

And so it gets you into some of the background of all of this, the very interesting role of female deities in Gnostic systems, who usually end up representing something about origin of the world of becoming, some element of unpredictability, some element of daring, some element of deficiency; whereas the male on the other hand tends more to symbolize permanence and stability, predictability and things of this sort. So Barbelo is a very interesting figure because clearly she's a positive figure, but nevertheless she does represent the first stage of the emergence from this supreme invisible spirit—who is generally thought to be male—which obviously allows everything else to come into being.

**MC:** So would you say, for example, that the *Secret Book of John* has both Barbelo and Sophia, are you saying that they were actually maybe two different stories put together?

**JT:** Well it could partly be so. You're very right to bring up the *Apocryphon* because if you were to read these chapters in book 1 of Irenaeus' work *Against the Heresies*, chapter 29 and 30 in sequence, you would see that it matches up quite well with the two really major sections of the *Apocryphon of John*. One might well wonder whether the *Apocryphon of John* was produced as a fusion of these two theologies which I mentioned—the trinitarian theology of the Barbeloites, these proto-Sethians, and this kind of midrash on the paradise story on the part of these other Gnostics who became called Ophites, who themselves have a supreme group of five deities rather than the Sethian trinity.

And so the material that you read in what's traditionally called Irenaeus' Ophites seems to correspond roughly to much of the second half of the *Apocryphon of John*, whereas the Barbeloite material seems to correspond roughly with the first part of the *Apocryphon of John*; the first part treating mainly the transcendental word on down to its periphery of the realm of the four lights, where we find Sophia. Sophia, then deciding that she wants to somehow emulate the creative power of the highest deity, produces an accident because she doesn't cooperate with her male partner or aspect, which produces the world creator or Yaldabaoth and then everything devolves from that point. That leads directly to the paradise midrash as soon as Yaldabaoth and his fellow rulers decide to create

the first human being.

**MC:** And it seems it's probably even more complicated because, as Stevan Davies posited, I don't know if you agree with this, but the *Secret Book of John* was then later Christianized, so you might have three sticky fingers in there. . .

**JT:** Well, that's conceivable, that is, I *do* think that the original milieu of these ideas of a supreme trinity, a heavenly world, a heavenly world of lights and this baptismal ritual of the Five Seals, does in a way seem to be not in its origin specifically Christian, despite the fact that Christianity went on to posit its own trinitarian theology. But it seems to me that it begins roughly in a movement in the fringes of Judaism mainly among a disenfranchised priestly component, who devised this view of the divine world and essentially adopted, or *adapted*, the priestly rites of lustration, which were always traditional to an act of baptism which is mainly designed to produce acts of vision, that is, vision of the transcendent world, vision of the beings that populate it. All of these beings emerge ultimately from the high deity, and as they emerge they engage in acts of praise like choirs of angels of the sort that we read of in much Jewish pseudepigraphical literature as well.

It certainly does reach a point—and my sense would be that this certainly must happen in the second half of the

first century—that this movement definitely intersects with Christianity, you might say that it becomes Christianized. We don't know anything about the process by which this may have happened. Irenaeus is interesting because he clearly describes first of all this Barbeloite theology, but notice that there it's already Christianized because the figure of Christ appears. Also he goes on to discuss next the interpretation of Genesis 2 through 9 that was later attributed to Ophites; and it's clear that that system also is Christianized, because one of the members of the supreme Pentad is in fact Christ, who was considered to be the elder brother of Sophia. But again the real worker through most of that is the figure of Sophia. In the *Apocryphon of John*, she becomes responsible for the origin of the world. Creator Yaldabaoth, trouble breaks out and then the story reads very much as we find it in the *Apocryphon of John*. But the damage that's been done is ultimately rectified by Sophia acting in concert with Christ, whereas in the Barbeloite system, Sophia's mistake has to be undone by this higher mother figure called Barbelo.

**MC:** I think the one thing that we're missing, as you write in your essays, is this group of priests who left the Temple, they must have run into some Neopythagoreans or Platonists, isn't that correct?

**JT:** Most oral literate Jews, I would think, certainly throughout the first century B.c.e and onwards, were, I

think, well aware, at least in a popular sense, of the Platonic and the Pythagorean traditions. Pythagoreanism is an interesting case in itself, because we find that early on, even in the early academy, that Plato was thought to have been well-versed in Pythagorean doctrines. Some of his earliest colleagues, people like Architos, were Pythagoreans, but as history goes on, in the Platonic academy there was ultimately a reaction against this. They felt that Plato had become a dogmatic metaphysician, especially in his later dialogues and in his so-called oral teaching; and that therefore he had ultimately been untrue to the teaching of Socrates, who himself is never represented as speculating about transcendent principles. So, by and large, they rejected this transcendental metaphysics of Plato, and this was the so-called Skeptical or New Academy. But then, interestingly, somewhere around the first century B.c.e, all of a sudden this Platonic metaphysical speculation about ultimate principles and the one and the diad suddenly re-emerges under the name of Pythagoras, and so, in a very interesting way, Plato's very highest metaphysical teaching becomes claimed for Pythagoras. And this is the birth of Neopythagoreanism.

**MC:** And in their system, wasn't the Monad the supreme being? Did the Sethians borrow from that? Or call the supreme being the Monad? Or is he always the Invisible Spirit?

**JT:** No, actually it's interesting, right at the very beginning of the *Apocryphon of John* there's the suggestion that the supreme Invisible Spirit is a monarchy, is a monad, and the idea is the metaphysical problem all these people try to deal with is: how can the many come from the One? And this is the problem that Neopythagoreanism focussed upon. In some sense they took it almost as an axiom that somehow the ultimate essence of the world must be simpler than we perceive it to be. And therefore all things must have come from some one thing—it's almost an analogy of certain speculations about the Big Bang theory. They began to speculate along these numerical lines that somehow the One, by some mysterious process which is never successfully explained, gives rise to the Two. And then the One and the Two interact to produce the Three and you have the possibility of a dimensional world and finally you get a Four. And a Four seems to be appropriate for discussing a three-dimensional world, and that represents the world that we can touch, taste and feel. And so, it comes by the interaction of these principles, which are given names for these primary numbers, the One, the Two, the Three and the Four which add up to ten, that is essentially the Pythagorean Tetract, as they called it.

But the sacred Decad is reflected to a certain extent in the Gnostic treatises themselves, more especially in Valentinian treatises where it's quite clear that the whole description of the transcendent world operates in terms of

ones and twos and fours, and that these combine together in ways to produce certain numerical groupings. So this is why it spread. In fact, one of the documents in the news recently, the *Gospel of Judas*—which is quite interesting—itself contains a sketch of the Sethian theogony or story of the birth and the development of the divine world and its gods. And it engages in a tremendous amount of numerical speculation, which, interestingly, seems to be quite clearly reflected in another of the Nag Hammadi documents—of which we have two copies in Nag Hammadi—called Eugnostos the Blessed. It talks about the various pairings of these, and groups of four and groups of six, ultimately become 72 and this is multiplied by five to become 360 which is the number of the year, the days in the year minus the five intercalary days.

**MC:** Frankly, one of the questions I wanted to ask you because Irenaeus says the *Gospel of Judas* was written by the Cainites but, even as you've just said, it seems much more of a Sethian work. Is there a connection between the Cainites or the Sethians, or could we possibly be talking about two different *Gospels of Judas*?

**JT:** Boy, that's a complicated question! So, I'll say "No," and "Yes".

**MC:** [laughs]

**JT:** No, in the sense that I don't think there was ever any

group of Cainites. Irenaeus' text itself never names any people called Cainites. This was the name that was added later by his epitomators, people like pseudo-Tertullian and Epiphanius and Theodoret and now we're getting, what, quite late into the fourth century. Whereas Irenaeus is a figure of the end of the second century, who never knew these names. I don't think that Irenaeus knew anything about Barbeloites or Sethians or Ophites or Cainites. But at the same time there is something tantalizing here, you see. All Irenaeus mentions are Gnostics, first the "multitude of Gnostics," who are the people who exhibit this *Barbeloite* theology. Then he goes on to discuss these people who have a supreme pentad who became later called Ophites, and who concentrate on, or are basically fascinated by, the paradise story and all of that. Their views seem to concentrate around the creation of the first human, his struggle to become enlightened, and that's in chapter 30. Finally in chapter 31, there's this other group, and it's in that context that he mentions this *Gospel of Judas* but he doesn't call these people Cainites...

**MC:** That changes a lot of assumptions!

**JT:** Of course, Cain is mentioned as being an anti-hero along with the Sodomites and Cora and other rebellious figures; but he says that these people are utilizing a certain *Gospel of Judas* but he goes on to suggest that Judas was an especially enlightened figure, and that through his acts



that he ended up throwing the whole world into confusion. Well that doesn't really tell us very much. But when you come on to the later epitomators, people like pseudo-Tertullian probably in the early third century, Epiphanius and Theodoret in the fourth, suddenly we learn a lot more about this. They're concentrating on this notion that somehow Judas is the one whom we really ought to thank, because he ensured the handing over of Jesus, which resulted in the supreme act of salvation for the church. Well that idea does not show up in the Gospel of Judas in spite of what its original editors have said about it. My own sense is that the preliminary version we all have is a colossal misreading of that document itself...

**MC:** To say the least!

**JT:** Which I won't get into, but it's certainly true that in the version that we have, yes indeed, Judas is an especially enlightened figure, but unfortunately he is a mere dupe of the stars; and so when he hands Jesus over, it's not at all because Jesus *asks* him to do this in such a way that therefore Judas can help effect this sacrificial act of salvation through Jesus, but it's merely that he is a victim. He is predestined by the stars to do this, and Jesus merely predicts that that is what Judas is going to do. Quite clearly something is amiss and, coupled with the fact that once you pick up the *Gospel of Judas* and you get on down to page 51, suddenly you get this very, very long

Sethian theogony.

**MC:** Very true.

**JT:** Which ends with the creation of the human being, but oddly enough it's rather completely unlike the *Apocryphon of John* in its similar story, the story of paradise. Because suddenly—although our figures like Saklas and Yaldabaoth become as it were the evil creators of the world—suddenly there's no more attention to the paradise story and the place of the creation; and once Eve and Adam are created, that's it—that's the end of it, and there's no account of the long series of moves and counter moves between the divine world and the evil creator Yaldabaoth. It's odd because if you compare it to the *Apocryphon of John*, much of the material in the second half of the *Apocryphon of John* deals with that fascinating story of moves and counter moves between the transcendent world and this world is missing. It's not there at all and so, yes, it's clear therefore that we have a Sethian story here in the second part of the *Gospel of Judas* but it just ends once the world has been brought into being and the primal pair arises, and at that point the Sethian material stops. So, my own sense is that we're dealing with a document that must have existed in several forms, one form probably known to Irenaeus, and another form according to the text that we possess today. But I don't think that they were necessarily one and the same document.

**MC:** Most of the readers already understand that there were three forms of people, the hylics, the psychics and the pneumatics. Do you see in Sethian literature some similarity to that? Did the Sethians think that they were the perfected race?

**JT:** Yes, yes, they did. In fact the reason why it's legitimate to call them Sethians is because it does seem that they actually did have a self-designation, unlike most other Gnostic sects. For example, Valentinians never called themselves Valentinians.

**MC:** Just Christians.

**JT:** Just called themselves Christians, and certainly the Sethians I don't think called themselves Sethians, but they did call themselves the Seed of Seth, they also thought of themselves as somehow victims of a hostile world system, and by comparison, to most people they thought of themselves as rather pure. They certainly have a tendency towards asceticism and so the most frequent self-designation seems to be the Worthy. They call themselves the Worthy, but certainly the Seed of Seth is a fairly distinctive self-designation. Now when you come to the question you raised, Miguel, about this tripartite division of humanity into the pneumatics—the especially enlightened, perhaps even saved by nature—and the psychic people, that is, in some sense, people who are on the way to Gnosis but nevertheless had to engage in the struggle for

purity—these are really the people in some sense to be saved—and finally, the hylics or the material people, who are beyond the pale and will be excluded.

This seems to be a product especially of the Valentinian schools, mainly—it may have originated actually with Valentinus' successor, Ptolemy—and the way in which he tried to approach these questions. You don't see much evidence of that in Heracleon and certainly in Sethianism as far I can see. No evidence that they carved humanity up into these categories.

If you read the *Apocryphon of John*, it becomes quite clear, towards the middle of the *Apocryphon of John* there's a question-and-answer dialog between Jesus and John, the son of Zebedee, where John asks Jesus a series of questions about the salvation of souls. It turns out that there's only one class of people that is beyond the pale, and that's the people who grasp the truth and rejected it, the turncoats, the apostates. So I would suggest that in some sense that the Sethians do not seem to have made this kind of general distinction. I would gather that in some sense everyone has this possibility for salvation, that what they need to do is to be awakened, so that they can get a much better grip on life and assess their position in the world.

In the Sethian corpus—I mean, it's a rather large corpus—you've got fourteen original Gnostic treatises. For example, you've mentioned already the granddaddy, the

*Apocryphon of John*, but to this we have to add the present version of the *Gospel of Judas* that we have, but then there's a number of reports on the part of heresiologists. We discussed mostly Irenaeus but we see this in the people who later copied Irenaeus, and even more information in the fourth century, from the church father Epiphanius. So, we have a lot of versions of the Sethian story. If I can back up a minute, I talked about my speculations of this arising in some kind of Jewish priestly environment, but it's quite clear it becomes Sethianised, that is, the figure of Seth somehow becomes important. We don't know exactly where this came in, but I think it probably arose in some polemical context, either with other Christians or, possibly, with other Jewish exegetes of the Book of Genesis. You know one of the refrains in the *Apocryphon of John* is, "it is not as Moses said", says Christ "but it is as I now tell you."

**MC:** Right.

**JT:** And one thing, one really begins to wonder, how does the figure of Seth come into all this? Well Seth is an interesting figure in some other contexts. For example, Josephus' *Antiquities* mentions for example that Seth played a special role in preserving the primordial knowledge of the arts of civilisation by inscribing them on stone and brick steles, and we see this also in another interesting work—which has nothing, really, to do with

Gnosticism—called the *Life of Adam and Eve*, which exists in several versions: Armenian and Latin and so forth.

**MC:** Really, never heard of it.

**JT:** Yes, right, a very interesting work, and in fact you can consult it on the web, just look for the *Life of Adam and Eve*, I think it's maybe Michael Stone who has put together an interesting collection of the various variants of that text. But I think that is possibly the key: why "not as Moses said", because Moses wrote the Book of Genesis and it's *his* story about paradise but Moses was never *in* Paradise. Who *was* in paradise? *Adam* was in paradise.

**MC:** That makes logical and theological sense.

**JT:** Adam was in paradise and therefore, for example in the Sethian treatise of the *Apocalypse of Adam*, there we have it, right from the horse's mouth!

**MC:** [laughs].

**JT:** Right? Adam reveals to his son Seth what really *did* happen in paradise, and the assumption is Moses came later. He was the one who became the devotee of the God who revealed himself in the burning bush and gave the law on Sinai and so if you really want to know the *true* dope about what happened first..!

**MC:** [laughs].

**JT:** ...then you should consult Adam and Seth and I think

that's ultimately how the figure of Seth became very important for the Sethians, since according to Genesis 4 and 5, he is the other seed that was born in the place of Cain, who had killed Abel. That and the priestly genealogy in Genesis 5 connects stuff directly with Adam. What's unique about Seth is that, unlike anybody else, he was born in the image of his father, Adam, but we know that Adam was born in the image of God!

**MC:** [laughs]. That's certainly the party line of Judaism and early Christianity!

**JT:** That means Seth is another image of God. This again gives it a certain special authority and so through observations of this sort, that's what attracts an interest in the figure of Seth. And this Sethian tradition becomes Christianized, I think, throughout the second century, although problems begin to break out towards the end of the second century. Seth becomes identified with Christ where he is regarded as appearing on earth in the guise of Jesus. And two very interesting documents in this regard would be the *Trimorphic Protennoia*—for example, where Protennoia descends in some sense to save Jesus from the cross—or, even more, in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* where it's precisely Seth who is recognised as the one who puts on the body of Jesus and descends to overthrow the hostile archon.

And in the literature it may be that the original name

was *Naamah* or something like that, which means beautiful, but this clearly is the figure of Norea, who is understood as the wife/sister of Seth, although occasionally you find other identifications as well. One of the Sethian treatises in the Nag Hammadi library is named Norea and she also becomes a prominent character in a problematic document in Codex II, where the Apocryphon of John is found, in a work called the Hypostasis of the Archons which is thought to be a Sethian document but is only obliquely Sethianised. Mainly because one of the revealer figures who comes to the aid of humans at the time of the flood is the angel Eleleth, who is traditionally the fourth of the luminaries, but nevertheless Norea in some way tries to oppose the archon. The archon has a stratagem that he's going to use to save the race of humans by having Noah build the ark; but Norea knows that this is a trick, that if the humans survive the flood, why then, Yaldabaoth will still be around and will still enslave people. So she tries to burn the ark up but then the archons set upon her and she cries out for help to the angel Eleleth. So it's interesting there that it's not at all Seth who is the savior figure in this document even though Hans-Martin Schenke who developed the original hypothesis of Sethianism thought that the Hypostasis would be a Sethian work; but it's actually Norea not Seth who becomes the spokesman for Gnostic enlightenment.

**MC:** Another question which I thought was interesting is:



Marvin Meyer in the *Gnostic Bible* puts *Thunder: Perfect Mind* as a Sethian work. What is your stance on this?

**JT:** I'm not so sure. This is not his idea, of course, it was developed by Bentley Layton back around 1984, who wrote a very interesting article called "The Riddle of the Thunder," mainly on the basis of certain testimonies we find in Irenaeus' *Treasure Chest*.

There, Epiphanius mentions a certain *Gospel of Eve*, and there's a statement attributed there that sounds very much like the the same sort of riddling that you get in the first paragraphs of the work, the *Thunder*—that we find on the occasion of the creation of Eve in two works in Nag Hammadi Codex II, the one I've just mentioned *The Hypostasis of the Archon*; but also in a sister work to that which has very few traces of Sethian theology, and it's called—though it actually has no title in Codex II—but we call it *On the Origin of the World*. Layton's solution is that the Thunder is to be identified with Eve, but in that sense, she could be identified with almost any of these figures such as Norea, and so on.

**MC:** Or even Isis?

**JT:** Sure. And mainly on the grounds of the first-person self-predicatory statements, very typical of Isis. But it reads something like this: "I am the members of my mother, It is I who am the mother and the daughter, the wife and the virgin, I who am the barren, I who have many children, it

is I who am the one whose marriage is magnificent and who is not married, it is I who am the midwife and she who does not give birth," these antithetical self-predications. Well you go on to the Origin of the World, and you see the story, as follows, where it says that Eve is the first virgin who gave birth to her first offspring without a husband; it is she who served as her own midwife and so for this reason she is held to have said; "It is I who am the member of my mother, I who am the wife and the virgin, I who am pregnant, I who am the midwife, I who am consolation of travail." And in the Hypostasis of the Archons which comes immediately before this thing we call On The Origin of the World, it says, "The spirit endowed woman came to him and said 'Arise up!' When he saw her he said, 'It is you who have given me life, you who will be called Mother of the Living, for it is she who is my mother, she who is the midwife and she who has given birth.'"

**MC:** So that's how they got the connection!

**JT:** Sure, and so it was originally Layton who worked this over, and so in this case Marvin Meyer adopted Layton's ideas.

**MC:** What other text would you recommend for someone who's interested in Sethian literature to read?

**JT:** I would always suggest maybe beginning with the

*Apocryphon of John* and I've already mentioned two others in the course of our discussion, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, a little tiny section of which I've just quoted. And another very interesting one: the *Sacred Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, which is popularly known as the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. "The Gospel of the Egyptians" occurs in the colophon but that's not actually the title of the work, but the title of the work features the Great Invisible Spirit, the deity. But this is very interesting because it tells you a lot about the Sethian ritual, in a long section, clearly baptism but also there are other acts, such as anointings, certain kinds of symbolic gestures made with ones hands to illustrate the vision of the divine world and the reception of light. I think I also mentioned briefly *The Apocalypse of Adam* when I was talking about why Seth came to play a role in Sethian Gnosticism.

**MC:** That's really fascinating.

**JT:** And this whole tradition about the steles or tablets or pillars of Seth that we see in Josephus and *The Lives of Adam and Eve*. We have a treatise called the *Three Steles of Seth* that comes at the very end of Codex VII. And then the granddaddy of the Sethian works, the longest work in the Nag Hammadi library, is by the name of *Zostrianos*. And there are others, the shortest of all is called *The Thought of Norea* in Codex IX, *Melchizedek*, which unfortunately is very, highly fragmentary, nevertheless a

very interesting text in which it seems that Jesus Christ and Melchizedek are somehow identified with one another as enlighteners, and that's also in Codex IX. But the thing that I've worked on most recently has been the connection between Sethianism and Greek philosophy which comes out primarily in *The Three Steles of Seth*. The long work *Zostrianus*, another very interesting work, the *Allogenes*, which seems to me to be the first evidence in western history of the doctrine of learned ignorance. This is mystical experience, so that one becomes ultimately to understand the highest deity by *not* knowing him. And the treatise the *Trimorphic Protennoia* that comes from the thirteenth codex, although it was originally tucked in the inside front cover of Codex VI, that was once a complete codex of itself. But the *Trimorphic Protennoia* (that is, "The First Three-Formed Thought of God") is interesting because it too is very much like the *Thunder* because it's full of first-person self-predications of the divine Mother, who here is called Barbelo. She's called the "First Thought of the High Deity," and it has an amazing similarity to the conclusion of the *Apocryphon of John*—a poetic triptych, a monologue of the divine protennoia—the first thought of Barbelo that occurs right at the end of the *Apocryphon of John*. The *Trimorphic Protennoia* seems to be an expansion of that.

But anyway back to these ones that I mentioned, which I conceive to be the latest, that is, at some point, towards

the end of the second century, the turn of the third, this loose alliance between the Sethians and the Christians fell apart mainly because the two became engaged in polemics. I think that Christians and the apostolic churches came increasingly to object to this identification between Christ and Seth. For the Sethians it was a natural identification, because Paul thinks of Christ as being in the image of God, Sethians think of Seth as being in the image of God, so clearly they're both images of God and so, in some sense they must be inter-identifiable. But there were Christian theologians who obviously objected to this kind of thing. And so I think that is what happened. The first-century theologian Victorinus and the treatise Zostrianus share word-for-word a common source, which has raised a very interesting question in the history of Greek philosophy that centers around the question: what was the origin of the theological interpretation of Plato's Parmenides? I'm sure you've seen references to the idea of negative theology. This you encounter almost at the very beginning of the Apocryphon of John.

**MC:** I have, yes.

**JT:** Traditionally we connect it with the second half of Plato's *Parmenides* which goes on to discuss the problem of unity and of otherness in terms of these eight hypotheses; and the first one therefore is the consideration of the one so pure that you can't even attribute being to it,

and so on. Well, it's clear this has made an impact in these negative theologies. We see them in the Sethian treatises, and, my sense is that quite possibly it was the Gnostics who, even before Plotinus, have been instrumental in instituting this religious, theological interpretation of the *Parmenides*, which before their time was regarded as a logical exercise in dialectic. So, I mean, in various ways, these treatises prove to be enlightening not only for the history of religion but also for the history of Greek philosophy. I wrote my book about called *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*.

**MC:** Thank you much, John.

**JT:** Happy to discuss it at any time

# Einar Thomassen

Einar Thomassen is author of *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'* and *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*, as well as Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Bergen, Norway.

As John Turner is the leading academic in the world on the Sethians, so is Einar Thomassen his counterpart when dealing with the other major Classic Gnostic sect, the Valentinians. In addition to being an essential force in translating and interpreting the Nag Hammadi library, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'* is widely considered the Rosetta Stone for the writings of the poetic, elegant and sophisticated Valentinians.

The interview aptly encapsulated Thomassen's adroit conclusions, streamlining the vast cosmogony and theology of the Valentinians that the church fathers spent volumes trying to decode. Although considered the closest form of Gnosticism to Orthodox Christianity, the Valentinians, like all Gnostic denominations, were never monolithic. Their doctrines contained subtle differences that set them solar systems apart from all other flavors of incipient Christianity.

Like all scholars of his caliber, Thomassen presented details that mainstream scholars and modern Gnostics rectors have overlooked. For example, the founder of these heretics, Valentinus, has been universally accepted as

originating from Alexandria and later establishing his school in Rome during the middle of the second century. Yet Thomassen noted that the rituals of the Valentinians were closer to early Syrian Christianity than Egyptian Christianity. This perhaps stresses the importance of Antioch that Gnostic studies often ignore because it is one of the cradles of Orthodox Christianity.

And that was just a fraction of Thomassen's cognition into the heart of the Valentinian biology. He skillfully juxtaposed the writings of the church fathers to the Valentinian corpus. He penetrated deep into the intricate yet outwardly conventional teachings of Valentinus, who saw the fallen universe as part of a providential plan of the Godhead instead of the cosmic cataclysm adopted by other brands of Gnosticism. Even the maligned demiurge was given a more benign role in the apocalyptical drama. Finally and unlike their Sethian cousins who shuffled their Saviors, there was no doubt that Jesus Christ was the way, the truth and the light (although his exact nature was disputed, nothing uncommon with nascent Christianity or Gnosticism).

The interview addressed the importance of the apostle Paul, an inspiration for many Gnostic sects. To Valentinus he was much more, though—the prototype of the individual permanently transformed once bathed by the discarnate message of the Logos. To put it simply, Paul experienced Gnosis.



This brings into question how orthodox or how heterodox Paul of Tarsus truly was, a perennial debate certainly complicated by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library that often mentions or quotes him. Many scholars and theologians have assumed that Paul was the founder of Orthodox Christianity, but both the Valentinians and Sethians declared he was indispensable to the framework of Gnostic principles.

The Valentinian schools would evanesce from history soon after the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its state religion. But because of the assiduous explorations of Einar Thomassen, the legacy of these Platonic, intellectual Christians is available in its full majesty. As well as the fascinating paradox of how dangerously close yet how celestially far away the Valentinians were from the germinal Catholic Church.

Einar Thomassen was interviewed on January 19, 2008.

**MC:** Could you briefly tell us about the rise of Valentinus and the Christian community in the second century?

**ET:** Yes, I wish I could give you more detail about this. Actually, all we know about Valentinus is just about what Irenaeus tells us—that Valentinus came to Rome—he doesn't say from where—in the middle of the second century, and then he stayed there for a couple of decades and had a lot of followers. We don't really know more than that. But I assume that he must have been one of many Christian teachers who came to the capitol of the Roman Empire and set up his own form of Christianity, his own church, if you like. I think we have to realize that Christianity, in mid-second-century Rome, was a very diverse affair. There wasn't really one Christian community, but a lot of Christian communities, all over the capitol, and they were all teaching their own adaptations of Christianity. This idea that there was one great Church and then a lot of sects is actually not correct. I think that is something that has been constructed, when you look at it, from a later period. It wasn't really like that in the mid-second century. So it seems that Valentinus came there and he had his own vision of Christianity and he formed his own community in that capitol, and it was apparently quite successful.

**MC:** And he came from Alexandria, did he not?

**ET:** We don't really know that. That report comes from Epiphanius, who writes 250 years later, and even he says it's only a rumor that Valentinus came from Alexandria, so we have no real solid foundation for that claim that he was an Egyptian and he brought with him Alexandrian learning. But it's not impossible. Personally, I'm also attracted by the idea that there are elements from Syria, or even Asia Minor, in Valentinian traditions. For instance, you have some of these formulae that are used in their rituals, and they are Aramaic. And why should Valentinians be using Aramaic formulae in their baptismal rituals, unless they came out of some kind of Aramaic or Semitic speaking background, or at least some of them may have done so?

**MC:** What about the famous rumor that he almost became Bishop of Rome? Is that founded on fact, or just legendary?

**ET:** Well, first of all, I think the idea that there was one bishop overseeing the whole of Christianity in Rome in the second century cannot be correct. However, we know from sources from that period that there were several people who were called bishops, and they were just overseers of individual communities, it seems. So I think that this is anachronistic to say that Valentinus aspired to become a bishop for the whole Christian community in Rome. Moreover, that report only comes from Tertullian who

wrote, what, more than half a century later. Tertullian says that Valentinus almost became bishop and then he wasn't elected and so he became angry, and became a heretic instead. And I think that is just slander, and a rumor on the part of Tertullian. I don't think there is any basis for that traditional story.

**MC:** And how did the views of Valentinus and his followers differ from the other Christian sects of Rome?

**ET:** I think if you read texts like the *Letter to Flora* by Ptolemy, who was one of the most significant followers of Valentinus, you see that Valentinians saw themselves as representing some kind of a middle way. So they wanted to find some sort of a third way between Old Testament-oriented Christianity and the more radical Gnostics, who thought that the God of the Old Testament was some kind of devil. And what the Valentinians are saying is that both these groups have some truth, but they are both exaggerating. And the Valentinians have the mediating opinion here. They think that the demiurge, the God of the Old Testament, wasn't a devil-like figure, and the world that he created wasn't a totally bad place, rather the demiurge was a limited person intellectually, and morally as well. There is another God who is elevated above this, and is the one true God who Jesus talked about.

So I think that the main difference here is that the Valentinians had a more accommodating view of the

cosmos, of the theology of the Old Testament where they claim that some of the prophets had an inkling of the Gnostic savior who was to come. And that's sort of thing you can read in the *Letter to Flora*, and you find it all along in the Valentinian documents, that they are trying to strike this middle way. I think that they were feeling just as alienated from the more extremist Gnostics of the Sethian type as they were of the so-called orthodox Christians. Actually it shows us that the category of Gnostic is much more diverse than we've come to think.

**MC:** Didn't the Valentinians also believe that in the end—unlike some of those Sethian texts where everything is destroyed and only those who are redeemed are going to be saved—that even the demiurge would be restored at the end of time?

**ET:** Oh, certainly, they thought so because they were convinced that the demiurge, when he learned who the savior really was, and about the existence of the transcendent world above the material world, that he would be converted as well. And so, eventually, when the material cosmos is destroyed at the end, which it will be, then the demiurge will be elevated to a level above the cosmos where at the moment Sophia or Wisdom is sitting, where she is sending down the spiritual seed into the cosmos to be trained there. But eventually the demiurge and his followers will attain, it seems, some kind of second

level salvation as well. So he's not going to be destroyed like the Sethian world creator.

**MC:** And their cosmology and cosmogony was still very similar to the Gnostics, the traditional Gnostics, except wasn't it a lot more intricate? They took the Neoplatonic views way out there?

**ET:** Well, I find Sethian myths even more complicated than the Valentinians, but the general idea for the Valentinians is that the cosmos is material, and matter is some kind of chaotic outflow of passion, but the cosmos is, after all, formed, because it has been brought into shape ultimately by the savior and Sophia, using the demiurge as their tool for bringing the cosmos into order. So because there is kind of order in the cosmos, the cosmos has something good in it, and this is unlike the Sethian view, where the cosmos itself is some kind of chaos, which is nothing but some kind of prison for the spirit, and which you have to be redeemed from. The Gnostics were basically Platonists and therefore they looked upon the cosmos as some kind of copy, ultimately, of the *pleroma* because it received, ultimately, some kind of formative effect *of the* *pleroma*. You have to distinguish, when you are talking about the Valentinians' view of the material cosmos, between matter and the cosmos. Because the matter of the cosmos is a bad thing, but the cosmos itself, which is shaped from that matter, is

a relatively good thing. I do want to repeat that I see a very basic difference between Sethianism and Valentinianism in their cosmologies.

**MC:** Did they see the pleroma as the all-pervading? In other words, do you see the Valentinians as more pantheistic than other Gnostic sects?

**ET:** I don't think they are pantheistic in the sense that God or the divine is everywhere, because there is after all different levels of reality, and the cosmos certainly has much less reality than the divine world of the pleroma; and so God is not present in the material world in the same way that he is present in the pleroma, of course. But there is a similarity between this monistic view of reality that the Valentinians had the idea that everything comes out of a single source, and what you find in Plotinus, or in eastern philosophies like Buddhism and the monistic philosophies of Islamic Sufism. Because all these religions and traditions have the idea that there is a spreading out and so that ultimate reality and divinity is strongest at the center which is God himself or itself, or herself if you like. And then the further away you get, the weaker is the divine presence. Ultimately at the other end, where you reach the material world, the substance of the material world, matter, is just about nothing.

So you have this idea that, seen from our point of view, the world is certainly real enough, but seen from the point

of view of God, the ultimate source of everything, matter is nothing. And I think that is part of what the Valentinians were taught, that they are in this world to learn about the reality, or rather the non-reality of this world; and once they have learned that the material world is really insignificant, it's really a nothing, and will be dissolved into the nothingness from which it came. Then they will have acquired the Gnosis which will lead them back to the source of their being.

**MC:** Do you agree, or do you disagree, with such scholars as Bart Ehrman and others that for all Gnostics the problem happened when there was a great catastrophe, in other words, everything was going well until Sophia came into the picture.

**ET:** No, I don't think that is accurate for the Valentinians at all. After all, the *Tripartite Tractate* says that everything happened in accordance with the will of the Father, and you have similar ideas in other Valentinian texts. So ultimately I think that the fall of Sophia, who is an aeon, who is a divine being, is a necessary phase in the development of reality and in the development of the divine itself. It spreads out and it has to collect itself again. And the creation of matter—which comes after the passion of Sophia, which is a mistaken and exaggerated form of the divine love—matter is a necessary phase in the self-knowledge of the deity; and that self-knowledge when a



part of the deity starts to reflect on itself and by this act of reflection it becomes further and further away from itself. There is a split and a spreading out and the part of the divinity that comes down and must live in the material world serves a purpose in this whole divine self-realisation. The world has been created for us to learn about our divine ultimate being, but it's also a necessary phase in the development of the deity himself where he spreads out and then ultimately becomes himself again.

I think this whole process, which is actually quite sophisticated and philosophical in its basic ideas, is actually quite simple. We have a deity who at the beginning is just one, and then he wants to be more than one. He wants that because God, that ultimate principle of oneness, wants to love, and to love you have to have somebody to love, and that is the motive for the spreading out of the pleroma into a multitude of spiritual beings. But this spreading out into a multiplicity of beings creates a duality in the divinity itself, and so that duality is concentrated in Sophia, whose act of love becomes a passion and therefore creates a split, and that split has to be made good again, and Sophia has to be brought back into where she came from. But she is all the time part of the divinity himself.

**MC:** And some have said that the concept of the trinity originated with Valentinus. What do you think of that, Einar?

**ET:** I think that the trinity is actually an idea that was created in its present form in the fourth century when you have the various church councils, and so on, who have defined metaphysically the idea of a trinity. I don't think you have anything like that anywhere in the second century. I think that you have in the Valentinian texts both the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; but basically the Valentinians did not think so much in terms of triads, but in terms of dualities. So that the basic foundation of their system is the relationship of the Father and Son and they are both one and two at the same time, and the Holy Spirit is, if you like, the relationship between those two. Probably, you might say that the Holy Spirit, if you are going to talk about its function in the Valentinian system, has something to do with making it possible for the one to be one and two at the same time. It's basically the sentiment of love that exists in the relationship between Father and Son and inside the pleroma as a whole. So I think it would be anachronistic to speak about the Valentinians as the inventors of the doctrine or dogma of the trinity.

**MC:** And it is said that there were two schools of Valentinians, the eastern and the western. What exactly were their differences?

**ET:** This is one of the main points of my book that I have tried to find out if there really was such a difference

between the eastern and western Valentinian Gnostics, which the church fathers assert, and what this difference consisted in. The reports that we have, in particularly in anti-heretical works by Hippolytus, says that the eastern and the western Valentinians disagreed concerning the nature of the body of the savior. The eastern Valentinians thought that it was a spiritual body, and the western ones claimed that the body of the savior was a psychical body. Now, I tried to see in the texts from Nag Hammadi, and from the other texts, if these two views can be detected in any of the sources. And I haven't found exactly what Hippolytus talks about. I've found something that seems to be related to it, which is that the eastern Valentinians... well, there is a certain group of texts, I don't know even whether I want to call them "eastern" or not, but there is a difference between two groups, and this one group speaks only about the spiritual body of the savior. You have to remember that the importance of the spiritual body, or the nature of the body of the savior, is that it determines who is going to be saved, because basically the Valentinians used Saint Paul's notion that all those who are saved become members of the body of Christ. So the Valentinians thought that all the spiritual seed, all the spirituals and the offspring of Sophia, will be assimilated into the body of the savior, and so that is why they are talking about a spiritual body.

On the other hand, there are some texts, particularly the

texts that are reported by Irenaeus and other church fathers, that speak about the body of the savior as a composite thing, that he has a spiritual body but he also has a psychical body. It is a complex body that the savior comes down with, and the way I see it is that the groups where you talk about this double nature of the savior's body, both spiritual and psychical, were the places where they talk about two kinds of human beings: the spiritual human beings and the psychical human beings. So in order to create the notion of the salvation of not only the spirituals, but also the psychics, they added the psychic body as another component in the savior's body. And I think it's clear that there is a difference between those two groups, and you can see that difference even without what the heresiologists talked about.

But another difference related to this is that those Valentinians who talked about exclusively the spiritual body of the savior also talked about his material body—that is, they spoke seriously about his suffering, his reincarnation into a real human body—and they conceived of the process of salvation as some kind of exchange. The savior is coming from above with the spiritual as part of his body, and the spirituals on earth are living in a material body. The savior assumes their material existence, and he swaps it for the spiritual body that he brings down. And because of this exchange, the human spirituals are saved.

Now, in the other theory—that the body of the savior is

both spiritual and psychical—they have to make more distinctions, and they will not say that the spiritual body of the savior was not incarnated into a material body. So they will tend to say that the spiritual savior did not suffer at all, he was not incarnated into a material body, but he put on a psychic Christ, which was a psychical body, and that was the part of him that had suffered. So in that kind of Valentinianism, you have more of a distinction between a spiritual elite and a lower group of psychic Christians who will attain, apparently, a lower type of salvation. So that becomes a much more complex system, where the original idea of salvation by a simple exchange is not so clear-cut as it was originally. But that is the kind of Valentinianism that is presented by Irenaeus and the other church fathers, and what we had believed was the Valentinian idea of salvation and of the body of Christ, but I think the Nag Hammadi texts show us that there is something else going on at the roots of Valentinianism. What we find in Irenaeus and in the church fathers is just a later development of the original Valentinian soteriology.

**MC:** In the introduction you give in Marvin Meyer's new edition of the *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, in the *Dialog of the Savior*, you say that only the elect understand God. Are we talking about the pneumatics and psychics only being saved, and the hylics won't be? Or were the Valentinians universalists?

**ET:** It's true that they often talk about three types of human beings. I think to understand this idea, you have to look upon it from the point of view of reality. The Valentinians were observing the reactions of various kinds of people, and they saw that there were some people who immediately grasped the message of the savior. There were other people who didn't grasp that at once, but they eventually came to accept that the savior was their spiritual savior as well; and so they had a harder time understanding who he was, and they needed some extra guidance. And so from that distinction you have the distinction between the spirituals and the psychics.

The third category, the material or the hylic human beings, are simply the people who have no spirituality in them, and no idea about the superior immaterial world, and so the Valentinians conclude that they would go back to what they ultimately came from, and that was matter and passion. They would go back to the non-existence which they really are. I don't think that the Valentinians were universalists in the sense that they thought that all human beings would be saved, but I think that they certainly would claim that all human beings would have the chance of salvation, and it's only in the fruits that you would see the nature of the tree, they would say. So some people just reject the savior and they would have to face the consequences of that rejection.

**MC:** And you mention Saint Paul. What are some of the

reasons that Valentinus and the Valentinians were so enamoured of him?

**ET:** I think the Valentinians of the second century were the really great Paulinists. There are at least two aspects of Paul's ideas. One is the one I have already mentioned, the model of salvation by some kind of exchange: the savior assumes or takes upon himself what he comes to save human beings from. Valentinus thought the savior, who is a spiritual being, assumed a material existence and made it into nothing so we could be assimilated into his spiritual existence. This is precisely the logic that we find in the letters of Paul, that the savior swallows up death, makes it into nothing, and we become integrated into him. So that logic of substitution is, I think, very basic to the Valentinians, and they took it from Paul. Of course, later Christians thought that that logic of substitution had to do with sin, and that Christ took upon himself our sins in order to make us partake of his sinlessness. Valentinians didn't speak about sin, they spoke of flesh; he took upon himself our flesh that we might partake of his spirituality.

The second thing about Paul is that he speaks about a spiritual resurrection, and that was totally endorsed by the Valentinians. They know, just like Paul speaks in 1 Cor 15 that there is sown a material body and there arises a spiritual body. That is exactly what the Valentinians thought. They didn't believe in the resurrection of the flesh, and they thought that Paul didn't believe in the

resurrection of the flesh either. The flesh whose resurrection they believed in was a spiritual kind of flesh, and in that respect it may be argued that maybe the Valentinians were actually closer to Paul than much of the later Christian theology that is about the resurrection of the flesh as a material body.

**MC:** And I guess this would beg the question, in the theology of the Valentinians, does faith have a place, or is Gnosis the only salvific option?

**ET:** Well, I think you can't distinguish between faith and Gnosis with the Valentinians, and I suspect not in other Gnostics either. I think that faith is certainly a precondition for Gnosis. Unless you have faith, you cannot achieve Gnosis. You must remember that Gnosis is not something that comes out of yourself. You have only the seed that makes you able to receive Gnosis. You have to have the savior to come and ignite the spark, as it were, and make this seed grow in you, and in order for that to happen, you have to first have faith in the savior, and then allow him to teach you, and then you will acquire Gnosis. Incidentally, that is not so different from what many orthodox Christians thought too. For instance, Clement of Alexandria also thought of two stages. You have first a stage of faith which leads to a stage of knowledge. I don't think that is a very controversial thing, although the enemies of the Valentinians made that into some kind of



conflict between faith and Gnosis. I think that was totally a misunderstanding.

**MC:** So basically faith is an outward search for the divine.

**ET:** Yeah. There can be no Gnosis without faith.

**MC:** And what were some of the sacramental practices of the Valentinians that we know of.

**ET:** I think that the Valentinians practiced more or less the same sacraments as other, so-called orthodox Christians. You had baptism and you had Eucharist. And this also makes the Valentinians closer to so-called orthodox Christianity than the Sethians. You know, the Sethians have some rather obscure rituals known as the Five Seals, and so on, but I think that the Valentinians practiced baptism by immersion into water, and anointing, and also practiced the Eucharist, although we know less about the Eucharist. Certainly baptism was extremely important to the Valentinians. I think they did the same acts, used many of the same formulae as many of the other Christians, but they had their own interpretation of what was going on in the act of baptism. By going into the water and having oil put on your body you are being united with the savior. You become part of his body in that way, and this was conceived of in a very peculiar way. In my opinion, the notion of the bridal chamber that is often used by the Valentinians refers to nothing else but the practice of

baptism itself. Because what you do in baptism is you receive the savior, you become united with him as a bride to a bridegroom.

They also thought that the savior, in order to become accessible to all those people who are baptized into him, is not only one, but multiple. And that idea they expressed by the idea of the accompanying angels. The savior came together with a host of angels, and there is one angel for each of us, and what happens when you are baptized is you receive your heavenly counterpart or bridegroom in the form of your designated angel. So in a sense you might say that there is in Valentinian baptism the idea of a personal savior for all of us in the form of an angel, so that is why they thought about baptism as a bridal chamber, in my opinion. I don't think there was any separate bridal chamber which some may claim. I think the only person who says that is Irenaeus, when he talks about the various Valentinian sacraments. He says that they set up some kind of bridal chamber, and so on, but I don't think that is true at all. I think Irenaeus is just making this up because he has heard about the notion of the bridal chamber. It referred to nothing else but the baptism.

**MC:** Einar, for somebody who might be wanting to learn more about the Valentinians, what works would you recommend for them to start reading from the Nag Hammadi library? Where should they start?

**ET:** You know, I've done a lot of work on the *Tripartite Tractate* over the years and so I feel that, for me, Valentinians became very clear when I worked on the *Tripartite Tractate* and tried to work out what it said in comparison to the reports of the church fathers. So I would recommend people to try to understand that text because it is the only independent version of a Valentinian system that we have, which is not being reported to us by the church fathers. Of course, the *Gospel of Truth* is a very important Valentinian text as well, but it's more like a poetical text, written, I would like to think, by Valentinus himself. It's certainly very beautiful, but you don't really get to understand the mythical structure of the Valentinian system from reading that text. But it is a very good read.

**MC:** Don't you mention that the *Gospel of Truth* is probably a more primitive version of the Valentinian philosophy?

**ET:** Yes, probably. The Valentinians didn't feel the need to refer to the whole Valentinian system every time they made a homily or wrote a letter, so I think the author of the *Gospel of Truth* takes some short cuts that makes it more difficult to put it into chronological order in relation to the other texts. But I'd like to think that it was written in the mid second-century by Valentinus himself, but it's just something I'd like to think, it's not something I know.

**MC:** And lastly, whatever happened to the Valentinians?

Where did they go?

**ET:** It's an intriguing question, isn't it? You know, the last we hear of the Valentinians is very precisely dated. It's August 1, 388 c.e., where there was an incident in a village in upper Mesopotamia or eastern Syria where some of these fanatical monks—there were a lot of those in that time—were burning down the church of some Valentinians in that place. And this we know only because Bishop Ambrose tells us of this incident. He tries to persuade the emperor not to punish those monks who, in his opinion, acted quite righteously. At that time, in the reign of the emperor Theodosius, they are really striking down very hard on pagans and heterodox Christians and so it becomes impossible to openly be a heretic in that time. That's why we don't have any more sources after that date. We don't hear any more of them but I would like to think that they eventually wandered east. I think there was an eastern movement going on throughout. Maybe the Valentinians actually died out during the third century in the western part of the Roman Empire. You find them at that time only in the east, and being forced further and further east you would end up in Mesopotamia and Iran. I have long wanted to look more into Syriac and Iranian sources to see if there could possibly be any trace of the Valentinians there. We do not know what the Valentinians of that time would be like at all, so I would like to think that they managed to survive in the east for some time,

but eventually we hear nothing more about them.

**MC:** Well, at least we have people like you keeping up the search, so let's hope their ideas never go away. I think that's all the time we have today, and thank you for taking your time and appearing on *Coffee, Cigarettes and Gnosis*.

**ET:** That you very much, it's been a pleasure.

# Jason BeDuhn

Professor Jason BeDuhn is author of *The Manichaean Body in Discipline and Ritual*, *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma: Making a Catholic Self in Late Fourth Century Africa*, and *Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations of the New Testament*, as well as Professor of Religious Studies at Northern Arizona University.

Although the classic Gnostics garner most of the attention in the scholarly and lay realms, Manichaeism was actually the largest and most catholic sect of Gnosticism in history. Originally from Persia, Manichaeism spread from Europe to far Asia. It was also a direct competitor to Christianity, Buddhism and even Islam. Because of their broad success, the Manichaeans were treated far worse than their older cousins from the Greco-Roman world. Yet somehow this pacifist, proselytizing Gnostic denomination survived well into the Renaissance in isolated parts of the globe.

To truly comprehend Manichaeism and the rocky evolution of Gnosticism itself, one eventually has to absorb the research of Jason BeDuhn. Our interview spanned the genesis of Manichaeism with the visions of its oracular founder, the Prophet Mani, to its possible mutation into the Cathar and Bogomil sects of the Middle Ages.

Although the Manichaeans are widely considered to have been world-hating dualists just a few degrees away from

Zoroastrianism, BeDuhn painted quite a different picture. The Manichaeans were refined theologians, compassionate evangelists, and artistic mystics. They were highly regarded wherever they went, until state religions felt threatened by their conversion rates and antinomianism. Although known to be adaptive and even parasitical, other faiths actually borrowed from their intricate doctrines, especially the Catholic Church. Like BeDuhn pointed out, Augustine of Hippo, possibly the greatest thinker in Christianity, was not only once a Manichaean but many believed he never completely divorced his former belief system.

BeDuhn further graced the interview with the rituals, organization structure and the lesser-known doctrines of the followers of Mani. His most shocking revelation was that perhaps it was never orthodox Christianity that finished the classic Gnostics but the success of the Manichaeans once they arrived in Alexandria and the other hotbeds of heresy. This only added to the great mystery surrounding the Manichaeans—a seemingly spartan religion that was so effective in its missionary campaigns across ancient civilization without ever having to lift a sword.

The effort to understand Mani and the Manichaeans has only scratched the surface, even more than Nag Hammadi studies. New texts, some from faraway places like China, have just recently come under the microscope of

scholarship. Academics are finally appreciating the Manichaeian depth and span, and how it literally modified many of the larger religions of the world. Yet a smog of misconceptions and polemics shrouding Manichaeism for centuries still pollutes much of public perception.

Jason BeDuhn cleaned some of the skies of truth in our interview, and continues to do the same in the scholarly atmospheres with his historical and theological environmentalism. It seems sunlight is slowly unveiling the majesty, beauty and importance of the perennially vilified and discounted Gnostic movement called Manichaeism.

Jason BeDuhn was interviewed on October 29, 2006.



**MC:** Jason, can you tell us about the founder of Manichaeism?

**JB:** Sure. The founder of Manichaeism was Mani, who was an Iranian who lived in the third century c.e, and he was raised in a Jewish-Christian commune in what is today southern Iraq. He began to have visionary experiences, still as a child. He experienced communication with trees and plants around him, sensing that they had a conscious presence, and he also had visions of messengers from the divine world who communicated to him that he was a specially chosen person and he was destined to form and revive the true religion. And by the time he reached his early twenties he was ready to go out on that mission and broke with the community where he had been raised. Mani had a series of debates with them about what they were teaching versus what his revelations were telling him. And so he left the community with a very small group of followers and began to build up his own religious community. He travelled throughout Iran and travelled to India and made contact with Buddhists and Hindus and Jains there, and went up a little bit into what are today other countries beside Iran, such as Turkmanistan and Afghanistan. Mani also went a little bit towards the Roman Empire, to his west, and continued to teach and preach and form his community for a long and healthy life. He lived to be about sixty years old before a change of

leadership in the Iranian government led to his arrest as a dissident, someone who was teaching a non-traditional form of religion. He was imprisoned and died in prison around 276 c.e and his community went on from there.

**MC:** And wasn't his death pretty gruesome? They flailed his body and then stuffed it with straw? Is it true his body was crucified on the wall?

**JB:** The stories about his death get told in various forms, but as close as we can tell from Manichaean texts themselves, he actually died in prison before he could be tortured. What happened was then after he was dead his body was skinned and stuffed with straw and, according to one of the later retellings, half of his body was suspended at one gate and the other half above the other gate of the city. This is one of the imperial cities of the Iranian state. And so Manichaean texts talk about him realizing that the moment of his death had come, and he went into prayer and meditation and his spirit ascended out of his body before the guards came and hauled him away to be tortured. The emperor was very disappointed that he didn't have the chance to torture Mani, and so he took it out on his corpse after the fact. There are even famous Islamic period paintings of the body stuffed with straw, hung over the gates of the city. It was a tale that was often retold.

**MC:** And isn't it the classic example of the jealous

priesthood of Zoroaster wanting him out?

**JB:** Sure, the existing priesthood didn't like this new teacher coming around and so they were instrumental in leading to his arrest. They had not been able to convince the previous emperor, who reigned for most of Mani's career, a man by the name of Shapur. He was more liberal and was not too concerned about Mani's activities. But when he died and was succeeded by another couple of emperors, then the policies shifted back to a more conservative stance and then the Zoroastrian priests got a hearing for their complaints, and that led to Mani's demise.

**MC:** Can you tell us something about Mani's ideology and what makes it a Gnostic ideology?

**JB:** Well, that's a very good question, because how exactly Manichaeism relates to the Gnostic movement is really a debatable point. In a sense you could classify it as Gnostic because of the essential role that knowledge plays in initiating the reform of human beings that Mani taught. And knowledge also involves both knowledge of the true nature of God and the true nature of the human soul, and in that respect it is in continuity with other forms of Gnosticism. But there are on the other hand distinct differences that set Manichaeism apart from many of the other Gnostic ones. For instance, in the Manichaean system, the good God creates the world, rather than the world being some sort of mistaken or accidental or even

malign creation, as you often find in other Gnostic systems. You also have in Manichaeism of course, the reality of evil, the physical concrete reality of evil, which agrees with some Gnostic systems, but other Gnostic schools taught that evil is more of an illusion than a concrete reality.

Manichaeism is ascetic, just like many of the Gnostic movements were, but its view of the extent of the divine soul in reality is a bit broader than most Gnostic systems in that Mani looked at animals and plants to be endowed with the same divine soul as humans, whereas in Gnostic systems, with few exceptions, there tends to be a disparagement of all non-human creation as somehow less than ideal, or even malign in some ways. But obviously Manichaeism drew upon some of the antecedent Gnostic ideas and concepts in the same way that it drew on antecedent Jewish concepts, Buddhist concepts, Zoroastrian concepts. It was a very amalgamistic kind of religious tradition. And so it has a very complex heritage, with many kinds of religious backgrounds.

**MC:** Right, it just adapted itself to wherever it went. That was the brilliance of his philosophy, right?

**JB:** Well it was intrinsic to Mani's revelation, which was that God had revealed the truth many times throughout history, and through many prophets including Jesus and the Buddha and Zoroaster. So, that being the case, there

was the sense in Manichaeism that all these other religions had at least a core of truth within them, and had simply become corrupted, and it was needed for Mani to come into the world and strip away the corruption once again. And when they went to the areas where these various religions dominated, they were quite comfortable in trying to convey Manichaeism in the terms of the local religious tradition, which they believed contained a kernel of the Manichaean message in it. So that made them very adaptable and very successful in spreading Manichaeism throughout the old world.

**MC:** What I found really interesting, which separates Manichaeism from most of the Gnostic philosophies, was that in fact man isn't created in the image of God, but isn't man created in the image of Saklas or the archons, and all we are is these vessels to trap light?

**JB:** That is essentially the case, yes. It's very dramatic in that human nature itself is really called into question in the Manichaean system, and the human body really is created as a prison, as a trap, basically to fool the divine soul into thinking that it was already in its proper condition. In that respect there's a slight qualification to what you said, and that is that the archons who form the human body actually model it on the divine form that they have perceived in looking up towards the heavenly world of light, and so in its appearance, in its form, it imitates the good, but in its

actual construction, it is designed to actually be a prison. And that is a very heavy qualification on human self-importance. Mani even said that of all the forces and beings in the universe, the human is the most corrupt and the most detrimental to the liberation of light. And that's precisely why he has the mission to reform the human character, because that's the one that really does most of going out into the world and harming the divine living spirit in all living things and being a force of violence and destruction all the time, and so the human is the one where the reform is most needed. And so there's a very interesting critique of human nature that's involved.

**MC:** Yeah, I don't think we should get into it, but I must mention that when reading the Manichaean Genesis, it's very much like a porn movie, isn't it? All that sex and orgies for creation... no wonder they hated sex because it's just yuck! Also, the other things that's interesting, and I don't know if this was polemics from the church fathers, but didn't they say that man was created as this trap for the light, for the powers of good, but then Jesus came as a snake and told Adam, "No, no, no, you can do it this way." Is that correct?

**JB:** Yes. Jesus appears to Adam and enlightens him as to his true nature. So what the Manichaeans say is that when you read the Genesis account, which is a corrupted account of this moment in human history, it puts that role

of the one who comes to Adam and enlightens Adam as the serpent. Manichaeism says that that's just a distortion and a disguise of the true story which is that Jesus in fact was the being who came and enlightened Adam, and that was the first revelation to humanity of what it can aspire to, and that was followed then by a succession of revelations throughout history.

**MC:** What were some of the characteristics and rituals of the historical Manichaeans? I think you already mentioned that they were monastic and ascetic, but I guess what also differentiates them from Gnostic sects is that they were actually missionary and catholic to an extent.

**JB:** That's true. They were very highly missionary in their intention. They very consciously and deliberately formed new strategies for spreading the religion, and in fact they succeeded in spreading it from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. So obviously they spread much further than the other Gnostic groups did, and that does set them apart. They also had a very structured and formal church organisation, which is something that the Gnostic sects tended to be looser about. There was actually a hierarchy of authority and something akin to a pope running the entire Manichaean church. Actually, some centuries before there was a Catholic Pope, so that's a possible influence on the Catholic Church among many others. The community was divided into two ranks. The elect were the really

seriously ascetic ones, who only ate once a day, who did not have sex at all, did not regularly bathe, wore different outfits that set them apart, did not cut their hair, and so these would be the ones who you could see on the street and be able to point to and say, "Well, that's a Manichaean." A much larger segment of the community were the auditors or hearers, who were committed to Manichaean ideology but were not prepared to take on the more serious mission and assignment of the elect. And so they supported the elect in their work and at the same time aspired to make as much spiritual advance as they could. This way after their death they could in general terms be reincarnated in a more advanced state so that in the next life they could be prepared to take on the more disciplined life of the elect. The elect were in a position to really lead the ideal Manichaean life and, in theory, upon their death they would be liberated, whereas the auditors could not expect to be liberated at the point of death because they had not yet advanced far enough.

So, that being the basic division of the community, there were different roles assigned to the two different parts of the community. The elect had very essential functions—the taking of confession from the auditors, obviously preaching and spreading the teachings of Mani, and their daily ritual meal was a very important act in the religion in that all plant life had divine soul in it; and one of the ways in which that soul could be liberated was it by being taken



as food by the elect who by their ascetic disciplines had radically reformed their bodies from instruments of entrapment of the divine soul into machines of liberation for the divine soul. So their disciplines had actually radically reformed their bodies and enabled them to, by eating plant food, actually separate the divine substance from the evil substance and liberate it through their prayers and hymns, and so that was an important ritual function that they had. They themselves could not go out and acquire food, it had to be brought to them by the auditors; the auditors could hold regular jobs, while the elect could not do any manual labor. They could not use their hands to affect the surrounding environment, they could not grab at things or hold on to the environment in ways that might be hurtful, and that was part of the elect life, so they would wait and receive offerings from the auditors and that's what they would eat. It had some resemblance to the kind of things you would see in Buddhist communities, the same ideal in terms of monks supported by the lay people, and the monks would lead a more ideal, advanced form of spirituality. But of course the Manichaeism ideology around food and how it's processed by the elect is something unique to Manichaeism.

**MC:** They were strictly vegetarian, right?

**JB:** They were strictly vegetarians. The elect were strictly vegetarians. The auditors were allowed to eat meat as long

as they didn't themselves take animal life. So there were less stringent guidelines on the auditors than on the elect. The auditors could also have sex, whereas the elect could not.

**MC:** And they were complete pacifists?

**JB:** Absolutely. They were completely pacifist. They thought all forms of violence were evil. Mani said killing was always evil. And of course that put them at a disadvantage in terms of the use of state power. And it was only in a very limited period of Manichaean history where they had a state supporting them. And it's interesting to look at that material and that evidence and see how they grappled with the role of the state, and how much it could help them in their religious activities. It was a tough issue for them because of this pacifist tradition.

**MC:** Did Manichaeans build churches, or were they simply monastic and lived in caves? I'm really not sure about that one.

**JB:** Actually, the elect were not allowed to live isolated lives apart from the rest of the Manichaeans. So they could not go off and live in a cave, they could not build and live in a monastery per se. The elect were expected to actually live with the auditors, with the rest of the Manichaeans and always be present and available for them. But in places where they were not under persecution, the Manichaeans

did build religious centers that were called Manistans, and the Manistans were places where people would gather for the ritual meal, where they would gather for confession and for teaching. The elect also did educational work with lay people, and medical care for lay people as well, and that would be the place where the books might be copied. So it was just sort of the local centers where people could meet and support each other in their religious observances. For most of Manichaeism history in most parts of the world, there were various laws against them. So they had to go underground, and so in that situation they could not build any public buildings that could be identified, they had to basically meet in people's homes, and keep a very low profile, and that's true for much of Manichaeism history.

**MC:** How popular did Manichaeism become at its height?

**JB:** It's hard to give any absolute numbers on how successful it was. It probably was a minority religion wherever it was except for maybe a couple of centuries in central Asia where it really was a dominant religious force. But in places like the Roman West or Iran or China, it was always relatively smaller, one of the religious options around. There's really no way to gauge its numbers, but it did have a wide geographic expanse. It had a very efficient communication system which kept Manichaeans in touch with each other over large stretches of land. It thrived for

a thousand years before it really started to seriously be squeezed out, in large part because of the ability of its rivals to invoke state power to suppress it. Manichaeism never really had a very successful strategy to responding to that. They could disguise themselves as members of these other religious communities. Manichaeans were allowed to deny that they were Manichaeans in order to save their lives. And so in various places they took on the guise of Catholics or Muslims or Daoists or Buddhists, but eventually these communities just shrank smaller and smaller and after a period of time died out. The last known Manichaean community in existence was in south China in 1500-1600 c.e. Just recently field workers in that area of south China have found that in some private homes there are still statues of Mani and veneration of Mani as a local mountain God, with very little memory of the larger Manichaean tradition. But just because he had been a popular religious figure in that part of the world, he's remembered as one of the sages or one of the regional deities.

**MC:** But didn't the Roman Catholic Church see it as a big threat at one point?

**JB:** It was a big threat in that it was one of the major rival interpretations of the Christian tradition. Manichaeans claimed to be followers of Jesus, they invoked Jesus as a divine revealer, and by the time you get to the

consolidation of the Catholic Church in the fourth century, many of the other varieties of Christianity are already on their way out. The other Gnostic sects are already in eclipse and many other forms of Christianity have already been beaten. The Manichaeans were the new kid on the block as a rival and a threat, and they actually enjoyed for most of the fourth century tolerance alongside of other forms of Christianity. And so when the Catholic Church started to get serious about using the state to suppress rival forms of Christianity, Manichaeism was one of the first forces that it really had to tackle. Again, as you said, the degree to which Catholicism directed its wrath at Manichaeism suggests it was considered a very serious threat, not necessarily in numbers, but in the cogency of its positions, in its ability to argue its claim on the Christian tradition in opposition to the Catholic claim, it took it very seriously. And so that battle raged for about 100-150 years before the Catholics really got the decisive upper hand. By the time you get to the early fifth century they had driven the Manichaeans underground and started the rapid decline of Manichaeism in the West. It took much longer in the middle east and in central and east Asia.

**MC:** We know, I believe, that Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine were former Manichaeans. Do you see Augustine synthesizing any Manichaean philosophy into his teachings or philosophy? Because I've heard people tell me that he used the Manichaean predestination to get some of

his theological ideas across. Do you see any more of these?

**JB:** Yes. Actually I'm working on the figure of Augustine and his use of Manichaean material in his own Catholic theology right now. And, yes, there's a lot going on there, in part because he sees his task as winning over his former fellow Manichaeans. He's working at that problem of trying to make Catholicism answer their concerns and be a kind of better Manichaeism for them. So he does allow it to shape a lot of the concerns that he focuses on. And I do think that his more complicated view of human nature than what you'd see earlier than him in the Catholic tradition comes in part from Manichaeism—in the sense that he has human disability, human corruption, and the need for divine intervention to set us on the right path for spiritual advancement. That kind of passivity to the intervention of divine aid is something that Augustine really brings into the Catholic tradition as never before. The only place you can really see that in a thriving religious community around him before that is in the Manichaean tradition. And that also involves, as you say, predestination, some sort of selectivity of who's there to receive the message, who's in the right state of mind to receive revelation, to receive divine aid.

Augustine struggled his whole life against his critics among both the Catholic Church and the other Christian churches that were around at the time that he was in fact

bringing Manichaeism into Catholicism. He was constantly being accused of that, and he went to his deathbed trying to fight off those accusations. But I think, in large part, many of them are fair accusations. Even though he was a committed Catholic, he didn't think that he was undermining Catholicism, he thought that he was strengthening it by incorporating some of these Manichaean ideas, and he thought he could work those ideas even better than Mani himself did. He was sort of taking Manichaean ideas and throwing away Manichaeism at the same time. So his intention was to bolster the Catholic Church for the future, but in a sense he really dramatically changed it, and that influence continued even after him in various more pragmatic ways. The Catholic Church in terms of adopting clerical celibacy, in adopting confession practices, in adopting a musical liturgy even, none of those things were there before Manichaeism came on the scene. All of them were things that Manichaeism was doing and all of them are things that Catholicism adopts after it has come into contact with Manichaeism. So, at least on the surface, there's an inference that there is some deliberate borrowing going on.

**MC:** One of the charges always leveled at Manichaeans is that they're world-haters and negative. In the dictionary you can find the word "Manichaean" as meaning someone who's a pessimist. Do you agree with this charge after studying their texts? I see a lot in them that's really

beautiful.

**JB:** Well, I agree with you. I think what's often overlooked is the degree that Manichaeism, despite its dualism, sees good in the world. We kind of think that's saying the world is bad, you want to get away from the world, but there's also this pantheism at the same time in Manichaeism. This unique pantheism says that God itself entered into mixture with evil and everything in the world has God in it, and there's nothing you can point to in the world and say it's absolutely evil. Rather, everything is a mixture of good and evil. And so, if you look at the Manichaean hymns, as apparently you have, you'll see this poetry, a lot of affirmation of the natural world as the manifestation of God. And there's even the claim in the later Islamic tradition, when it is trying to suppress certain radical forms of Sufism, the claim is made that the Sufis have learnt from the Manichaeans how to meditate on beauty as a form of drawing close to God. And of course that's everything from meditating on a flower to meditating on the face of a beautiful woman. So, for more conservative Islamic forces, this kind of religious devotion to material forms is antithetical to the values they're trying to cultivate. But it fits perfectly the Manichaean view that God is tangible in what is beautiful, is tangible in what affects the senses in a positive way. So God smells sweetly and God is light as opposed to darkness. These very sensory ways of talking about the divine which are the very things that



Augustine and others criticised as too materialistic are actually ways in which you can see Manichaeans affirming the world as being permeated with divinity in a way that you miss in many other forms of spirituality.

**MC:** I agree. The whole ship of light metaphor, it's just incredible, and how Mani said that every blade of grass has light in it—he saw light everywhere.

**JB:** He did, and of course, that leads to a very strong discipline required as to how people interact with nature, and I think this is often what's misinterpreted as negative towards the world. The elect shouldn't even walk on the grass and they shouldn't touch a dewdrop on a leaf. It sounds like they're basically checking out of existence in this world, but in fact it is this consciousness that there's life in these things, and that the human hand is a bruising thing, and then one needs to be very aware of how to interact with nature, not because nature is dirty or polluting, but because it is pure. For example, the rule that the elect cannot bathe, this comes from the idea that water is pure, and it's not for humans to pollute water with the dirt of their own bodies. And so it is the heightened awareness of the whole world as a sort of sacred space that makes them very careful as to how they interact with the world.

I should also say that part of this affirmation of beauty and natural forms as manifestations of the divine is

manifested in the high value Manichaeism placed on religious art. Mani himself painted a picture book that he used to teach the religion to people who were illiterate and couldn't read the text, and so he could show them through illustrations how his teachings were to be understood. And we have surviving examples of Manichaean art, which is a very highly developed medium, and really great skill was used in portraying the natural world, and good in the natural world, and the Manichaean community in activity in their environment. And this art is one of the attestations of how much the Manichaeans valued the physical and material as a dimension in which spirituality was taking place.

**MC:** Another charged that was levelled against the Manichaeans was that they were obsessed with astrology.

**JB:** Yeah, I've heard that often in the secondary literature, and I've looked in the Manichaean literature itself for signs of this. They believed that the stars and the planets reflected the actual ongoing struggle between good and evil. They did believe that that struggle produced effects that flowed down into the human being and caused the human being to be influenced by them. But they also contended that traditional astrology as it was known at the time was full of mistakes and misunderstandings about how it was supposed to work, and so it was a qualified affirmation of the truth of astrology. I haven't found any

evidence that it was a major source of concern. Because they thought that the human body was open to influences from all over in the environment, from the movement of the stars, from what a person eats, from what you breathe.

They actually were resisting an argument against other forms of religion that emphasises rituals of purification. You know, if you took ritual baths every day you were spiritually pure. And they said, this was just absurd because the human body was open to things coming into it all the time, and you can't just wash off the surface of your body and be pure. Purity is something which is a spiritual thing inside, rather than a physical thing. And so they did have this view of the human person as very vulnerable in its environment to all kinds of influences; and they also talked about the human mind as constantly buffeted by all kinds of influences that momentarily derange the human mind and cause it to do acts of violence or lust or things like that. The Manichaeans were always teaching their followers how to train their minds and be aware of these influences and counteract them, and maintain a sort of mental presence that were allow them to lead moral lives.

**MC:** Do you see any Manichaean influence in, let's say, the Nag Hammadi library? Scholars have noted that there's certainly Manichaean influence in the *Pistis Sophia* with the Treasury of Light, and Jesus fighting the zodiac. Do you

see any other Manichaean influence in the Nag Hammadi texts, or is it just too early?

**JB:** Most of the Nag Hammadi texts are probably too early to show the effects of Manichaeism, but as you said *Pistis Sophia* is a good example of a later Gnostic text which shows Manichaean terminology and imagery. What's happening is the Manichaeans come into Egypt in the late third century and they basically begin absorbing the Gnostic sects. As the Gnostic sects become eclipsed by other forms of Christianity that are coming into the area, Manichaeism becomes a sponge that pulls in many of the people who were adherents of other forms of Gnosticism; and so the kind of two-way influence that's going there, both Gnosticism into Manichaeism and Manichaeism into other forms of Gnosticism, and eventually Manichaeism becomes the dominant alternative form of Christianity to the Catholic Church, which comes in around the same time Manichaeism comes in.

In Egypt you have a real battle going on for supremacy between the Manichaeans and the more orthodox tradition, coming in at the same time, and recent archaeological finds of the last decade have given us a lot more information about the Manichaeans operating in Egypt very successfully. In fact many of the documentary pieces of evidence that were thought for decades to be the earliest evidence for mainstream Christianity in Egypt have been identified as actually Manichaean. So Manichaeans were

one of the leading forces in spreading a kind of Christianity up and down the Nile valley, and they were there moving in right alongside many of the Gnostic groups who were also trying to spread upriver from their heartland which is more in the Hellenised North. So Manichaeism was very quickly in the picture, so there's probably a lot more to be found out about how the other Gnostic sects and Manichaeism started influencing each other once you get to the second half of the third century.

**MC:** And is it safe to say that you mentioned that Manichaeism was able to last a thousand years? Do we trace the Cathars and the Bogomils as the offshoots of Manichaeism?

**JB:** You know, that's a really difficult question, because the Cathars and the Bogomils did not recognize themselves as Manichaeans. So that's kind of a phenomenological question in religious studies: if a community itself does not identify itself as belonging to a certain tradition, how legitimate is it for us to classify it as belonging to that tradition? What I would say from looking at that material is that there's obviously a lot of residual Manichaean ideas and practices that have become incorporated and embedded in these later alternative traditions, and the influence varied over time and from place to place. I mean, one of the big debates among the Cathars was: is their dualism an absolute dualism like Manichaean

dualism, or did they see Jesus and Satan as twin brothers, a sort of modified dualism, which would be very un-Manichaeism. And there seem to have been different missionaries teaching different versions, and that might reflect the coming together of very distinct strands. One thing about the Cathars was that their division of the community into the Perfect and the lay people is very similar to Manichaeism, as well as devotional and confessional practices made to the Perfect by the layperson. This looks very Manichaean in terms of how the community was organised, and it could be that what we're dealing with is a Manichaean community which has gone so underground, so to speak, that it has lost its connection to the Manichaean tradition and just sees itself as Christianity. And that is basically in continuity with an earlier Manichaean community.

The Bogomils are a more difficult question, in part because we have less information about exactly what evidence really applies to the community that we call the Bogomils. But one factor that could be important in their connection to Manichaeism is the influence of people actually coming into eastern Europe from central Asia where Manichaeism was still a very live and dominant tradition, even into the Middle Ages. And therefore they could very well have been bringing at least bits and pieces of Manichaean spirituality with them that could have influenced what they were developing once they got into

Eastern Europe. So Manichaeans are on the scene there, so you can never count them out as a possible factor. But all these religious communities had a lot of fluidity among them, there was a lot of movement back and forth. Even your average person in the street didn't necessarily adhere to a very strict definition of religious belief and practice, and so all these different traditions could always be coming together and blending in minds and practices, and that's probably why we see such a complex picture.

**MC:** And do you see any historical or maybe artistic figures who might have been inspired by Manichaeism after its passing? I think Voltaire mentions a story of a Manichaean in one of his writings, but that's as far as I see it. Do you see any others?

**JB:** Well, in fact because it was so poorly known and remembered it's hard to say that anyone could have known much about it before, say, the eighteenth century when people started going back to the texts and started to figure it out. And of course we've only had actual Manichaean texts themselves since the early part of the twentieth century. So there was simply a lack of a Manichaean presence in the public consciousness to influence anybody. I know that once those texts started to be recovered and published, some people did pick them up and got interested in popularizing them and reading them again. I know Rudolf Steiner saw his teachings as

some way in continuity with Mani's teachings. I know that the Shakers in the USA also, in the late nineteenth century, began to look back into history for antecedents for their movement and affirmed Mani as a possible precursor. They were interested both in the celibacy and ascetic side as well as the affirmation of a feminine side to God, which was something that the Manichaeans had which obviously dropped out of the Christian tradition in the meantime. So there were some efforts to do that, but I'm not familiar with other possible influences on people's thinking. In the reformation there were always accusations being thrown back and forth between Protestants and Catholics over who was really reviving Manichaeism, but these are just polemical terms, they don't really mean much.

**MC:** So basically the reason why there's so little scholarship on this largest of Gnostic sects is just because there were no writings or texts up until recently. Weren't they so censored? That's been very hard to get to, is that the reason?

**JB:** That was true until about a century ago, and everything that people knew about Manichaeism up till that time was based on what its enemies said about it, so obviously there were a lot of distortions there and it didn't take on a very appealing picture. Once they started finding texts—in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century a set of Manichaean texts were found in China, and



then in the late 1920s, early 1930s, another body of texts was found in Egypt, and since that time, in more recent decades, there have been more finds in Egypt—and part of the problem is that in all these cases the finds were so fragmentary, and in such damaged condition, that they don't read as well as the Nag Hammadi texts do, for example. Many of the Nag Hammadi texts are in great shape. But it was the Manichaean texts that had all kinds of problems with the manuscripts themselves. Either they were very broken up and fragmentary, or they had discolored, or other things had happened to them, which made it much harder, a much slower process, to reconstruct meaningful segments of these texts. And so it's really been the purview of philologists and linguists, and people willing to really spend a lifetime piecing together tiny little fragments, and so it hasn't yet had the ability to be published in a form that very many people would have the patience to study. So that's part of the reason why Manichaeism hasn't caught the public interest in the same way that Gnosticism has.

Furthermore, Manichaeism hasn't really had an Elaine Pagels or someone who has gone out of their way to highlight certain features of the religion that are appealing to modern people. You know, it's easy to do that with Gnostics as kind of non-hierarchical, egalitarian spiritual visionaries. You can emphasize that side of Gnosticism and it sounds appealing to liberal-minded religious people in

the modern world, whereas Manichaeism has a hierarchy and these very strict ascetic disciplines. Things like that seem to a lot of people a bit more like the structured religion that a lot of people, who might otherwise be interested in alternative religion, are trying to get away from. So it hasn't really had the kind of salesmanship in terms of its more appealing and positive aspects the way that Gnosticism has.

**MC:** We need Dan Brown to write a novel about Mani being married to Mary Magdalene. That'll break it through for all of us.

**JB:** Yeah, instead what you get about Manichaeism is, there was a novel published a few years ago which basically had a Manichaean cell inside the Vatican conspiring to take over the Catholic Church. The Manichaeans were put more in the role of the villains in that story. That's been their lot in life, because of their ability to cling on in these secret cells for so long, it's easy to link the Manichaeans to conspiracy theories, and I just think that's part of how they're viewed. As you said earlier on, Manichaeism is by definition this harsh, judgemental, right and wrong, good and evil, light and darkness thing, and people often find that off-putting. They don't always appreciate the moral clarity, nor do they appreciate the fact that the Manichaeans themselves were very insistent that you cannot isolate something as purely evil, that

everything you experience in reality has a mixture of both, and it's your job to perceive the good in everything, and identify with that, and turn away from the evil in everything. And so I do find that there's a great spiritual strength in the way the Manichaeans faced the world, that probably just needs to find the right way of expressing it to get more public interest.

**MC:** Hopefully people like you and other scholars will bring it out to light so we can get more understanding of this great ancient tradition. Thank you Jason, I do appreciate you coming on and taking your time on this evening to appear on Coffee, Cigarettes and Gnosis and I will be hounding you to get more information on that turncoat Augustine.

**JB:** Well, it's been my pleasure to talk to you.

# Elaine Pagels

Elaine Pagels is author of *The Gnostic Gospels*, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters*, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*, *The Origin of Satan*, and *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, as well as Harrington Spear Paine Foundation Professor of Religion, Princeton University, New Jersey.

The writings of Elaine Pagels are possibly the most substantial contribution to the advancement of modern Gnostic studies. Her seminal book, the award-winning bestseller *The Gnostic Gospels*, awoke a global interest in Gnosticism across the entire spectrum. *The Gnostic Gospels*, named one of the top 100 books of the twentieth century by the Modern Library, is widely considered an essential reference companion or at least primer to any involvement with the Nag Hammadi library. *Beyond Belief*, another very popular work, is regarded as one of the most affecting and sagacious efforts concerning the *Gospel of Thomas* (as well as the esoteric frequencies of the Gospel of John). And in between, Pagels' other publications have extracted early, alternative Christianity out of the halls of academia and into mainstream awareness.

Ironically, our interview on Gnosticism was not about Gnosticism, or actually could have never been about Gnosticism, by default. Like Karen King (as she explained in our respective interview), Michael Williams, Ismo

Dunderberg and other reputed scholars, Pagels has evolved into a doubting Thomas when it comes to accepting there was ever an ancient, religious movement known as Gnosticism. Unlike Marvin Meyer and Birger Pearson in their corresponding interviews, she views these terms as needlessly problematic, at best, and ultimately intellectually constraining at worst. Pagels stressed this issue throughout much of our discussion for the basic reason the terms "Gnosticism" and "Gnostic" hijack an individual's ability to fully retrieve the bounty found in the formative stages of Christianity. In essence, these terms are a sort of light pollution that has dazzled scholarly and religious minds but obfuscated an almost endless constellation of elemental Christian sects, each emanating from the same theological Big Bang but with their own unique and educational illumination.

Pagels perhaps went further than other academics in stating that even accepting Gnostic subdivisions such as Valentinianism and Sethianism was potentially falling into the mental quicksand of leaning too much on expedient but generalizing labels. Doing this inevitably creates a myopic projection into the Nag Hammadi library itself, conceivably aborting the possibility of taking accurate snapshots of youthful Christianity. Furthermore, within these accepted Gnostic categories, there exist so many contradictions in history, dogma and even praxis that it makes them all but cumbersome. Pagels believes the most

sapient approach is to discard all conventional Gnostic groupings and place them under the Christianity rubric. Without these constraints, apocryphal and canonical texts, the Church Father writings, and historical evidence are beheld together in a more harmonious manner that can induce a deeper midwifing of the tenets of Jesus Christ.

Although as erudite as any scholar today, perhaps it is Pagels' wisdom to keep matters simple when necessary that has made her the pre-eminent popularizer of ancient heresies. Although "Gnosticism" and "Gnostic" may be obstructive, Gnosis itself is far from it. Like Pagels stated in our interview, humanity's reacquaintance with its "image of God" or "Divine Spark" is a critical and uplifting kernel motif that all of Christendom shares, past and present. After that, other layers of doctrine fall into place almost effortlessly (or at least Pagels has made them seem effortless). Certainly worth mentioning is her almost childlike, humble wonder of a subject she has earnestly pursued for generations, as revealed by the mere fact Pagels was just as interested before and during the interview in my own perspectives on Gnosticism as she was in sharing her ideas.

Even when it came to the *Gospel of Judas*, Pagels once more had an intelligible yet judicious view of the Gnostic Judas. Instead of seeing Judas as a delegate of the despotic demiurge, as April DeConick posited in her interview, or an astral pontiff of the eternal realm, as

Marvin Meyer proposed in his interview, Pagels placed him in the sensible middle, beyond extremes. Judas Iscariot in the *Gospel of Judas* essentially symbolizes humanity in general—constrained by fate yet endowed with certain transcendental choices, caught in a continual see-saw of rejecting and accepting the providence of the divine, able to fully accept or completely ignore the message of salvation from the living Christ, and simultaneously a flawed hero and enlightened villain in creation's grand but rickety stage. The Gnostic Judas is each one of us, and Pagels' unadorned yet astute observation opens this Sethian text to greater lessons, whether historical or inspirational.

Although her legacy was cemented decades ago, Pagels, as she mentioned, will continue to reward both the scholarly and religious provinces with further insights on the wonders of a small yet labyrinthine faith that became history's dominant religion. Whether "Gnosticism" or "Gnostic" remain in culture's lexicon seems to be of little concern to her in the end. What matters are those countless, individual stars of the constellation called Christianity representing the assorted theologies the primordial followers of Jesus of Nazareth left behind for civilization's edification.

**MC:** We have the great pleasure of having Elaine Pagels. How are you doing today, Professor Pagels?

**EP:** Fine, thank you. How are you?

**MC:** I'm doing great. Thank you so much for taking your time and coming on.

**EP:** Oh, I'm happy to do that.

**MC:** Professor Pagels, you're considered, and rightly so, one of the pioneers of the so-called Gnostic studies, beginning with your ground-breaking book *The Gnostic Gospels*. How did you get into the study of heretical Christianity and what has been the most rewarding thing about it?

**EP:** Well, those are great questions. First of all, I didn't think of getting into the study of heretical Christianity—I thought of getting into the study of Christianity. I went to do that in graduate school, and I was absolutely astonished to find out that my professors had file cabinets full of gospels I'd never heard of. So I was looking for the earliest we could find about Jesus and what he really taught; and what I discovered at Harvard was that all these secret gospels had been discovered, and they're early—we don't know how early but certainly first, second, third century. And they were completely changing the field. It's like suddenly we could see the other side of the moon. So I found that very exciting, it made the study of the



beginning of Christianity a lot more dense, specific, complicated and interesting.

**MC:** When I talk to scholars they always say, well, it seems like we've only just begun every time they put out a book or write a paper.

**EP:** Well, personally that's true because when people study the beginning of Christianity they're really looking for the real thing—that's what I was looking for. So there are very strong presuppositions that we bring with us. You said "so-called Gnostic Christianity". That's a good qualification because what do we mean by that? What do we think that means? I was told when I first read, say, the *Gospel of Thomas* that it was a Gnostic text. The people who said that knew what they meant. They said, well, it's a Gnostic text, that means it's got to be dualistic, it's got to have philosophical speculation and weird mythology and a very dismal negative view of the world. And when people started to read it and they didn't find philosophical speculation or bizarre mythology or dismally negative views of the world, they said, well, that shows us that Gnostics are sneaky. They don't tell you what they mean. But they just read all of that into it. And if you read lots of articles, in fact you can read text books that are the most respected in the field, which I could name, but I'd better not, which say that you can't understand the Gospel of Thomas if you don't understand that it has weird

mythology and bizarre stuff that isn't in there, but you've got to know this before you can read it. I said to the person who wrote that, well, why don't you just read it? And he said, well it doesn't make any sense. And I said, well, what you're saying doesn't make any sense. So we have a very different understanding of that.

**MC:** So they're basically saying you have to have Gnosis before you understand the Gnostic gospels?

**EP:** Well, they're saying you have to understand the Gnostic myth. Now, that so-called Gnostic myth was, in a way, constructed by Hans Jonas out of his book *The Gnostic Religion*. It's a brilliant book. I'm sure you've read it. I read it. It inspired me. It was wonderful. But you don't always find that stuff in these texts. But people often find what they're looking for. So what exactly is "Gnostic" is a real open question. What do we mean by that?

**MC:** I'm sure that it must have been a meme that almost couldn't be stopped. Because the Nag Hammadi library is out there, and suddenly you're going, "Oh my God, this is the *Gospel of Truth* that Irenaeus quoted. This is the *Secret Book of John* that Irenaeus quoted. So therefore the whole thing is monolithic."

**EP:** Well, what that tells you is it's second century. In 2005 somebody called me out of the blue and said, "I have a text I'd like you to edit." "What's that?" I asked. He

said, "It's the *Gospel of Judas*." And I thought, "Hah, how does he know that there really was a *Gospel of Judas*?" Unless you read second-century weird texts like I do, you would never have a clue that there'd be a *Gospel of Judas*. In fact, I thought it might be Irenaeus' irony to talk about that, because we never saw anything close to it, until it was discovered in 2006. But what you know then is that this wasn't written in the eighteenth century, it was actually written early in the Christian movement.

**MC:** Right now there's a discussion on the relevance and expediency of the words "Gnostic" and "Gnosticism". You have the brilliant argument in the Williams/King paradigm that states they should be discarded. On the other hand you have people like Marvin Meyer or Birger Pearson that believe that these terms are still useful pointers. Where exactly do you stand on this, Professor Pagels?

**EP:** Well, I guess that's an interesting point, and it's not an easy one. I mostly tend to agree with Michael Williams and Karen King that the term isn't too useful because it brings with it associations that people then project onto whatever they're reading. So I guess I prefer to put the labels aside, and say, "What are we talking about?" Because in some cases, the *Gospel of Thomas* particularly, it doesn't have the characteristics Hans Jonas identified. It is, I think, a mystical text, and probably contains some very early sayings of Jesus.

**MC:** And, on a side note, what is your dating of the *Gospel of Thomas*?

**EP:** Well, Miguel, I just do a pretty conventional one. I was told initially that it was dated to 140—well, it's got to be heretical, so obviously it's a late text, a generation later than anything else we have. Then other people said, well, you know, maybe this is an early version of Jesus traditions. And my teacher, Helmut Koester, suggested it was written in the year 50, which puts it 20 years earlier than anything in the New Testament. But I think that's extreme. I think it's probably about 90 or 100. We have fragments of it that come from the early second century, as we do of the Gospel of John and Matthew. So I think it's probably early, but there's no reason to put it that early. They wanted to say, "this is the original teachings of Jesus," which is a tempting idea but you can't prove it.

**MC:** On the other hand you have also the writings of Paul that are circulating, and it seems that the Thomazine community had no idea about them.

**EP:** Yeah, well there's no evidence that they have any knowledge of Paul. That's an interesting point.

**MC:** So, would it be safe to say that under the Gnostic umbrella we can put the Valentinians, the Sethians and perhaps later on the Manichaeans?

**EP:** I would think so, I would think so, but I've come to

the conclusion that what we call Gnostic is a wide range of sources. In the collection that was found at Nag Hammadi you've got something like the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth, which is a Hermetic text. It's a meditation text, I'd say it's a mystical text. You have Allogenes, which is another meditation text. It's fascinating. It looks like it's influenced by Buddhism. So would you call that Gnostic? I don't know. It depends what you're calling Gnostic.*

**MC:** Maybe it's like John Turner says, Sethians who became very Neoplatonized and got away from Christianity. Like you say, it's very hard to pinpoint, except for the real hardcore ones, like the *Secret Book of John*.

**EP:** Yeah, I mean, do you have a definition of Gnostic? What definition do you use?

**MC:** Well, I think we touched upon some of them. Going back again to Hans Jonas, obviously you have the myth of the false God, but that could put you into Marcionism, the false world, the myth of Sophia, or a fallen divine principle, the divine seed that lies within that can be awoken by an intermediary, world hating—you did mention that one, but that one is of course debatable. Am I missing something?

**EP:** That's the list you would use?

**MC:** That would be close to a list I would use, yes.

**EP:** Mainly people have developed those kinds of

characteristics from, as you say, the *Apocryphon of John*. And it fits pretty well there. It doesn't fit a lot of other texts, and I just think that under that umbrella we have put a wide range of perspectives.

**MC:** But, let's say, Valentinus writing the *Gospel of Truth*, as Einar Thomassen says, not every time he sat down to write a gospel he was going to throw in all the cosmology and cosmogony and theogony.

**EP:** Yes, you see, that's because Einar Thomassen assumes that underneath the *Gospel of Truth* there is all that stuff. Maybe there is. Maybe Valentinus did have that kind of mythology, but if you read what we have from him, which is, as you know, very little, this beautiful little poem *Summer Harvest*. It's a beautiful poem, and I don't see any hint of that in there. Some people do, though. You can read it into it, but I don't know if Valentinus knew all that stuff. I love the Valentinian material. I work on those most because it has a view of the world that is like Princeton today, which is just perfectly glorious—the sun coming through the leaves, the most brilliant colors. As the *Gospel of Thomas* said, the kingdom of God is inside you and outside you. And here you can see the beauty of it. It just happens to be one of those fabulous days here. So the Valentinians have that vision of the world and the divine energy that pervades it that I find also in the Gospel of Thomas. And I do find that somewhat different from

the Sethian view.

**MC:** And another point that I might have missed is I would classify—and a lot of scholars would as well—would classify Gnosticism as dualist. Not in the Zoroastrian sense of two Gods opposing each other like with the Manichaeans or Cathars, but dualist in the sense of the separation of spirit and matter. Where do you stand on this?

**EP:** Well, that's interesting. That's an interesting point. I just find it really hard to generalize, because as I read the Gospel of John, it's the same kind of thing. I mean, the Gospel of John talks about the light shining in the darkness of the world, a world lost in sin and darkness, and the presence of God isn't visible in the world except when the Logos shines into it. Paul sometimes talks that way, too. So I think that certainly a strong distinction between spirit and flesh is present in a lot of Christian literature.

**MC:** Yeah, but of course, the Gospel of John and the Pauline letters were definitely something that the Valentinians were definitely very fond of.

**EP:** Yes, they were. They loved that stuff. There's no reason not to think, as I would guess, that Valentinus was taught by a student of Paul, and then he felt he was a kind of disciple of Paul. Not Thomas. As you say, that tradition

doesn't show any knowledge of Paul, but Valentinus seems to be aware of that tradition.

**MC:** And when somebody comes up to you, a student or another teacher, and says, "Well, Professor Pagels, does the pleroma or the All encompass matter and spirit? Or is the pleroma distinct from the kenoma?" Or is it like Ismo Dundenberg says, that's almost impossible to answer because in Valentinianism there's always different schools disagreeing with each other.

**EP:** Well, I think that he has a good point there. I would tend to think of the pleroma in the way that Origen talks about the divine fullness of being, as quite different from the material world. That's the usual understanding of it. I think Origen sees it that way too.

**MC:** What about the notion that Gnosticism or what we call the Gnostics, could have been a pre-Christian Gnosticism? Or do you see Gnosticism as definitely coming out of the Christian matrix?

**EP:** Good question. I thought that Edwin Yamauchi's book was really clear, that there's no evidence for pre-Christian Gnosticism. Before that, in the nineteenth century, people were treating it as having Persian or Zoroastrian or other influences—there's a lot of different cultural influences in there in that mix, but I don't see any evidence for what the fathers of the Christian churches called Gnosticism before



the second century. There were influences, sure, but in a way I think that develops out of their meditation on and reflection on the teachings of Jesus. That's what Ptolemy says. In the *Letter to Ptolemy* he says it's all about the words of the savior, also about Genesis.

**MC:** And, to be fair, in those days there was such a stew of ideas that it would be impossible to have any religion coming out of a vacuum.

**EP:** Absolutely. Especially a religion as complex and widely dispersed as the early Christian movement. You see the images of Horus and Isis in the mother and the child, you see the images of the Great Mother in the pictures of the Virgin Mary that comes out of Asia Minor, what is now Turkey. And of course a great deal of influence from the Jewish bible—that's the major influence. And Greek Gods and stories about virgin birth, and so forth. So it's a huge cultural synthesis, what we call Christianity anyway. And Gnosticism too.

**MC:** Yes, the evidence is still pretty sparse. No silver bullets or Rosetta stones yet.

**EP:** No, that's right. We might find some.

**MC:** Egypt will give us more presents, perhaps.

**EP:** And how did this fascinate you? How did you get so intrigued by this material?

**MC:** It was honestly one of those “don’t touch it” things. I went to a Catholic college, St. Thomas in Houston, and we were taught by Basilian priests; one of the speeches we got from the priests in every class, whether it was Old Testament or New Testament classes, had to do with the Gnostics, for about five minutes at the beginning of the semester. They’re heretics, you know. So of course, that made me interested, but then life went on and I remained a Catholic but kind of shopped around for religions. But the Gnostics always stayed in the back of my mind and your book *The Gnostic Gospels* was actually the first one I ever read and my response was “Wow!” like you; there’s so much to Christianity that we don’t know, this rich tradition that goes on almost forever.

**EP:** There is, and there’s a lot of dissidents that we never really knew about. A lot of arguments and discussions in the early Christian movement get completely wiped out in the history, and they become harmonised, and everybody’s happy and they all agree each other. But, for example, when you get the *Gospel of Judas* discovered, one of the things it’s opened up for me is what Tertullian writes in the second century—an African writer, from North Africa—and he says, well, some people think martyrdom isn’t a good thing. They think it’s cruel that God wants us to die. Jesus said, ‘If they pursue you in one town, flee to the next’. I mean, that’s in the gospel, so why should people die as martyrs if they can avoid it? And other people say, well,

Jesus died for your sins so that you wouldn't have to die. I mean, God doesn't want you to die. Tertullian says, no, martyrdom's good for you. It's like exercise. A good bracing martyrdom in the arena makes you strong. And besides, God loves it and nothing is more beautiful to God than the death of his saints. And you think, "What kind of God would find the death of his saints a beautiful thing?" So what you find out is, some people were saying, "No, it's not at all what God wants. It's completely wrong." And if it weren't for the *Gospel of Judas* and a couple of other writings from Nag Hammadi, you wouldn't have any evidence of texts that express a very different point of view on martyrdom.

**MC:** Yeah, the *Apocalypse of Peter* is another one that is very anti-martyrdom. Anti-many Christian sects, it seems.

**EP:** Exactly, and the *Testimony of Truth* is the same, and critical of the leaders and the bishops that are pushing people into martyrdom. So they did really knock out the dissidents pretty much, and burn their literature.

**MC:** In popular culture there's this romanticized vision of the Catholic Church hunting down Gnostics in the second and third centuries and destroying them. But we really don't have any evidence. It's more like they probably just faded away.

**EP:** Well nothing like that. In fact I assumed when I first

wrote that Irenaeus had said they were bad, and so they did just kind of fade away, but the fact is: where did we find these texts? We found them in Egypt in the fourth century—fourth century!—being read, we now think, in a monastery. So if they're being read in a monastery in the fourth century, they didn't fade away. People were reading this stuff intensely and with great interest, and they were only stamped out with huge difficulty by Athanasius at the end of the fourth century when he told them to get rid of these other books in his letter of 367. But Christians were reading this material intensely as devotional literature. We can now see that.

**MC:** Going back to the *Gospel of Judas*, Professor Pagels, where do you stand on the interpretation of *Judas*? We have April DeConick's *Thirteenth Apostle* that sees Judas as a sort of incarnation of the thirteenth aeon or stellar lord; and then you have the softer interpretation that sees Judas as a priestly hero, or as John Turner calls him, "a fool of fate." Where do you stand on Judas?

**EP:** Well, I think that April DeConick and John Turner's view that Judas is a completely benighted sort of devil figure is a huge exaggeration. The text is more complicated than that. What it suggests to me—and I've written about it, actually—is that Judas is the representative of the human race, which cannot be saved in its natural state, the state in which we're born as

children of Adam. Just as the Gospel of John says, you must be born again. If you're not born again, you just die. If you're spiritually born then you become a member of the heavenly race. It's just like any Christian baptism. So the *Gospel of Judas* pictures Judas both as a representative of you the disciple—okay, you're completely lost and hopeless. But if you're baptized you become a member of the heavenly race. But what you get is scholars saying, either he's the devil, which is hopeless and worthless and completely garbage, or he's the best disciple of all. How do you get such contrary views? It's because, I think, the *Gospel of Judas* is saying, before baptism, you, or any disciple, is hopeless and worthless, and bound to die and sinful. And after baptism you become a member of the divine race, and you become blessed. But it's their kind of baptism, and it's probably not the same.

**MC:** How the Sethians viewed baptism, and how the Sethians saw apostolic Christianity and the old Jewish temple culture?

**EP:** Yeah, exactly.

**MC:** Here's a question that I'm sure is very hard to answer. I've asked a few scholars without really getting an answer. We have the Valentinians and the Sethians. They seem to be very parallel, very similar. They have their differences. The Valentinians are more orthodox, they seem to be softer, whereas the Sethians are, you could

say, the bad boys of that movement. Do you see them as having a common ancestor? A common theological ancestor? Or do you see them as cross breeding at some point? Or do we have any evidence?

**EP:** Oh, that's an interesting question. I don't know. I kind of suspect that they're reading the same texts, you know. They're all reading the Hebrew Bible, they're reading Genesis. The Sethians may not even be dealing with Jesus in the same way, though. I just don't know. That's a good question.

**MC:** I've asked that question a lot. Maybe someone needs to write a book now. Do you see the Sethians as really like rebels who decided that they had had enough of the Jewish dispensation? Or as some scholars have said, they really saw themselves as elite or very kindly bodhisattvas who want to show people, no, this is a better way?

**EP:** Well, you know, I guess I'll leave that to the people who really work on those texts. I don't work on them very much, so I don't feel I'm the best person to speak about that.

**MC:** And, Professor Pagels, could you give us maybe two or three stances that you've either made a 180 degree turn on, or perhaps highly modified concerning the so-called Gnostics since you started your research on them?

**EP:** First of all, I just see a whole lot more variety in the

texts than we originally assumed. Second, I'm not sure that I'd call them Gnostic. I'm not sure that we know what that means except for meaning what I designed it as meaning as having to do with a conviction about the divine that is within, and I think that's consistent with a lot of these texts. So I guess I've really shifted on whether I think they're Gnostic in some definable sense. Whatever that means, it's gotten a lot more interesting and a lot more complicated.

**MC:** But you still hold that there's something called Gnosis as you write about that insight into yourself and into the divine?

**EP:** Yes, of course. And the view that the divine light is hidden within us and we can find it, we don't have to go through a church—that I think is common to these texts. I love that about them.

**MC:** It seems that the Gnostics could be pretty dogmatic and structured and sacramental, at least some of them. The evidence points to some of them.

**EP:** Some of them could. I'm not necessarily opposed to ritual and sacraments. I'm a viewer, but I don't think it's necessary. Actually, what Irenaeus says is some are using a lot of rituals, and others are saying it isn't necessary to do that. And I think those two points are consistent with each other, or could be.

**MC:** A lot of it is probably apocryphal, but some sources on the web say you were the source of saying that the Gnostics were more egalitarian or perhaps more feminist than other Christians. Do you still hold that view?

**EP:** Well, there's evidence that those groups that Irenaeus didn't like were a lot more inclusive to women than others.

**MC:** That's the reading of the church fathers?

**EP:** Yeah, of course, because they clamped down.

**MC:** The old question is how much you can trust the church fathers. Don't you have to put on a psychologist's hat to understand them?

**EP:** Well, you can probably understand anyone better with a psychologist's hat.

**MC:** That's very true! Lastly, do you see anything exciting on the horizon for Gnostic studies? Anything coming up the well?

**EP:** I'm having fun. I'm writing a book about the Book of Revelation and about Gnostic texts that are, if you like, books of revelation, and really wonderful ones—better than the one in the New Testament, I think.

**MC:** Well, we certainly look forward to it. You don't put books out very often, but when you do, wow, the ground shakes.



**EP:** Well, thank you so much. It takes about ten years.

**MC:** Wow! You're almost as bad as Tolkien!

**EP:** [Laughs] Yeah, well if I could end up like he did that would be great!

**MC:** You already have a legacy, Professor Pagels, so don't worry about it.

**EP:** Well, that's kind of you, thank you. I really enjoyed it, and I appreciate how knowledgeable you are.

**MC:** Thank you, and you have yourself a good day.

**EP:** Thank you, and you too.

# Karen King

Karen King is the author of *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (with Elaine Pagels), *The Secret Revelation of John*, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, *What Is Gnosticism?* and *Revelation of the Unknowable God*, as well as Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard University, Massachusetts.

As crucial as Karen King's labor has been on Gnostic studies, she is probably best known for her 2003 book, the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, which created and expanded interest in this text from both scholastic and religious circles. This is very remarkable, since the *Gospel of Mary* was discovered over a hundred years ago!

The interview spotlighted her research and insights on the *Gospel of Mary*, but naturally it had to overflow into other nascent Gnostic and Christian ideologies. No Judeo-Christian manuscript materialized or evolved untouched within the simmering stew of Middle East religiosity after the death of Christ.

King took a less black-and-white approach than the other guests when it came to Gnosticism and Christianity. In her book, *What Is Gnosticism?*, she even argues that the term "Gnosticism" itself has several flaws and perhaps should be discarded. As revealed in our interview, Christianity spread out like a puddle of fluid theological

speculation and never rose like a rock-solid institution, as tradition states. The Nag Hammadi library itself is a treatise on dozens of varied and often contradictory creeds. Even the *Gospel of Mary*, according to King, cannot be pigeonholed into any exact category other than "alternative Christianity."

King made a persuasive argument during our conversation, contrasting not only various apocryphal works, including the *Gospel of Judas*, but the cultural environments behind their conceptions. To wit, she made the case that Christianity began as a many-tentacled animal with no central command. Each tentacle claimed its authority from the teachings of some member of the inner circle of Jesus and settled eventually into communities across the Greco-Roman world. The communities wrote their canonical scriptures and assigned authorship to the evangelist who inspired them. They also manufactured their traditions, theologically crossbred with other communities, and often slandered one another throughout their development. There is a good possibility there was a Mary Magdalene cult that solidified and evanesced along with the other apostolic sectarians. In the end, despite popular culture's beliefs, King disagreed there was any sort of Gnostic pedigree in the Gospel of Mary.

Another observation of King, shared also by such professors like April DeConick, is that the Gnostics were never as volatile towards human sexuality and the cosmos

itself as is widely assumed by academia. Such groups as the Sethians, Valentinians and the Manichaeans (which King would simply refer to as "Christians") actually believed that it was harsh attachment to the material world and a casual attitude towards sex that was intrinsically sinful. These positions weren't much different from any flavor of early Christianity. In fact, as she pointed out, the doctrines of maturing Gnosticism and Orthodox Christianity actually overlapped more than they remained parallel.

Many scholars hold King's viewpoint, while others, like Marvin Meyer explained in our interview, see the two tradition as similar but ultimately vastly separate. This debate undoubtedly will continue as Nag Hammadi library exploration continues throughout future generations.

Regardless of her position, King exposed the deep stimulus Mary Magdalene and her following had on vernal Christianity, before any of the sensationalistic authors and grail hunters came to the public's consciousness. And unlike them, her contributions are timeless, accurate and penetrating.

Karen King was interviewed on February 9, 2008.

**MC:** How are you doing today, Professor King?

**KK:** Good, thank you.

**MC:** Wonderful, glad to hear that, so why don't we get started. Moving to the first topic, which is the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*. Can you give us a brief account of the history of the various findings of this gospel? It's the only extant gospel by a woman?

**KK:** We don't actually know, of course, that Mary wrote it, but it's the only gospel that we have that's in the name of a woman. The first copy that we know came on to the antiquities market in Cairo in 1896 in a papyrus codex, and that contains the largest copy that we have of the *Gospel of Mary*, even though there are several pages missing. In addition to that we found Greek fragments later in 1970. The Rylands Library purchased a very tiny piece of papyrus that they now call for Papyrus Oxyrhyncus—Oxyrhyncus is the place where it was found in Egypt in a garbage heap. And another fragment was found much later in 1983, also from this find in Oxyrhyncus, in the garbage dump. It's very interesting because the largest fragment that was found initially in 1896 is actually a translation from the Greek into the Coptic language, which is the last stage of Egyptian. The fragments that were found later are actually in Greek and earlier, dated from the second century

**MC:** And isn't it one of the misconceptions, because you always see it there in every publication, that the *Gospel of Mary* was in the Nag Hammadi library?

**KK:** That's right. I think part of the reason that it arose is that when there was published an entire English translation of the Nag Hammadi find, because of the similarity between the contents of the Berlin Codex, in which the *Gospel of Mary* is found, and the Nag Hammadi texts, they published the *Gospel of Mary* at the end and gave an English translation of it. Everyone has since then confused it and thought that it was part of the Nag Hammadi find which is, as you say, is not accurate.

**MC:** What is the basic plot of the *Gospel of Mary*, Professor King?

**KK:** The beginning, as you know, is lost. That's unfortunately part of the text that was marred, so we don't know how it begins. But when it opens, Jesus is in the middle of a dialog with his disciples, and they're asking him questions and he's giving them answers. From what we hear later in the text, it appears that this is a conversation he is having with the disciples after the resurrection. So we think of it as a post-resurrection dialog. After the disciples have asked these questions and been given the answers, Jesus disappears. He goes away and his disciples are weeping and afraid saying, "What will happen to us, look what happened to him?" And Mary

Magdalene seems to be the only one who's not upset. She steps forward and says, "We should turn our thoughts to the savior and do as he told us," so Peter then asks her, "Well, since the savior loves you more than other women, perhaps you could tell us what he said to you that we don't know." And she tells them about the discussion she had with him in which Jesus told her about the rise of the soul after death.

When she's finished, shockingly enough, the disciples object. Andrew says, "Look, I don't know about the rest of you, but these are really strange teachings, and I don't believe them." And then Peter comes and says, "Surely the savior wouldn't have spoken with a woman, and not us, and spoken privately with her". And Mary at this point is very upset and she's crying and she says, "Surely you're not accusing me of having lied, of having made all this up?" And Levi steps forward and says, "Peter, we've always known that you have been a hot head, and now we see you contending on the side of the adversaries. Surely the savior loved her and he must have talked of these things." And so at the end of the gospel they all go forth and preach the gospel. But of course we don't know what kind of gospel it is that these disciples would preach, whether they have really understood Jesus' teaching or not.

**MC:** And do you believe that the *Gospel of Mary* represents a schism between two sides of early



Christianity?

**KK:** I think that really overstates things. Clearly, what we see in Christianity from the earliest literature we have, which are the letters of Paul, is that there are controversies among Christians. If you look, for example, at the Letter to the Galatians, Peter and Paul are already having a conflict over the question about whether gentiles who accept Jesus need to be circumcised or not, and whether or not they need to observe the purity laws of the table. And should we call this a division, a schism between Peter and Paul? Well, of course, these are the two great founders of Christianity who are understood as part of the great movement. What we see in the *Gospel of Mary*, the question is, is the controversy there such that it requires us to see a schism there, a real deep divide and separation into two groups, or even into two different kinds of Christianity, or as some people would say two different religions. I think that's probably overstating it, because the issues that are at stake there in the Gospel of Mary have to do with, how do we understand the teachings of Jesus? Who really understood the teachings of Jesus? And who is able to go forth and preach the gospel? And is it possible for women to understand Jesus' teachings and to be leaders in the early Christian movement? Those were issues that were being debated throughout the first, the second, third, fourth centuries and perhaps, I would say, even onward to today.

**MC:** And I've always thought that it's a very curious line when Peter goes, "If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?" Was he talking about martyrdom, or why exactly did he say that?

**KK:** I think it shows one of the early characteristics of the *Gospel of Mary*, because in the Gospel of Mark 13, Jesus says, "You will stand before governors," and so forth, and "don't worry about what you will say." But the notion there is that the discipleship is the suffering discipleship, and those Christians who go out and preach the gospel are very likely to suffer for it, to be beaten, to be thrown in prison, to be killed; and the disciples are pointing this out and they're saying, "Look at what happened to him." So, yes, I do think that is exactly the issue here, but those who go out and preach the gospel are really putting their lives in danger, and the disciples are rightly distressed by this. As Christians in the second century when this gospel was written surely would have been.

**MC:** And another thing that I always thought was odd is the last thing we see of our heroine is her weeping. Why do you think that's the last thing we see of the main apostle?

**KK:** Yeah, that always bothers me. Sometimes I think that her grief as a kind of negative thing is kind of a misunderstanding. Peter has accused her of lying, and it shows, I suppose, her distress at the division amongst the

apostles because she has been, in some ways, the one who has been bringing them together and unifying them around the teachings of the savior, and she is being falsely accused of lying. Other than that, of course, the last we see of her in the Gospel of John is Mary weeping in the garden because they're taking Jesus. It doesn't end there, of course, because then the savior appears to her and she goes and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

**MC:** And another thing that has always been curious, and you see that in the Nag Hammadi library, is that a lot of these gospels don't call him Jesus, but call him the savior, and of course this falls into the mythicist case, that he was some kind of Joshua God or some other rising dying godman. Why do you think a lot of these scriptures refer to him as the savior?

**KK:** Well, we find a lot of difference in the terminology that's used to talk about Jesus. Sometimes he's called Jesus, Jesus Christ, sometimes the savior, sometimes the Lord, and I don't think it's necessarily tied to the distinction between seeing Jesus as human and seeing him as divine. In the *Gospel of Mary*, calling him the savior is a reference to the role that he plays, or to call him teacher or rabbi is the same thing again, to refer to the role he plays rather than calling him by name. We have to ask ourselves, what are the conventions of calling someone by name? We find, for example, in the *Gospel of Judas* that he's called Jesus,

and in other texts. So it's not as sharp a distinction as it might be made out to be. In other words, one needs to look at more than just how Jesus is addressed in order to understand what the text's attitude is towards christology, to understanding what Jesus was and why he was important. In reading the church fathers writing against the other Christians whom they consider to be heretics, who lots of people these days call Gnostics, in writing against these folks he says that they were docetics. They believed that Jesus only seemed to have a body. But if we look at the Nag Hammadi texts, for example, let's say the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, it talks about Jesus coming in the body, and truly suffering and truly dying. So the question is in some ways, yes, the question of who Jesus was, but the question of who Jesus was is the question of what it means to be human.

I think that is central to the debates that early Christians were having. To be human, does that mean that we are physical bodies and physical souls, as Tertullian would have it, that the soul was a wholly corporeal entity? Or is it the case that physical bodies are not our true selves and at death dissolve back into the rest of the universe? Is the soul or spirit the incorporeal spiritual entity that will ascend to live with God? And depending on how they answer that question, this is how they portrayed Jesus. If he was a soul in a body, then when he died his body was dead and it was Jesus as God, as the divine part, that

would live for ever, and so would human beings. So, if Jesus rose from the dead physically, so everybody will, or Christian believers at least will; and in some texts everybody will raise to eternal life, physically, both the good and evil. But many of these early Christians didn't think that. They thought that what would endure and live forever was the spiritual self, and therefore it was the spirit that needed to be attended to. So even in a text like the Letter of Peter to Philip, which argues that he came in a body, he truly died, he did that to show that the body is not the self, that the self that rises to be with God is the spiritual self, and it may be that is the position that the Gospel of Mary takes.

**MC:** Have you had the chance to read Robert Price's reconstruction of the *Gospel of Mary* in the *Pre-Nicene New Testament*?

**KK:** I actually haven't, so I'm sorry, I'm not able to address that point.

**MC:** Okay, he goes for it all, he basically took the idea and went for it. Well, perhaps another day I can ask you what your opinion is of it. Like Jane Schaberg, who likes to point out that she believes that there was a widespread bona-fide Maryan following in the first and second century. Do you agree with this?

**KK:** Well, I think Jane Schaberg's work is absolutely first

rate, and her book on the resurrection of Mary Magdalene is just superb. And she really is asking that question about the historical Mary Magdalene. It's one that I haven't really addressed much in my own work, but I think that the *Gospel of Mary* shows that there were some Christians who were following the gospel and took their apostolic authority from Mary. And that already is very interesting. Whether or not we can talk about a widespread Maryan following in the first and second centuries, I'm less clear about. But Mary is portrayed in many of these newly discovered texts as an important disciple of Jesus, and even as an apostle, sometimes the favored disciple, that is clear. Can we then say that some Christians were following her in her name? That's less clear to me. The second problem for me in this is: is this notion valid that Christians were picking a single disciple out to follow, so to speak, that there were Pauline and Petrine Christians, and so forth. I think we're in a period, especially in the first and even in the second century, where Christians didn't have the New Testament, they didn't have all these texts that we do, and it's difficult for us to know what they would have called themselves. We do have Paul saying, "I have the gospel," and he's saying that the gospel is from Jesus Christ. If there were people following specific disciples by the second century, we have very little evidence of that. What's fascinating here is that some people are calling upon Mary Magdalene as a kind of

apostolic authority for the teachings they have, that have been passed down, and I think that's very important.

**MC:** And like Professor Schaberg, you have no problem believing there was an historical Mary Magdalene?

**KK:** That's correct.

**MC:** And, moving on to the 800 pound gorilla, why don't you think that the *Gospel of Mary* is Gnostic in character?

**KK:** Well, see, the answer to that question depends how you define Gnostic. It's clear that the term Gnosticism, as such, with the -ism on the end was not invented until the 18th century. And it's a term that's used to cover a whole set of different kinds of early Christian beliefs and movements, and so forth, that were basically regarded in the early church as heretical. I think that the term is not helpful for us, because it basically is a way of just reiterating that certain of these texts, certain of these ideas, certain of these groups were wrong, and were the wrong Christians, and were not even Christians at all. When people argue that Gnosticism is a non-Christian religion, that may have taken over or gotten mixed up with Christianity, but it's fundamentally not Christian, it's that position that I oppose. Because I think that what we see in these early centuries is the formation of Christianity. Already in the first century we see Christians in conversation, in controversy with each other about very

basic kinds of issues. What do the teachings of Jesus mean? Who should be in charge? What should be the role of women and slaves? What does it mean to be saved, what is salvation? What is the nature of the body and sexuality, and so forth? All these kinds of issues that are quite frankly very much alive today were hotly debated in the early church.

In those centuries it wasn't clear who was going to come out on top, so to speak. What views—not one single view, what coalition of views—would become dominant, and which ones would be set aside? And so, I think that this term Gnosticism already makes it sound like that's been settled from the beginning. It doesn't let us feel the dynamic of the way in which an early Christianity was formed, and it introduces a foreign term into the debate by calling the *Gospel of Mary* Gnostic. So again it depends on what one means by that. I think that it's much more helpful to try to describe what the *Gospel of Mary* says, and to try to place that into that matrix of developing early Christianity than to call it Gnostic and preclude immediately it having anything to contribute either to the understanding of authentic Christianity in antiquity or to theological kinds of discussion today.

**MC:** But Marvin Meyer speaks of several sects that referred to themselves as the *gnōstikoi*. You don't have a problem with these sects falling under the Gnosticism umbrella



**KK:** Well, it's very interesting because in all of the Nag Hammadi literature we have all other texts that were written by these so-called Gnostics and they don't call themselves that. The word *gnōstikos* does not appear as a name for the group. They call themselves the true believers, they call themselves other kinds of things, but they don't call themselves Gnostics. That kind of language only comes from opponents who were writing against them, and Irenaeus, who is a church father writing in the second century, is the one who talks about the *gnōstikoi* in his work *Against Heresies*, and he mentioned them a couple of times. Interestingly enough, not all of the groups that contemporary scholars call Gnostic, but a very specific group, or a very specific set of ideas, and he contrasts them with the Valentinians. He said that Valentinus took his ideas from the *gnōstikoi*. So the Valentinians, for him, would be different from the sect of the *gnōstikoi*. Irenaeus also talks about those who call themselves Gnostics. That's the one reference we have. We don't have Gnostics calling themselves Gnostics, we have their opponents calling them that, and in this case just Irenaeus. Clement of Alexandria, who is also writing in this period, second and third century, talks about people who are calling themselves Gnostics. And then we have three non-Christian writers, Porphyry, Celsus and Prodikos, who are writing about people who profess to be Gnostics.

**MC:** Doesn't Plotinus reference them as well?

**KK:** There's a treatise that Porphyry writes called *Against the Gnostics*, and he talks about them up as being a member of the *haeresis*—a heresy, a sect—only in the book he wrote, the *Life of Plotinus*. But then, Clement of Alexandria calls himself a Gnostic, and talks about the Gnostics and the church, but he did not mean what contemporary scholars mean by it, he means himself and his group. So this larger question about who the Gnostics were in antiquity—did they call themselves that?—I agree with Bentley Layton that there may have been some of these early Christians who called themselves *gnōstikoi*, and then it may be possible to separate out who they are, and if so then they come very close to the group we call the Sethians. But again, it wouldn't be as big an umbrella term for all of these groups that are labelled Gnostics, and that's probably true with Plotinus as well. His ranting *Against the Gnostics*, people have argued that it looks like he's writing against the Sethians.

**MC:** And what about the Valentinians, would you call the Valentinians the next step to the Sethians?

**KK:** It's quite clear that Valentinus and some of his followers, they're Christians, and they have ideas in common with, let's say, the *Apocryphon of John*. They have the fall of Sophia, they have a distinction between the demiurge who created this world and the true god of Jesus, and so forth. So there's lots of important similarities

there but of course there's lots of important similarities between what Valentinus is teaching and the Gospel of John as well.

**MC:** So it's safe to throw Marcionites, Mandaeans and even Manichaeans out of the Gnostic world view and into their own denomination or religion?

**KK:** Well, I think what we need to do is, rather than talk about a Gnostic view, is to realize that there was a wide variety. Again, if we look through the Nag Hammadi texts, we do find a wide variety of world views, even if they are similar. But we also find that if we look at the New Testament, there's a lot of variety there. But I think to talk about the orthodox world view, the Gnostic world view makes it very difficult for us to see the differences within or among the orthodox groups, the people who are later called orthodox, the people we now call Gnostics, but also the similarity that you can find between and among these groups. So there are clearly relationships of early Christianity to the Mandaeans, to the Manichaeans, as well as a lot of similarities and differences within this whole huge mix of sects and literature that we call early Christianity.

**MC:** And do you agree with Walter Bauer that Clement's writings are evidence that the early catholic tradition was much closer to Gnosticism and that following that Tertullian and Irenaeus reflected a later reaction to

Gnosticism?

**KK:** This is a great example, because Walter Bauer was really able to note not just the differences but the similarities, and in doing so he could see many of the ways in which Clement actually agreed with a lot of the views that we find in these texts, and the views that someone like Irenaeus was opposing. I just published an article that will be out soon in a volume by Princeton that compares the *Apocryphon of John* with Irenaeus, and points out the enormous similarities between those points of view, and what the differences were.

Similarly someone is working right now on Tertullian's *Scorpiace* and the *Gospel of Judas*, and the way in which Tertullian is arguing so vehemently against Christians who question whether in the face of persecution, if you know someone's coming for you, should you flee? Does God want people to be martyred? Did God want Jesus to suffer and die? Does he want us to do that? And Tertullian's *Scorpiace* is arguing, well, some of these people are saying Jesus died so we didn't have to, he suffered to overcome this, truly this isn't what God wants, and this is the kind of position that the *Gospel of Judas* takes. It says, no, no, no, the God who wants all this suffering and dying and martyrdom is not that God, he's one of the fallen angels that God put in charge of the world. But if you back Tertullian and the *Gospel of Judas* up, they have a very similar rhetoric. Both of them are saying that if you don't

worship true God, then you are committing idolatry. They are both saying that Jesus had to die, they are both saying that Judas betrayed, they're both saying that Christians who come up against this will be put to death, they need to do it. But they differ again on this question, what kind of God is this? And both of them arguing that God is ultimately all powerful and in charge, and it is Satan or angels who were making life tough so to speak, who are pushing the powers behind these martyrdoms and so forth; but then they disagree over whether or not this is God's will, or whether God stands against this.

It's a very interesting set of similarities and differences. If you put them together, as different as they are when you read them, much of the rhetoric is very much in conversation with each other. It's actually quite fascinating, and I think we have missed this by just setting them in different camps and assuming differences without asking, well okay, where do they agree as well as differ. And without question, where do they agree as well as differ, that's where the really core issues were in these early controversies. Which of course will help us understand better what kind of Christianity we got.

**MC:** What do you think happened to the Gnostics and the other forms of alternative Christianity? That's also been hotly debated, whether they were exterminated, absorbed by the Roman Catholic Church or they simply faded away out of fashion.

**KK:** Well, there is another option, you know. To what degree have these ideas that are in these texts been retained in Christianity? And I think to a large degree a lot of it is still there. For example the emphasis on Jesus' teachings being salvific. The question of the goodness of God. There are a number of these ideas that are very, very important. The emphasis on the spiritual, and so forth. I think if we look at these texts, the ideas that got eliminated were the notion that God did not create the world, that God is not the creator. This is an idea that I think has been thoroughly eliminated from Christianity and simply doesn't have a place any more in Christian thinking. And, theoretically, also eliminated was the notion of physical resurrection. People argue, as you know, very strongly today for Jesus' resurrection in the flesh, but of course this also meant the resurrection of believers in the flesh, and the notion that Christians would live as souls or as spirits, and it was the soul that would live with God forever was a theoretical notion that I think many Christians today still hold. The question is twofold. We don't see any more of these kinds of texts, they seem to have been written and buried in the fourth and fifth centuries, they've been lost to us for all those years. But of course Mandaeism and Manichaeism survived for centuries, Mandaeism to the contemporary period up until today, although they are very, very much, as you know, at risk of dying out now. It's just unbelievable.

**MC:** Terrible.

**KK:** Just terrible. But many of these other ideas were at least partially appropriated and submerged in the Christian tradition.

**MC:** Professor, in a crowded field why did you decide to write *Reading Judas* with Dr Pagels?

**KK:** Ah, well of course the field wasn't crowded when we decided to write the book.

**MC:** At the time it was new. Now there's a book on Judas every time you turn your head.

**KK:** Exactly, now there's a lot of things out there, but we were having breakfast together actually here in Boston in Cambridge. Elaine was here for a lecture and we had gotten together for breakfast and that was on a Sunday morning. The previous Friday was when the *Gospel of Judas* had been released by National Geographic and I had gotten a copy and read not just what was online but also the book, the *Gospel of Judas*. So we were chatting about this and we said, well let's write a book. And so we thought, "Well, wouldn't that be fun because we've been friends for a long time, and wouldn't it be fun to write a book together." So we just decided that morning that we would do that and by the next day we have a contract, and they wanted the book immediately of course. So we spent most of that summer and the fall working on the Gospel of

Judas for writing this book. Because we thought that we have a different kind of opinion, new insights, new things to say about it.

**MC:** What are some of the new insights of different insights that you bring to this Sethian work?

**KK:** Well, I think first of all we were contesting reading it, assuming that the cosmology, that is to say, the view of God and creation is the same as the *Apocryphon of John*. I had just finished a book on the *Apocryphon of John* and even though the *Gospel of Judas* has many commonalities with other kinds of texts, with the name Barbelo and so on and so forth, it's also very different. The *Apocryphon of John* draws a very sharp line between the higher God and the lower God who creates the world, whereas the *Gospel of Judas* has much more a kind of apocalyptic cosmology in which God is the one who is ultimately responsible for creating the angels who are in charge of the world. And so there's a lot more continuity there, even though the angels who rule the world are basically the bad guys in the *Gospel of Judas*.

Another thing we got that was important to point out was the context of this text in terms of early Christian martyrdom. We were asking ourselves, where is all that heat from? The *Gospel of Judas* is so angry. Whoever wrote that text is accusing the Twelve of leading people astray and killing their own wives and children and sexual



immorality, and this is just over the top. It's not like just saying, "O Peter, Peter, what are you doing?" It's completely over the top. We were asking ourselves, where is the passion here coming from? And in looking at this, the *Gospel of Judas* comes out very strongly against idolatry—which is a strongly Christian stance which all texts take—but in particular against sacrifice. And this notion of leading Christians to the altar to be sacrificed, they are reading this in terms of the controversy in the second century exactly over this question about whether or not God is the one who wants Christians to be martyred, to be put to death. And it seemed to us that the Twelve were stand-ins for the bishops of the second century, the leaders of the church in the second century who would say, "Yes, God wants you to be martyrs, God wants this to happen, and this will save you, this will bring salvation." The Gospel of Judas is simply saying, it's screaming, saying, "No, no, this is not what God wants for us, you're worshipping a false God, you have fallen back into idolatry." And we felt that this was in some ways the central way to understand the teaching of the Gospel of Judas, and it hadn't been brought out at all of the National Geographic book.

**MC:** So basically, you're saying that the *Gospel of Judas* is anti-apostolic succession as well?

**KK:** Well, it is interesting, yes. Apostolic succession in the

sense of the Twelve for sure, and it depicts Judas of course as the disciple to follow, if you will, through the text. It's also I think very strongly... Jesus laughs at the disciples as they are praying over the Eucharist, and it also seems to be very anti-sacrifice, so we passed this is a text which seems to be opposed to understanding Jesus' death as sacrifice. Now, even though later Jesus says to Judas in the text, "You will sacrifice the one who bears me, the person, the man, the human who bears me." I think it's one of those questions that will be debated amongst scholars for a while to come, about exactly what that means and what is going on there.

**MC:** And, Professor King, have you had a chance to read April DeConick's *The Thirteenth Apostle*, which gives us a very different view on Judas?

**KK:** I've looked through some of it, and her argument I would say is maybe overly sharp in that it seems to her really clear that what is going on with the figure of Judas and the *Gospel of Judas*. I think that she's right, and that others have been right in saying that maybe Judas was portrayed in too positive a light by the first scholars who worked on the text. But I think it's going too far to demonize him also. In some ways a sharper kind of argument, a very excellent kind of academic argument that I've been trying to engage with is that of Louis Paschaux, who is writing in French, but he's taking a position

somewhat like April's. He wrote and published a piece in October of 2006, very early, arguing that the figure of Judas is actually much more of a negative figure in this text than had been portrayed in the National Geographic book; and I think certainly more than in the book that Elaine Pagels and I wrote as well. I think where we're going to come down on this in the end is much more to see Judas in the context of an apocalyptic kind of role, to see the apocalyptic elements in the *Gospel of Judas* as extremely important, and to see that he is in that sense a tool of bringing about the end times. And of course, it talks about the stars and so forth.

I think that the figure of Judas in this text may be somewhat more ambiguous, but I think he's still the one to follow. The Twelve are thoroughly condemned in this text. Judas is the one who at least understands in the beginning something of who Jesus is, and as we go through the text I think readers are in some ways asked to put themselves in the position of Judas, and it is through Judas that Jesus teaches the readers of the text, and teaches them the truth, the truth about the true God, the truth about the nature of the world, the truth about what it means to be human, the truth of salvation. And in the end I am one of those people who think that Judas misunderstands that. Throughout the text he makes a mistake, Jesus laughs at him, he sets him right, he corrects him, but by the end he looks up and he is able to

enter the cloud, and whether that is the sphere of the thirteenth aeon, or whether he takes it all the way to the very, very top is perhaps less clear because of the lacunae, because of holes in the text. But I still think that the portrait of Judas in the end is still a positive one. So that would make me disagree with April DeConick quite strongly, and would make me a good conversation partner, I think, for Professor Paschaux.

**MC:** And lastly, Professor King, since your studies began on Gnosticism and ancient Christianity, are there one or two topics on which you've made a radical 180 degree turn?

**KK:** Well, you know, I think one of the most surprising things to me was in my writing about the *Secret Revelation of John*, the *Apocryphon of John*. In the book, I had just assumed that text was very negative about sexuality, human sexuality and reproduction. And I kept coming up against this passage where Adam and Eve have sex and he issues a child in their proper likeness, and so forth, and it became clear to me that the text is not so much anti-sexuality, and anti-reproduction, as it is against sexuality when it is violent and when it is about desire and lower belief. So it sees the proper generation and reproduction on the model of the highest God's reproduction with the divine mother. The cosmology is complex, but basically it goes like this: there is a father, mother and son in the

highest defined sphere who are the true God, and that Adam, Eve and Seth in the lower world represent that appropriate family, if you will, or appropriate hierarchy and they are mirror of the divine God. And so Adam and Eve producing Seth is considered to be, if you will, good sex. And it's contrasted with the bad sex that the archons do when they rape Eve; and they produce children in their likeness, who are Cain and Abel, who kill each other, and so forth. So it's unfortunately a kind of sex that's without desire, and so that makes me less happy as a modern person, that the good sex is without desire. But it's very interesting, it took me a long time to come to see that.

And the other thing that I think that is pretty shocking to me is again that not all of these so called heretics are docetics. Some of them assert very strongly that Jesus came in the flesh, suffered and died, that he had a body that is really real. They will even tell the story of the crucifixion, but they tell it to make a different point. They tell it to make two kinds of points. One to say that, look, the rulers of this world are out to get people who are telling the truth and so if you go out there and you preach the gospel and you tell the truth, you will be opposed and you will suffer, and you simply have to do it anyway, because that's what you are called to do. And the second thing they say is, look, you know, they have lied to you in telling you that you should be concerned with the things of the body and the things of the world. You need to be

concerned first of all with the things of God and the things of the spirit, and the body will dissolve away, it's not who we really are. It's the spirit who you are. And I think that we have taken this very seriously as a kind of denial of the body and importance of the body, and I think it can be read that way.

But I think it can also be read as putting the focus on the spiritual life and using then the body as a way, not to be negative about the body. Because the *Apocryphon of John* will say that the body is not the problem, you can have this relationship to God even now in this world, living in the body, and so forth, but what you have to do is you have to turn away from the desires of the flesh and the body which leads you away from God, and turn towards God. And of course, that's just a fundamental message of spirituality. I was just very interested to see that these texts are not nearly as negative about the body as I had been led to believe by reading the church fathers. I am of course terribly, terribly happy with the positive role that women can sometimes play in these texts, particularly the *Gospel of Mary*

**MC:** I agree with you, and that's one of the reasons I like some of the ancient Christians. But Professor King, I think that's about all the time we have. I'd like to thank you for taking your time and giving us a wonderful interview.

# Jane Schaberg

Jane Schaberg is author of *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*, *Mary Magdalene Understood*, and *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the New Testament Infancy Narratives*, as well as Professor of Religious and Women's Studies at University of Detroit Mercy, Michigan.

Jane Schaberg is one of the leading experts on Mary Magdalene in all her manifestations—Christian, Gnostic, historical, mythical, artistic and cultural. As a feminist and scholar, she admitted in her encompassing book, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, that her interest in the apostle to the apostles wasn't merely scholarly but personal. Fully understanding Mary Magdalene meant a deeper understanding of the plight of women for the last 2000 years. And the book, as well as our interview, revealed an individual who recreated and walked the many paths of Mary Magdalene through history and imagination.

Our interview teetered between the Mary Magdalene of Gnosticism and the Mary Magdalene of orthodoxy, as well as how they overlapped. It also involved a wealth of apocrypha in between. With more assurance than Karen King in our respective interview, Schaberg explained that recent scholarship indicated a sizeable cult once surrounded the figure of Mary Magdalene. Moreover, it

also pointed to the real possibility women held leadership positions during early Christian days. Orthodoxy gradually deleted what the Gnostics and other Christian sectarians viewed as a prominent figure, perhaps even the preferred disciple of Jesus Christ. But in the end it failed because western culture never lost its fascination with Mary Magdalene.

Schaberg was quick to dismiss much of the vapid sensationalism concerning Mary Magdalene. Yet she always returned to the intimate companion of the Savior—the religious leader that was likely instrumental in creating a new religion and then was vilified because her visionary teachings were too egalitarian for the good of those who needed to be controlled.

It was apparent that uncovering the entire truth about Mary Magdalene was not only what any respected scholar would do, but as a feminist it also exorcised more than the seven demons that plagued Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Mark. It ultimately dispelled the patriarchal demons that have marginalized women's role in Christendom for so many centuries.

With the rising interest of Gnostic studies, Mary Magdalene has truly been resurrected in her original form to both academia and popular culture. And there is arguably no one better than Jane Schaberg to build a firm yet sensible bridge between the two sides.

Jane Schaberg was interviewed on September 1, 2007.



**MC:** You seem to have a strong affinity to Mary Magdalene. Why do you feel this connection?

**JS:** Well, what I do, I'm a New Testament scholar, I'm a feminist scholar, so one of the things we do, but not the only thing, is to look at some of the female figures in ancient history and ancient texts, and to see how those figures have influenced ancient images and stereotypes of women throughout the centuries, so that's the source of my interest in this figure.

**MC:** And you would say she's the most prominent one in ancient Christianity?

**JS:** No, I would say she's the second most prominent. The most prominent is the one that's the good girl, the Virgin Mary, and sometimes they're very much confused, so I did work on the good girl in a previous book called *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, which has just come out in a 20th anniversary edition. The subtitle is "A Feminist Interpretation of the New Testament Infancy Narratives." So it was kind of a natural progression to go from the study of that figure, also called Mary or Mariam, to this one.

**MC:** What is your stance on the historicity of Mary Magdalene. I know, for example, you quote Robert Price, and he has kind of vacillated back and forth. How do you see her? Do you see her as a historical figure?

**JS:** Yeah, I certainly see her as a historical figure. I don't think there's any reason to doubt the historicity. I think the reason that some scholars do doubt it is that we don't have any reference to her outside the material in the New Testament gospels and the apocryphal gospels. But I think that early on the witness of women, even in the New Testament period, began to be suppressed. So I don't think it's unusual that her name would not keep reoccurring.

**MC:** And the question I guess most people would have is why do you think Paul omitted her, not mention her at all as a witness of the resurrection of Christ?

**JS:** Yeah, it's in I Corinthians 15, but that's the real little nugget, what Paul learned in his early experience of this movement. You have to look at the variety of logical reasons why she and the other women were not named in that little nugget of information that he gleaned from the early Jerusalem church, apparently. So one would be—and this is popular with many scholars—that the empty tomb and the appearance to women are later tradition. Another would be that he was not taught it, because in the Jerusalem church it had already been suppressed or ignored, and a third possibility is that he himself suppressed it, because in Corinth he had difficulty with the level of women prophets in Corinth who are claiming authority. He put the lid on some of that. That's the way

we have to look at things: what are some logical reasons why something would or would not be present here? So I go with that third possibility, and there's been a lot of study recently on the role of women, the gender role of marriage and the leadership roles in the communities, the community in Corinth to which Paul is speaking. So, my argument is that it's very possible that the women who are claiming authority there are tracing their own authority back to other women in the Jesus movement.

**MC:** I might as well get this out of the way, because of course some people want to know: what is your stance on Jesus being married to Mary Magdalene? Or do you have a stance?

JS: Well, I don't think there's any evidence for a marriage between the two. There are erotic tones or undertones in John 20, there were echoes of the Song of Songs, the beloved, the garden, the searching for the loved one, and so forth, of love stronger than death, but we don't have any evidence of marriage and we also don't have it in the apocryphal texts. In some of them, Mary is called Jesus' *koinōnia*, which means companion or partner—it could mean lover. One of the problems, one of the reasons people are very interested in this question, is a sort of a subtle reason, that if Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers, it made Jesus more of a real guy, a heterosexual guy. Basically it's another way of downgrading her to the

role of Mrs. Jesus. And you can see that in the Da Vinci Code, where if you read that book carefully—it doesn't really deserve a careful reading—but if you do read it carefully, you'll see that what she is basically there is a vessel, that is, a womb.

**MC:** Instead of a leader, which is what she was.

**JS:** That's what I think, yes.

**MC:** And it was very normal back in the early Christian days to have these sister-wife couples, these celibate men and women walking around preaching.

**JS:** Well, we don't know enough about that at this point in time. There certainly were these couples in the post-resurrection, post-crucifixion period. Paul does talk about men being accompanied by their sisters, whatever that means, and wives, but there are also people who are choosing to be celibate, and that's causing the problem. So in terms of the internal workings of this movement with the historical Jesus at the center of it, it isn't clear what their sleeping arrangements were. So, enquiring minds want to know, and sometimes we just cannot know.

**MC:** What does Mary mean, and what does her last name mean, Magdalene?

**JS:** The name Mary is a common woman's name of the period. Its source from way back comes from the word "bitter." It's like our names today, we don't remember the

etymology of it. I forget the percentage of people who are named Mary in this first century period. It's very, very high. And for males Yohannan or John is very high also. So it's a common name, and there are many Marys in the New Testament, and that's part of the reason her story becomes confused and develops into a legend that's combined with a lot of other figures. The word Magdalene I think comes from the town of Magdala on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, and I just read on the Internet today on the *Biblical Archaeological Review* site that there will be excavations, they will be continuing. They stopped since the 1970s, but it's going to be started up again on that site on the western side of the Sea of Galilee.

**MC:** Wow, that's great. And there was a tower?

**JS:** Yes, the word Magdala also means tower, and there was a tower there, but I know that Spong thinks it's a nickname for her, Mary the Tower, rather than Mary of Magdal. I don't think he has to make those kinds of distinctions.

**MC:** And there was for sure a town called Magdalene back in those times? Some people say, like Nazareth, it didn't exist. It was only a later addition.

**JS:** Well, there was a site there for sure, yes.

**MC:** She seems to be given quite a prominence in the canonical gospels. Do you think it's accidental, they were

trying to repress it and it just kind of filtered through, or was it intentional?

**JS:** In the canonical gospels you only have one mention in Luke 8 of named and unnamed women who were travelling with Jesus. But in the other gospels the women appear at the first time at the cross, so they are witnesses to the death and the burial and the empty tomb. So they're very, very essential to the story, but they only come in, in the three gospels, they come in at the end of the story. But they are said at that point to have been, at least in Matthew and Mark, with Jesus from Galilee. You can say they are suppressed if you want. There's no core narrative stories that involve them. There must have been historical events that they were a part of, in order to be loyal at the end, but we don't have that information. We don't have those traditions.

**MC:** And what is your take on the scene in John, which you said was almost erotic, in which Mary Magdalene can't touch Jesus. How do you decipher that scene?

**JS:** Well, the scene in John 20 is the scene where Mary Magdalene, either alone or with somebody else, comes to the tomb, finds it empty, is confused, asks for help, eventually encounters the living Jesus, but doesn't recognize him, which is a common theme indicating that he's changed. She recognizes him when he speaks her name, and then she says *rabboni*, which means "little

teacher," or "beloved teacher." The erotic element has to do with not finding him, searching for him, and so forth, in sight of the garden, which recalls the Song of Solomon. I am more interested in the idea, which I think is very strange. He says, "I am ascending, go and tell my brothers and sisters that I am ascending," which is odd, so it puts him in a kind of interim between death and final glorification, or whatever. So that, to me, echoes the II Kings story where Elisha the disciple of Elijah is trying to follow him, trying to, in a way, hold him back, but then he witnesses his ascent, and in the Elijah story Elisha receives a double portion of his spirit, his prophetic spirit. So I think that last part is left out in John 20. Reading that indicates that Mary Magdalene would be a successor of Jesus, and she is the witness of his ascent.

**MC:** I certainly like that.

**JS:** Yeah, it's a different reading.

**MC:** Yeah, well I'm a big fan of Mary Magdalene. I'm a Gnostic, after all.

**JS:** Do you know this Gnostic thing out in Palo Alto? It's a Gnostic sanctuary run by Rosamonde Miller, and if you go online and look up "gnostic sanctuary," it's in the Palo Alto area, and she runs a church up there, a Gnostic church. It's very, very interesting. Worth the trip.

**MC:** Oh, yes, I've heard of it, yes.

**JS:** It used to be over a doughnut shop. But now she's built an actual sanctuary.

**MC:** That's certainly always good to hear. I'm a big fan of Mary Magdalene, and everything Magdalene. What you think of Margaret Starbird, one of her big fights is to say that Mary Magdalene is Mary of Bethany. What do you think, Jane?

**JS:** Well, Margaret Starbird is I think a novelist, and using her imagination to do the kind of thing that legend-making does, which is to fill in the gaps and to fill in things here and there. I don't see that identification as reliable, historically speaking. The methodology that we use in New Testament criticism is a historical criticism, not the same thing that people try to use when they're creating a novel.

**MC:** But didn't some of the church fathers believe that, early on, and then it changed?

**JS:** Well, the legend is a slow snowball thing, it snowballs through the centuries, basically connecting not so much with Mary of Bethany, but with the woman of the city who is a sinner in Luke 7, and read by many people as meaning a prostitute. Then the woman in John 8, or wherever it is, the woman caught in adultery. So you get this whore legend of Mary Magdalene that just grows and grows and grows and, yes, the fathers of the church contributed to it, and it just grows and grows and grows, and makes good



literature in a way, a good story. And some people mourn the fact that historical research is deconstructing that.

**MC:** Yeah, I remember my first taste of Mary Magdalene was watching *Jesus of Nazareth* as a child and seeing Anne Bancroft. I thought, "She's a whore! She's a whore!"

**JS:** Yes, but I think Anne Bancroft's portrayal of Mary Magdalene is really quite good. Forget the whore business, but they got an angry woman to play that figure, and I love the part at the end when she bangs out of the room and lets the door slam behind her.

**MC:** And what is your take on the beloved disciple, there are all these rumors going on that the beloved disciple might have been Mary. What you think?

**JS:** When you ask a question like that, you're asking about the different levels of transmission. If you're asking about the level of what the final editor of the Gospel of John thought of this figure, if a figure presented as male is also presented in the same scenes as Mary Magdalene, the answer there would be no. If in some previous level of transmission there was a person called the beloved disciple who was important in that Johannine community, which was very different to other early Christian Communities, then that may have been a female figure that was modified into a male figure. That's a possibility. That's the other thing about the beloved disciple is that it seems almost to

be like a symbolic figure. It's very strange, it's both concrete and symbolic, and in some ways it's said to be the guarantee for the witness that's being provided in the Gospel of John.

**MC:** And you mention in your book that probably no biblical figure has had such a bizarre and vivid post-biblical life in the human imagination, in legend and art. Why do you think this has been the case, Jane?

**JS:** Well, because it's sexy, particularly.

**MC:** Sex sells.

**JS:** Yeah, sex sells. I mean, if you go to the arts museum, you're going to find a lot of Magdalenes weeping and kissing the feet of Jesus with their hair down and all of that, and you'll see what Susan Haskins, the art historian, calls pious pornography. The half-naked Magdalenes repenting their past, and all of that. So, it's bizarre, also the idea was that if she could be saved, anybody could be, so she's like the worst of the worst. In the legends, she never quite escapes her whorish past. But now, we're finding with the publication of the *Gospel of Judas* by National Geographic and other translations, well Judas has always been an important figure in the movies and the legends, not at the level of Mary Magdalene, but now we're saying that the early Christians were trying to figure out the kind of questions that people still ask—how could

someone who was in the movement betray him, what does the betrayal mean, and was it betrayal, what could his motives be?

**MC:** Doesn't the image of Mary Magdalene change with the sexual fears of each era?

**JS:** Yes, absolutely. In the 19th century and 18th century, it's very interesting, people wanted to pose their mistresses and wives as Mary Magdalene in paintings and photography. Don't ask me why, I have no idea why!

**MC:** Sexual therapy, let's not get into that.

**JS:** In many paintings, she is dressed in different centuries in the costume of a prostitute which would be recognisable. But actually in the movies too. Hal Hartley has a Jesus movie, *The Book of Life*, and he has Mary Magdalene's figure with the tall vinyl boots, and I think she's chewing gum and stuff. You know, century by century we get that.

**MC:** What is your favorite Mary Magdalene in the movies?

**JS:** My favorite is Denys Arcand's Mary Magdalene figure in *Jesus of Montreal*, who is still kind of operating with this whorish past, but he has a very Magdalene figure. It's a two level film, it's a cast of passion play performers in 20th century Montreal. They perform the passion play and then the figure that represents Jesus dies accidentally, and the powers that be, the advertising and radio and so forth,

want to commercialize on that, and the Mary Magdalene figure there just says, excuse me, and then just walks away from the movement, and then looks over the city of Montreal with her back to the audience. That's my favorite.

**MC:** And were you surprised that Mel Gibson decided to completely eschew the whore part of Mary Magdalene?

**JS:** He didn't.

**MC:** Oh, he didn't?

**JS:** No.

**MC:** Ah, I must have missed it with all the gore.

**JS:** Right, the gore does overwhelm, sure, but look again, because the first time you see her, you see those earrings dangling, and she's crawling along in the John 8 scene, where she's about to be stoned for adultery.

**MC:** I must have missed that.

**JS:** Yeah, go back and look again. I had to watch it two times, because I did an article in a book called *Mel Gibson's Bible*, and I did the article on Mary Magdalene there. It's very interesting because I don't know if she has any lines. She just covers her face, she just looks away and screams, and she is overpowered by the mother of the Jesus figure.

**MC:** And what are some of the more outrageous legends

about Mary Magdalene that you've heard? I think you mention where the wedding at Cana was actually between John and Mary Magdalene and Jesus comes and breaks it up.

**JS:** Right, that's one in there, he breaks it up and therefore she has to be a whore, because she's so disappointed. The two I like the most, if you can be said to like these things: one is set in southern France. She spends the last 30 years of her life up in the mountains, in repentance, with no food, and she's fed by ravens, so that's a pretty good one. And then the other one is a sweeter one, it's from the Camargue region in southern France, where she's linked with the other Marys, and they come through the sky to help people who are in need. The legend behind that is that Mary Magdalene and some other New Testament and post-New Testament figures escape from Jerusalem in a boat and they come to southern France. And that's all associated with her preaching powers, more than the whoring.

**MC:** What about the outrageous one when Jesus pulls out a woman from his own rib and has sex with her in front of Mary Magdalene?

**JS:** Oh yeah, well that's a good one! I'm trying to remember. I think that's in Epiphanius. It's very bizarre. It's certainly re-enacting something from Genesis. A lot of those things that we get in the church fathers are just like

little snippets, and we don't get the full meaning of whatever that kind of thing is. Doesn't he also talk about eating semen?

**MC:** I've been trying to get my mind around it.

**JS:** A lot of times the so called fathers of the church would accuse their enemies of all kinds of strange activities like eating semen, eating menstrual blood, sacrificing children, free ranging sex, that kind of thing. So that's probably connected with some kind of thing that we don't have a hold of it, because the fathers would just take out the snippets. That's what makes the discovery of the apocryphal material and how so important. Because now, for the first time we can hear these other voices themselves, not just being quoted by their enemies, the fathers of the church.

**MC:** And Epiphanius was accusing this of being a Gnostic tale?

**JS:** Yeah, that's my memory of it. A lot of this stuff, like Mary Magdalene laughing at the Eucharist, it's very hard to make sense of the little snippets that we get. Who knows, we might get the full thing with those little snippets in it later on, and then see that some of those snippets were inaccurate.

**MC:** What are the characteristics of the Gnostic Mary Magdalene, how is she different from the canonical Mary

Magdalene?

**JS:** Well, one of the things that we have to increasingly be aware of is that scholars of these apocryphal books are telling us not to use the word "Gnostic" too loosely, because we are seeing now that these are individual works. It's like, don't harmonise the canonical gospels, don't make them into one story, because they each have a voice of their own. The same thing with these more recently discovered works. If we give them the umbrella term Gnostic, then we assume that they have all this mythological stuff as a part of their picture. But if we look at them individually, for example, the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* does not have any of that. Karen King does not think that the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* is Gnostic. It doesn't have this bizarre, very, very elaborate mythological system. It's very, very different, and some of the others are that way too. But in general, what I did in my book was to look at the fact that the Mary Magdalene who appears in the non canonical texts, the apocryphal texts, basically she's prominent in the post-resurrection period. So, a lot of the apocryphal texts, they don't really deal with the lifetime of Jesus, they deal with afterwards, and they deal with the secret teachings, or non-secret teachings, that were given to certain people afterwards, in the post-resurrection period. So in great part some of them are mystical texts.

The first point is that she's prominent, but she's

prominent in texts that are still male-centered, so there is a tension there. She speaks very boldly. In the New Testament, in the canonical texts, she hardly speaks at all. In John 20 she says, "They've taken the body of my lord, and I don't know where they've laid him," and she says, "if you've taken the body, tell me, and I'll go and get him," and then she goes back and she speaks to the others and says, "I've seen the lord." But in the noncanonical texts she's a real leader. She's jumping up to ask questions, she's a very, very bold speaker. She's a visionary, and they talk about her mystical understanding. In the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* she recounts a vision which she has of Jesus, which has to do with the ascent of the soul. She is praised by Jesus and others for having found superior understanding—this is the one who understands. And she's called in several texts his intimate companion, *koinonia*.

**MC:** Isn't she called the woman who knew the all in one of the texts?

**JS:** The woman who knew the all. The one who understood completely. She's also opposed by the male disciples. Often it's Peter, sometimes it's others, sometimes it's all of them. She leaves them, but she's opposed by them, and she's defended, usually by Jesus, but in the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* also by others. None of that is the case in the canonical gospels. It was very surprising



when people started to put together the aspects of the apocryphal Mary Magdalene. Each text does not have all of those traits. All of the texts that I dealt with—and there are 13 of them—have at least five of those traits that I just mentioned. So it's only the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* that has all nine traits. The other thing that's different is that she is not merged with other women in legend. She's not a whore, that never develops in the apocryphal material. She's attacked for being a woman, but not for loose sexuality or anything like that.

**MC:** Yes, you don't go into the *Pistis Sophia*, but in that one she's given a lot of prominence, isn't she?

**JS:** Yes.

**MC:** And could you name some of the other texts in which Mary appears?

**JS:** Well, the *Gospel of Philip* is a very important one. You can get those now in the *Nag Hammadi Library*, which has gone into several editions. You can get it, I believe, in a book from the Polebridge Press called, I believe, the *Complete Gospels*. Now it's not complete because the *Gospel of Judas* came out afterwards. So we should never use "complete" in our titles now.

**MC:** Yes, you never know what Egypt's going to throw up out of the sands.

**JS:** You never know what we're going to find in

somebody's library. Perhaps in Russia, Ethiopia.

**MC:** So you're basically believe that there was a wide Mary cult in the first and second centuries, or am I reading too much into it?

**JS:** I don't know if I would use the word "cult". There's women's leadership in the first and second century. Then some women in those centuries probably did look to this figure of Mary Magdalene as a precedent. But the cult comes later, when you get the cult of the bones and the cult of the skull. I don't know what cult means anyway. What you see in the Gospel of Philip and some of the other apocryphal things, that this woman understood the all, this woman understood perfectly, but she's not a cult figure in a way, because she's embedded with the others, and they've turned to her for explanations, and she's given praise, but cult? I don't know about cult.

**MC:** Another gospel that we missed, and that most people miss, because it's not either Gnostic nor in the Nag Hammadi library, is the *Acts of Philip*. Isn't that one that she had a big prominence in?

**JS:** Yeah, she has prominence in the *Acts of Philip*, and Bovon from Harvard has worked on that text. That's later and, yes, she's very prominent. She has a role in deciding who goes where, more than a secretary, directing missionary movement and stuff.

**MC:** Isn't that where she cross dresses as well?

**JS:** Yes, the cross dressing is not only in that text, it's in other texts like the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. For one thing it would make travel possible for a woman who's unaccompanied.

**MC:** What other instances of egalitarianism do we see in the first century outside of Mary. Do we see anything?

**JS:** Well, the fact that there were women in the so called Jesus movement, or the kingdom of God movement—that focuses more on the kingdom of God, not so much Jesus, that comes later. From the fact that there are women and men traveling together, the fact that some of the women were witnesses of the execution and stayed loyal. And some of the teachings. We have no negative teachings about women from Jesus. But on the other hand we have no explicit teachings of Jesus against sexism, for egalitarianism. So it's not egalitarian in the 21st century meaning of the term, but I think what we've got is something that brings out a more egalitarian form of Judaism than we're used to imagining. Now we have scholars working on things like, were there women in the Pharisee movement? Were there women Essenes down in Qumran? Some people say yes. So it's like women's history in every period, we have to dig for it, you have to look carefully, you have to be trained to look at the traces. And it's similar to African American history, or any history

of a suppressed group.

**MC:** Josephus wrote that the Theraputae had women in their ranks didn't he?

**JS:** Yes, and they're very interesting. Joan Taylor has a really good article on those, and it's important, because they use the imagery of the priesthood and the temple, and so forth, so they felt quite free to do that, yeah, and who knows however many groups like that existed?

**MC:** And what do you think Paul's views are? I've heard it said that, beyond the pseudo-Pauline letters, some of his comments on women are interpolations, because they contradict him talking about how women should prophecy and so forth. What's your view on Paul?

**JS:** Yeah, well the text you're talking about is I Corinthians 14. Well, you get these logical problems. I think it's an interpolation. The view that supports that is that it's very much like the view of the deuteropaulines at the turn of the century. "You will permit no woman to speak," and so forth. Or, it's just about married women, because they're supposed to ask their men at home, if women don't understand and have questions in the assembly. If that view is correct, it would mean that unmarried women were free to speak in the assembly, so there's a question mark there. Paul in I Corinthians 7, it's a very amazing chapter, about a balanced marriage, that the husband dedicates his

body and his life to his wife, and vice versa. But then he's got, I think it's I Corinthians 11, he's got this really very funny chapter about women are prophesying in church without veils on their head. The veils apparently represent ordination. So, he gives about 15 reasons, and you can see him sweating through all these illogical reasons, and finally he just says, it's what we do. We do it because we do it. Put them back on. Yeah, he's a very fascinating person. His life is really devoted to the idea that Jews and gentiles can come together in a community, and so he focused on that rather than on gender issues or on the slavery issue. But all three of them are in the baptismal formula in Galatians 3, but nobody succeeded in those early centuries in creating a community based on that baptismal formula.

**MC:** Well, I think that's about it Jane.

# Marvin Meyer

Professor Marvin Meyer is the author of *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, *The Gospels of Mary, Judas: The Definitive Collection of Gospels and Legends About the Infamous Apostle of Jesus* and several other books. Meyer is also the editor of *The Nag Hammadi Scripture* and co-editor of *The Gnostic Bible*, one of the original translators of the *Gospel of Judas*, as well as Griset Professor of Bible and Christian Studies and Co-Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, Chapman University, California.

There can be no dispute that Marvin Meyer's scholarly contributions are essential to any understanding of Gnosticism today (and that doesn't include his galvanic research on Christian magic, Mithraism, and other subjects). For over thirty years, Meyer has been at the forefront of quarrying the Gnostic texts and burnishing their rich minerals for the general public. He has accomplished this as a dexterous translator, editor and author. Whether in a scholarly or spiritual context, one will always run into the Gnostic Philosopher's Stone and Rosetta Stone provided by Meyer. He is one of those rare individuals who has already left an invaluable legacy on the field of Gnosticism and early Christianity.

Marvin's greatest fame perhaps came from being a main force in the National Geographic project that acquired and

translated the *Gospel of Judas*, the focus of our interview not too long after it was released to the public in 2006. Obviously, we had to quest into the edgy theology of its originators, the enigmatic Sethians. Meyer left no stone unturned concerning the very harrowing process of procuring and bringing to the world the *Gospel of Judas*. As a welcome blessing in all interviews, there were rewarding detours into other branches of Gnosticism, Christianity and Judaism. Meyer even took some risks, which have usually paid out for him throughout his career, including proposing that Sethianism was influenced by the Pythagoras cult, germinal Kabbalah and other esoteric pre-Christian ideologies (notions rarely heard in "respectable" scholarly circles these days).

Meyer, like most scholars when the *Gospel of Judas* was first released, assumed that Judas Iscariot had in a sense finally been vindicated. Beyond speculative legends, Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and even the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, it seemed the thirst of the public for a tragic-hero Judas was finally quenched. Ancient Christianity finally offered proof in the form of the Gnostic Judas that indeed the heavenly plan of the savior *was* heavenly and without unnecessary victims (although the Church Father, Irenaeus, had written about a *Gospel of Judas* exalting Iscariot, his words have always been taken with a grain of salt and no thirty pieces). Judas was not only a champion for divine providence, but an individual

endowed with Gnosis. He was also promised redemption in the annals of history and eternity itself, as a literal star.

This view of Judas Iscariot would be quickly countered by the also brilliant and maverick April DeConick, whom I would interview soon after Meyer. Presently, the debate continues in academic circles on the exact nature of the Gnostic Judas (holy high priest or demonic godman?).

Beyond his acumen and scalpel insights, what struck me most about Meyer was his blazing enthusiasm. I felt I wasn't talking to a man who had spent three decades arduously fathoming the Gnostic ethos and bleeding over Greek and Coptic translations; but more like a person who had just discovered his calling in life and was ready to begin an adventure he knew was everything he had ever wanted to do. Meyer was lively and extremely excited during the interview; and this after already making the rounds with dozens of major print publications and television stations around the globe. Meyer struck me as a person who wasn't interested in fame or a legacy but rising everyday and doing what he most loved to do—bring alive the ancient heretics for the benefit of his curiosity and the benefit of humanity as well.

The ancient Gnostics and Judas himself couldn't have found a better friend in Marvin Meyer, and those of us who are passionate about Gnosticism are much richer because of this.

Marvin Meyer was interviewed on February 25, 2007.



**MC:** Marvin, could you give us a brief history of how the *Gospel of Judas* was recovered, and your involvement in it?

**MM:** Well, to make that a brief history is somewhat difficult. It's an incredible story. The text was apparently discovered in middle Egypt in the 1970s by a person from that area, around El Minya, who was poking around. He was in a cave and he found a burial in a cave and in conjunction with that some old books or codices and then thereafter the texts were shown around a little bit. They made their way to Europe in a kind of surreptitious fashion, finally coming to the United States where they were housed in a safe deposit box for quite a while on Long Island. Then they were purchased or newly purchased by somebody in the Midwest, who thought he would put them in deep freeze, and through all of this time there was more and more damage that was done to these texts until the very early part of this century when finally the texts were made available.

The various texts, including the *Gospel of Judas*, were made available to Kasser and to others of us to translate and to make these texts a part of what the public in general could look at. And so the end result is a good one that finally the *Gospel of Judas* and the other texts in the collection will be a part of our lives and we can look at them and we can read these texts and so forth; but

unfortunately along the line there was a fair amount of damage done to this fragile ancient papyrus, and so we've lost something too. We've lost phrases, there are holes in the texts, lacunae and so on, but nonetheless with the *Gospel of Judas* we were able to recover most of what is there and get a pretty good sense of this remarkable and dramatic text.

**MC:** And now that the dust is settled for about a year, what new insights have been found on the examination of the *Gospel of Judas*? For example, I talked to John Turner the other day and he told me that he found out that Judas wasn't really exposed as someone who chose to betray Jesus, but Jesus just told him that he was a fool for the stars. Is he correct, and what insights do we have?

**MM:** Yes, well, you know, there is a lot of work to be done on the *Gospel of Judas* yet. What we were able to do is—the three of us who were commissioned by the Maecenas Foundation and the National Geographic Society, that is Rodolphe Kasser from Switzerland, Gregor Wurst from Germany and myself—we were able to work on this text and come out with a provisional translation, make that available along with a provisional Coptic text on the Internet. We put out a popular book that has been before the public now, and before scholars, for a while. Very soon we will have a critical edition, which has photographs, the Coptic text, an up-to-date translation of the Gospel of

Judas, and the other texts in this particular book or codex. But already there has been a lot of discussion. Various people that are scholars, students, lay people, clergy, folks in and out of the church have been weighing in on these texts, and what is very interesting now is that scholars can all begin to look at this. We've tried to distribute prior to the publication of the critical edition copies of the Coptic texts, transcriptions of the Gospel of Judas and the other texts, so that we all can look at this together. And now what becomes very exciting is the usual sort of scholarly debate and discussion. That is: now, how do we interpret this, how do we understand this, how about the gaps in the texts, can we fill more of those? How about the reading of the Coptic that has been presented, are there any alternative possibilities for some of the ink traces that remain? And so various scholars are weighing in.

We had a conference a few months ago in Paris at the Sorbonne and a number of us, maybe 25 to 30 scholars, came to the conference, maybe a few more than that. We gave papers and had discussions and had a lot of wine together and some good French food and talked and talked about Judas and our interpretations of Judas. So we are at that particular point right now, that very exciting point of being able to talk about how to interpret this and how to understand this, and through all of this there are some—what shall I call them?—revisionist interpretations coming out.

I believe that the overall message of the *Gospel of Judas* is that the one disciple according to the *Gospel of Judas* who got it right, who had the right conception of who Jesus is, who was privy to the wisdom of Jesus, who heard the mysteries as they were unpacked by Jesus about the cosmos and the world above and this world. The one disciple who was a part of all of this was in fact Judas Iscariot. But there are some key gaps in the text and there are different ways of understanding some of the rather obscure phrases so there are some other interpretations that maybe suggest, well maybe he won't such a positive figure after all. John Turner and April DeConick, among other people, have suggested that maybe we should look at some of these other possibilities for interpreting some of the passages; and so it's that wonderful and that very exciting time that we're caught up in now of having some great debate around us and having various people weigh in on what exactly the Gospel of Judas means to communicate.

**MC:** But I think the one thing that probably is not for debate is that the *Gospel of Judas* is most definitely a Sethian work.

**MM:** Well, I think that's pretty clear. Now, John Turner is a scholar of Sethian thought, and John is holding back a little bit on that. The last I talked to him, which was in Washington not too long ago, he said at that time that,

"Well it looks as if there are some Sethian elements in it." To be honest, everything that you would ever expect in an early Sethian text is found in this text. Barbelo is here, the Great Invisible Spirit is here, Adamas, Seth, all the folks are here. But the characteristics of this particular text would suggest, even as does the date which is the most probable date—namely mid second century or so—the characteristics would all suggest and point to this as an early Sethian text that may say something about the relationship between Jewish Sethian thought and Christian Sethian thought, the development of Sethian ideas—including ideas about Sophia, Wisdom, and what her fall might have and was it so important for all of the Sethian texts or not? Because here seems to be a text where Sophia is mentioned, but she is not really a part of the central revelation as far as we can tell. So there are some characteristics here that are very interesting.

I'm doing a variety of talks and articles, and I'm writing a book on the *Judas* text and so on, in order to argue a particular point. I believe that the central portion of the *Gospel of Judas* preserves what is essentially a Jewish Gnostic or Jewish mystical kind of revelation about the nature of the world, the devolution of the divine from the realms of infinity down into this world and the career of the light as Seth finally enters into this world. I think that that portion that is put on the lips of Jesus in the *Gospel of Judas* is basically fundamentally essentially a Jewish

tradition that was very akin to other traditions of Jewish mysticism; and in fact what becomes so intriguing about this, even though the time span is a different matter all together, it does seem as if there are characteristics here that are akin to Kabbalah. Now Kabbalah does go back a little ways, and we know something about the full manifestation of Kabbalah at a later time, but there are a number of things that can be found in this variety of Jewish mysticism that are very close to what we see in the *Gospel of Judas* and it all becomes, I think, just very interesting, a fascinating part of the text.

**MC:** Yes indeed, especially the Kabbalah angle. So basically we have a Sethian core that might have been very early, and later Christianized?

**MM:** I think so. That's how I see it. This is not unusual for the Sethians because with the *Apocryphon of John* or *Secret Book of John*, the same thing seems to have happened, namely that the text seems to be fundamentally a kind of Jewish-mystical, Jewish-Gnostic text that has been secondarily Christianized, and now becomes a revelation of Jesus. But most of us I think who have studied that text carefully contend it's fundamentally a Sethian text. In fact it is a Sethian classic. Most of us would agree that the *Apocryphon* or *Secret Book of John* also shows those same set of characteristics that is built on a kind of Jewish foundation, and that what comes to

expression then has been fairly lightly Christianized.

Now in the case of the *Gospel of Judas* the Christianized quality is perhaps a bit more obvious and a bit more substantial because finally here we have to do with stories about Jesus and Judas Iscariot and the disciples. It all kind of leads off to the turning over, the handing over of Jesus toward the end of his life. But still that essential part, that core of the text seems still to represent that kind of a pattern, namely a Jewish revelation that is not as dualistic as some of the other examples that we have of Sethian thought. There seems to be a kind of a gradual evolution or devolution of the light above, the spirit above into the realms below, down into this world, with what seems to be a gradual diminution of the light. Yet at the same time the implication of the text is that Judas and all of us may be seen as people who can have a spark of that light within us. We just need to allow that to come to expression.

**MC:** But in the *Gospel of Judas* doesn't Jesus claim that maybe some people don't have souls, or that the only perfected race is the race that returns to Barbelo?

**MM:** Well, there is a distinction between the generation of Seth, which is often referred to in a way that is akin to other Sethian references. It's often referred to as "that generation" simply. It seems to mean the generation of Seth. Mere mortals, people that are not privy to this kind

of insight, that aren't on the inside, the outsiders. So there does seem to be a distinction there between the insiders and the outsiders, those who are in the know and those who are ignorant, as a matter of fact. Now, what that finally means in terms of the fate of all people is not entirely clear from the text. But it does seem to suggest that there are certain people that are the people of Gnosis, who have a special knowledge and special enlightenment, and perhaps they would be people that would have something of the spirit and the light and knowledge of the divine within.

I guess I should go on to say that one of the characteristics of the *Gospel of Judas* is the fact that it's an impassioned gospel, it's a gospel with a lot of feeling about it. And some of the feeling is politically incorrect. As hostile as the heresiologists can get sometimes, so also the *Gospel of Judas* throws that hostility right back at the people in the great church. There are some pretty nasty things that are said seemingly about members of the emerging orthodox church, or at least the leadership and ideas that would suggest that this idea of Jesus as a sacrifice for the sins of people should be discarded. And the Eucharist, of what value is that? And perhaps—as a new book about to come out by Elaine Pagels and Karen King may in fact be indicating—this whole idea of dying as a martyr and emulating the death of Jesus, of what value is that? Isn't that just like killing the children, that is, the



children of God, and letting them die? So that there are some rather angry rejoinders in the *Gospel of Judas* that would suggest that the way that is emerging in the emerging orthodox church—of piety and belief in sacrificial atonement, and in one's own sacrifice of one's own life—that that way might in fact be set aside and might be denied entirely out of interest in another way, that is, a way of Gnosis, a way of enlightenment, a way of allowing the inner person and the spiritual person to come to full expression.

**MC:** Do you get this through the visions that Jesus interprets, where he seems to be talking about the sacrificial lamb and the false God and the temple, and all that, is not so much against orthodox Judaism but against the orthodox Church.

**MM:** Right. This really is a part of the text that is rather clearly reflective of gospel interest and Christian interest and so on. The distinctions between the group of people, whatever that group might be, that would stand behind the *Gospel of Judas* over against people in the emerging orthodox church. And, yes, exactly so, in large part this is based on a kind of vision where the disciples say, we had a vision of the temple, and there seems to be a kind of description there that might in fact be based upon some Jewish critique of temple worship. There was that going on within Judaism too, that there was a description of the

temple, made in the temple in Jerusalem, and the animals being bought, and the priest there, and so forth, and that seems to be interpreted in an allegorical way to say, that's what's going on in these Christian temples, the Christian churches, and it's the same kind of sacrifice that's going on in the churches, and the sacrifice is just as bad, if not worse, as the sacrifices that you'd find elsewhere in the context of the Jewish temple. Yeah, that's the part that gets pretty harsh in terms of just how wicked these people are and how wicked this approach is, that places such an emphasis on sacrifice. And of course what we know very well is that emphasis upon sacrifice that comes to expression in various aspects of the early church, various presentations of the gospel in the early church, is with us to the present day.

And one of the pieces of furniture in most every church around is the altar. And while nobody usually gets sacrificed on that altar these days, it is a reminder that this idea of sacrifice is very much a part of mainstream Christian tradition to the present day. That seems to be precisely what the *Gospel of Judas* is combating, and from their point of view it becomes very interesting to think about that. What about the cross? If the *Gospel of Judas* seems not to care about any kind of salvific quality of the cross, how does that impact discussions today? Do we need the cross today as a part of Christian tradition? Are there other ways of following Jesus, other ways of

spirituality that may be more appropriate? So the *Gospel of Judas* in a way like that may play quite a role in terms of contemporary discussion

**MC:** Indeed, especially you had last Easter Pope Benedict out there with his polemics against the *Gospel of Judas*, telling Catholics, "Don't read it, don't read it." So it has made a splash. And also the scene in which, at the Last Supper where Jesus starts laughing at them, is that part of the polemics against the orthodox church, or ...

**MM:** I rather think so because the language that is used there is the language about the *eucharistea*, which is the Eucharist. Now, of course, Eucharist can mean "thanksgiving" and so forth. It can have a variety of meanings in Greek. It's a Greek loan word that has been brought into the Coptic there. But any reader who is reading through this—and I would assume that the Greek original must have had that Greek word in it to if it survives right into the Coptic translation—any person who would read through this and notice the Greek word Eucharist, *eucharistea*, would understand that it's not just Jesus laughing at the disciples having any old meal at this time, or having a last supper. There are eucharistic overtones to that, so this would be yet another way of saying, you know, the Eucharist, as a commemoration of the sacrifice of Jesus, is laughable. It doesn't really have any power. It doesn't really have any significance, and why

bother? So there too, there's a kind of collection of themes that swirl around this critique of sacrifice. Jesus dies for nobody's sins. Why celebrate a sacrifice of Jesus in the Eucharist and why go to your death in emulation of the sacrifice of Jesus, and become a martyr, instead of allowing the real inner person to come to enlightenment and to realize your spirituality in that kind of way? That seems to be the cycle of things that is being discussed here, and it's pretty provocative stuff.

**MC:** Yeah, certainly very controversial. So the purpose of Jesus is obviously to come as a messenger of light and impart Gnosis. In this text— and I got a little confused— Jesus is basically the Allogenes in flesh form, or is he talking about a different aeon?

**MM:** He's not referred to in this text, though in the next text in *Codex Tchacos*, he is referred to as Allogenes, as the stranger or the foreigner. He is referred to in that way in that text. But still I think your description is fairly apt, that is, it looks in this particular text that Jesus comes as somebody who is not from the demiurge, not from the creator, that is to say, not from the God of the rest of the disciples. That's what Judas understands, that Jesus really comes from a transcendent realm. He comes from the realm where Judas and none of us would be worthy to pronounce the name—we couldn't pronounce the name of the ineffable being—that is in fact in that realm. And in

fact the word Barbelo is used in that context too, sometimes Barbelo is thought to be the exalted mother of God, the mother of the redeemer, and so forth. Sometimes there is not that same kind of gender specificity connected with Barbelo; but this is also a word, by the way, that most likely goes back to some kind of a Hebrew or Aramaic originally, probably in Hebrew in fact, that is some kind of reference to the Tetragrammaton. The best understanding we have of Barbelo is that it maybe comes from Hebrew for God in Four, that is, God in the four-letter name YHWH, that is the unspeakable, ineffable holiest name that there is.

**MC:** There's a little Neopythagoreanism in there.

**MM:** So that the fact that Judas gets that, that Judas understands that, which is why Jesus says, "Judas, we can talk!" And Judas becomes then the favored recipient of revelation thereafter and learns all the secrets and mysteries from Jesus, knowing where Jesus is really from. It's the other disciples that think that Jesus seems to be from the creator of this world. And Jesus says, "No! I'm not from your God." They are apparently implying that their God is the creator of this world, and Jesus claims to be from another kind of place altogether. That is, he appears to be—as you said before—something of a stranger in this world. He comes from a spiritual realm, an exalted kind of realm, and then uses a body, it seems.

That is how I would take the conclusion of the text. The text is difficult to read at the end in large part because there are some gaps in the text just when we would like to know who exactly is transfigured here—I think it's probably Judas, but it could theoretically be Jesus who's transfigured at the end. Just when we'd like to know what really happens just before Judas turns Jesus in to the authorities at the end of the text, we have these gaps in the text, unfortunately.

Now, what seems to be happening there is Jesus turns to Judas and he says, you will exceed all of the others—probably the other disciples—for you will sacrifice the man who bears me. As I read that, it seems clear to me that that refers to the fact that Jesus is wearing or is using or is inhabiting flesh; but that the real person of Jesus, the real person of the redeemer, indeed the real person for each one of us, is the inner person. That's the real human being. We are more than our biology, but there is something spiritual about us. That is, I think, what this text says, and that's what Jesus is too, and what he says and implies about himself, that he's more than just the flesh that bears him and carries him around. And finally that is what is crucified. The flesh will be crucified, but that doesn't mean that the inner person dies, or that the real person somehow comes to end. So to that extent Jesus, and all of us, would be seen to be individuals in this world, in so far as we are people of Gnosis, who are more than

our biological bodies. But the real person of us is that inner person, that spiritual person.

**MC:** Moving on historically, are we pretty much sure that this is the *Gospel of Judas* that Irenaeus wrote about, since he never really quoted it?

**MM:** Well, he never quoted it, and it's not even sure that he ever saw it, in fact. He knew about it and he knew something about it, but his words are pretty general. If you read through his description, it fits in some kind of a general way with the contents of the *Gospel of Judas* as we have recovered in Coptic translation. There are some words that are used, some outrage that Irenaeus has . . .

**MC:** Oh, what a surprise. Grouchy old coot!

**MM:** Yeah, he was pretty grouchy about it, yeah. So I think it's a very good supposition that we have to do here with a Coptic translation generations removed, to be sure, from the Greek original that was composed in the middle or so of the second century, that Irenaeus knew about. Now we would also assume that probably in the meantime it had been copied and recopied and so on; and usually in antiquity when things were copied and recopied there was editing that was done and changes in fact were made. So there may in fact be ways in which that happened. I mean, that happens with all texts, it happened with the Bible, with popular texts that we know of from ancient

collections. It must have happened with the *Gospel of Judas* too. There would have been some updating and some editing on the way. But the fact of the matter is I think that there is good reason to connect in that particular way with the text that Irenaeus knew about.

**MC:** And what about the Cainites? Do we really know anything about them? Or were they just created by the church fathers to have another bogeyman to kick around?

**MM:** Well, we know of no self-designating Cainites out there. We know of no people who call themselves Cainites. My guess is that the heresy hunters were simply looking for some really bad labels to lay on people. In fact what is going on here is connected much more clearly with people that Irenaeus said called themselves *gnōstikoi*. That's one of the reasons why I still feel very comfortable using the word Gnosis and the word Gnostic. I don't feel quite as comfortable talking about Gnosticism as that is a modern term, with the -ism on the end. There were all kinds of folks who bought into one kind of Gnosis or another. But Irenaeus says that some people, like the people who used the *Secret book of John* and the *Gospel of Judas*, that some of these people call themselves Gnostics. They used that word, and so if they use that word as a term of self-designation then that makes me much more comfortable using that term too.

I bring this up because, as we all know, there is a



debate going on as to whether we should talk about the Gnostics any more or not. Well, if there were people who said, "We call ourselves Gnostics and we want to be called Gnostics," then I'm willing to call them Gnostics too in that way when it becomes a term of self designation. Whether there were actually Cainites I'm actually not sure. I don't know what to make of that kind of term. I do know that the word Cain does crop up every once in a while. It's not the most common term, but it does crop up every once in awhile in certain texts, and it does crop up occasionally in some Sethian texts. It's not a term that is used a great deal. But who knows what texts might still survive in the sands of Egypt and maybe we'll find out more about Cain and how the name of Cain and the person of Cain might have been used by some of these folks.

**MC:** Yes, maybe we'll find the *Gospel of Cain*.

**MM:** Yes, that would be exciting indeed, wouldn't it?

**MC:** And, Marvin, why do you think there is such an obsession with the *Gospel of Judas*? Every other guest I interview wants to write a book on the *Gospel of Judas*. There's many books coming out, Elaine Pagels and Karen King, that's one example you used. It seems to me to have taken some of the interest out of the Nag Hammadi library. What makes Judas so tantalizing to the public?

**MM:** Well, I'll tell you Miguel, that's a very interesting

question there that you raise and I suppose that I can speculate on that, and you can speculate on that, and the interest has been just phenomenal. And part of it is, I suppose, just the world we live in. We're well connected internationally with each other through various means of communication. The Internet has made this a very small world in terms of passing information from one place to another. National Geographic is a society that is very well connected internationally as well, so that for them to be involved and for them to make an announcement, then to do it in conjunction with a couple of books, and a television program, and a website at one time together does make a difference.

But I think there's more than that. I think that probably the title itself is the first thing that just fascinates people. The fact that there is a gospel, that is, a statement of Christian good news, that is a *Gospel of Judas Iscariot*! That miserable traitor! That quintessential betrayal of the master! That there is any good news connected with Judas! I think that's so shocking, and so surprising, that the title itself makes people just step back and saying, what's going on? And then to find out that within the *Gospel of Judas*, Judas is in fact the one disciple who seems to know what Jesus is. He is praised by Jesus, he is privy to all the secrets about the world and about God in the world according to Jesus. He's taken aside for that special instruction that nobody else seems to get, except for

everybody who can read the text. And then he has a role to play at the very end, that seems to involve sacrifice, yes, but not sacrifice for sin, this is a different kind of sacrifice altogether. The only kind of sacrifice that matters, that is, transcending the flesh and realizing our spiritual self.

We understand that here is a Judas who is a positive Judas. This isn't a bad boy Judas that has been critiqued and demonized and vilified throughout the entire tradition, and in fact now what is happening with some people also becomes interesting, and I have been lecturing literally around the world on this. That people are now looking back at the New Testament gospels to say, how did we get such a bad boy Judas, this poster boy of anti-Semitism, and so on? How did we ever get him, if in fact here's a gospel in which he seems a much more positive figure? We're finding that the story of Judas in the New Testament deserves a second or third or fourth look, because it may be that something is going on there, which is worth looking at. It may well be that the New Testament story of Jesus and Judas would suggest that Jesus and Judas were good friends, and that Judas was a part of the inner circle, and that Judas might have been a very trusted part of the inner circle, and that's what actually happened, that is often described as, and translated as, betrayal may not have been exactly betrayal at all. This may have been handing Jesus over to the authorities, introducing him as some other scholars have even said before, so that Jesus

and the Jewish authorities have come and talk together about their version of reform within Judaism. And then something went terribly wrong.

**MC:** And the word in Greek for betrayal is the same as handing over, isn't it?

**MM:** Well, absolutely. *Paradidome* means give over, or hand over. And in fact what's interesting, if you would look at the earliest author of the New Testament, Paul says, "Oh yes, Jesus was handed over." Paul, by the way, never mentions Judas, doesn't seem to know Judas, just talked about the Twelve. He doesn't have any particular story of how they got to be down to 11 because Judas was dead; they had to have an action for Matthias to be selected Paul never mentions that. But Paul says, "Oh yeah, Jesus was handed over, to be sure, and he finally was crucified." But when he finally says, using the same Greek verb, who handed Jesus over, Paul says, "Well God handed him over." Or in another place, Jesus handed himself over, using the same verb. So it may be that the Gospel of Judas becomes the occasion for us to have a broader discussion of what the earliest texts that we have, namely the New Testament texts, might really be saying about Judas. Now, to be sure, in these texts there is a growing demonization of Judas that already occurs, and you can see that chronologically, when those texts are laid out, from Mark to Matthew, Luke to John. Those New

Testament gospels are increasingly hostile towards Judas as time passes, and I really see that as part of the editing process, that is, more and more blame is being placed on not the Romans, but on the Jewish people.

**MC:** And that's what Judas represents?

**MM:** And on Judas as being a bad Jewish person, so the Romans can get off the hook, and Pilate can turn into a pretty positive guy. He washes his hands and he's okay. So who is really responsible for it? A bad Jew. Who has a name, in fact, who even sounds like he was just a Jew. Judah, or Judas.

**MC:** His last name is also a negative too, isn't it? Iskariot?

**MM:** Well, we're not really sure what Iskariot means, in a matter of fact. There are a number of possibilities. I think the best possibility is that it means that he is an *ish*, a man, in Hebrew or an Aramaic, a man of Kerioth, a man of the city, maybe a man of the village, of Kerioth. We're really not sure of that. There have been other suggestions that he is one of the Sicarii, one of the dagger men. Kind of an attractive idea, but it doesn't really fit well, and there are other possibilities too. We're not really sure what the name means, but it may be a way to place him in Judaea, place him around Jerusalem.

But that becomes part of the reason why it becomes interesting, because I think some people are saying—

including people that are in the church—there are people that as saying, may be that there is another story here, of the various stories we've been hearing about, that we've not heard about in church for a while. What we've heard before about Thomas is that doubting Thomas is kind of a bad dude who couldn't quite get it straight until he could touch the wound. So now we find out there's a *Gospel of Thomas*. What we've heard before is that Mary Magdalene was a whore, a repentant whore, but she was a whore. Now we find out she might not have been, and almost certainly was not a prostitute at all, but might have been one of the closest disciples to Jesus. And now we find out another story too about Judas. I think people are excited to find out that Christianity was and remains a very diverse phenomenon. There are a lot of things going on here, and it's not just one line, it's not just one orthodoxy, and not just one truth; but there are many truths, there are many ways, there are many gospels and many interpretations that can be embraced and I think that many people will find that to be very exciting.

**MC:** Right, it's nice to know early Christianity was actually very fluid, unlike what Acts of the Apostles or tradition and everything says

**MM:** Of course, this is all going on before Constantine began to fiddle around with things and to introduce rather an overt way political elements into the discussion. This

before the time that dogma is being settled, it's before the time of creeds, that'll tell who is on the inside and who is on the outside. So, before all of that happened, in the beginning there was diversity. There were different gospels and different ways, different beliefs and there were arguments to be sure about this, but there certainly were variety of different ways of approaching Jesus and follow Jesus.

**MC:** And you mentioned before you're perfectly comfortable with calling the Gnostics the Gnostics. You haven't jumped on the Karen King or James Robinson or Elaine Pagels bandwagon yet?

**MM:** Well, these are all friends and we have good discussions about this. I simply use the word Gnosis, and I use the word Gnostic, derived from *gnōstikos*, because the heresiologists admit that these terms are being used by their opponents. That there are people out there who call themselves *gnōstikoi*, or Gnostics, for the reason that if they can call themselves that, I feel that it is legitimate for us to use that too. Now, the word Gnosticism, as I mentioned before is a modern term. I prefer to stay away from that, and also I don't want to bring all of the baggage that comes from the heresiologists to say that, well, if you're a Gnostic that means that you're a heretic. In fact all this language, and to this extent I agree completely with Karen King, I think that her book *What Is Gnosticism?* is a

brilliant book, even though I disagree with aspects of it, but certainly when it comes to the understanding of what is orthodoxy and what is heresy, there are very powerful and dramatic political and rhetorical aspects to orthodoxy and heresy.

Orthodoxy is defined by the winners. Orthodoxy is defined by those who have the loudest voices, what are deemed to be the strongest arguments and the most votes, and those who lose in that debate are called heretics. There are very few people who referred to themselves, unless we are in a different world of discourse, there are very few people who call themselves heretics. This becomes a term of accusation and of rhetoric. That's exactly right, and so when Irenaeus and Hippolytus and, even much more, Epiphanius use words like Gnostic, they mean it to be a kind of a club to beat people with. I certainly feel that that is entirely inappropriate if we're trying to be fair to the people that Irenaeus and others call Gnostics. The folks that we often referred to as the Sethians are those who Irenaeus referred to as the *gnōstikoi*. If they call themselves that, I would be happy to do them the service of abiding by the same kind of name that they preferred.

**MC:** You talk about the other texts found, the *Allogenes* text. Is that the same one found in the Nag Hammadi codex or is it a different one?



**MM:** As far as we can tell, it's an entirely different text. There actually were several different books found, a Greek translation of the book of Exodus, some Coptic versions of letters of Paul, a Greek mathematical treatise, various books were found like this, but in *Codex Tchacos* there were at least four texts. There was the *Gospel of Judas* of course, but before that there was a version of the *Letter from Peter to Philip*, a text called *James*, which is a version of the *First Apocalypse* or *Revelation of James*, also known from Nag Hammadi. Both of those first two documents are known to us already, and then the full text of the *Gospel of Judas*. The fourth text is a text that we are calling the *Book of Allogenes*, or the *Book of the Stranger*. And this was available for quite some time on the Internet. On some of the sites out there were photographs, transcriptions of it, and so on, that have been made available some time ago. But now it appears not to be part of the *Gospel of Judas* at all, but rather it's its own separate text, the *Book of the Stranger*, the *Book of Allogenes*. This, unfortunately, is a text that is quite fragmentary, and so are only a few of the pages remain, and then a bunch of fragments.

But now, lo and behold, there is some evidence to suggest that in fact *Codex Tchacos* might have been much longer, and part of it might be missing or destroyed. There is the word "Trismegistos," "thrice greatest," in the fragments, and there may be a Coptic translation of a Hermetic text, maybe *Corpus Hermeticum 13*, as part of

this as well. So, who knows, there may be more pages of the codex out there. I would hope that people who have access would just make this available. There might be more that we can learn. Or, perhaps, these pages have turned into dust, and if so, we have lost a great deal. But that's what we have at this point, but there may be more that comes to light in the future.

**MC:** I hope so too and I have to keep working on it. You certainly show a lot of passion for it.

**MM:** Well, it's a very exciting moment. I feel honored and I feel that it has been just a marvelous adventure to be at this particular place and to have been able to play a role in making this available to the public. I think it's a great time, it's a great moment, and I think that as we have a chance to read these texts and learn from these texts, we will all be the best for it.

**MC:** I agree with you whole heartedly. Well, I think that should do it, but thank you very much for taking your time today, Marvin.

**MM:** Well, it's really been a pleasure, Miguel, and I wish all the best.

# April DeConick

April DeConick is author of *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says, Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth*, and *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospels of John, Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature*, as well as Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies at Rice University, Texas.

April DeConick is a rising star in the field of Gnosticism. Although already an established scholar because of her works on Johannine and Thomasine Christianity, it was her single-handedly going against the National Geographic team's interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas* that elevated her status in the academic pantheon. Just as much of western civilization was celebrating the arrival of a heroic and even priestly Judas Iscariot, DeConick revealed a very different character in *The Thirteenth Apostle*.

Our two interviews presented her almost ironclad arguments, as well as an often literally spellbinding adventure into the heart of Sethian Gnosticism (some areas that even John Turner had not foraged into).

DeConick admitted that from the first moment she set her eyes on an English translation of the *Gospel of Judas*, there was little doubt Judas had fooled the modern world like he had fooled the eleven Apostles. Researching the

original Coptic translations, DeConick discovered that the National Geographic team had rushed the publication of the Sethian scripture and, even worse, had projected into it what many in the modern world had wanted.

Our first interview focused on how DeConick exposed initial mistranslations, misjudgments in Sethian cosmology, and context extravaganzas. What she uncovered was a Judas who was an even worse fiend than the zealot of the four gospels. In the Sethian account, Judas Iscariot was actually the son of the demiurge incarnate on Earth. To make matters worse, unlike the ignorant rulers of the cosmos, Judas actually possessed Gnosis! In other words, the Sethians had created the greatest villain the Gnostic sagas had ever encountered, a sort of anti-Logos made flesh. They also presented an even more heroic Jesus that would ultimately defeat the arrogant powers and all their servants, which included the Apostles.

The second interview continued the refutation of the initial claims by the National Geographic team. DeConick parried with several counterarguments to *The Thirteenth Apostle*, in addition to excavating deeper into the fertile soil of Sethianism. DeConick was in agreement with the stances of John Turner and Birger Pearson that Gnosticism was a pre-Christian phenomenon. Yet she did not necessarily think the Sethians were merely rebellious Jews enamored by Plato; they might have actually been

Egyptian Jews beguiled by pagan Hermetic philosophy. Another possible theory she proposed was that Gnosticism began with actual Christians forced to become non-Christian heretics. In essence, they were once the intelligentsia of Christianity who gathered in secret lodges when not involved in the church community. Eventually, because of their heterodox attitudes, they were cast out of mainstream Christian society and modified the figure of Jesus Christ. They also wrote scripture that was polemic against apostolic Christianity and their beliefs, which included the blood atonement doctrine. The *Gospel of Judas* exemplifies the acrimonious divorce between Orthodoxy and Gnosticism.

DeConick also went into detail about the importance of ceremonial magic, theurgy, and astrology in the Sethian tradition, issues other scholars frequently avoid because of the occult implications. But the truth is that these practices were not only essential to the Sethians, but all other Gnostic sects along with the elite religions of Alexandrian Egypt.

Lastly, to tie her arguments together, DeConick spoke about a magical gem from antiquity that one of her graduate students showed her from a catalog. It revealed the secret of why Judas was so vilified by the Sethians and perhaps even early Christians. These magical gems were used as talismans for protection against the whims of haughty supreme beings. The gem in question had the

name Judas etched on one side and Yaldabaoth, one of the names of the demiurge, on the other side. After some research, DeConick realized that Judas was a cipher for the tribe of Judah, known to be the earliest worshipers of the demiurge-figure the Gnostics disdained. Thus, Judas Iscariot in the *Gospel of Judas* was the earthly and heavenly representation for the oppressive powers that had made the Sethians orphans to the Christian world.

Between the magical gem and her arguments against the initial interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas*, DeConick presented in our interview an exuberant exposition on Sethianism and other Gnostic sectarians, as well as a complete summary of the *Gospel of Judas*. And it seems DeConick will continue revealing deep truths about the perennially misunderstood Gnostics that scholarship might not want to face—like the reality that these heretics were not only elegant dissenters, commanding philosophers and astute theologians but often mercurial sorcerers.

April DeConick was interviewed on November 10, 2007 and February 28, 2009.

**MC:** When was the exact moment you realize that something was rotten in Denmark when it came to the first translation of the *Gospel of Judas*?

**AD:** I remember the moment very clearly actually. I was with my husband and we had just finished watching the documentary that National Geographic put out on the *Gospel of Judas*, and I was excited, thinking that we had finally found the *Gospel of Judas*. It had a hero figure in it. So I went to the computer and I printed out the English translation of the text and the Coptic transcription that National Geographic had uploaded. I read through the English rather quickly, and I turned to my husband while my stomach just sighed, and I said, "Oh my gosh, there's something really wrong here. Judas is working for Saklas, the demiurge." That started it for me. The next day I went into my office and started working through the text itself and came across several issues of translation differences that I had with National Geographic.

**MC:** Just by reading the English translation, the bells and whistles went off in you?

**AD:** They did. When I came across the passage where Jesus is explaining to Judas about sacrificing—how horrific it is—and that Saklas was being sacrificed to. The text breaks at that point and you have several lines that are missing; and it comes back with Jesus telling Judas, "And

Judas, you're going to do the worst of all, you're going to sacrifice me." I knew that he was going to be sacrificed to Saklas.

**MC:** Why, I guess the burning question a lot of people have, why do you think the translators missed what seems to be obvious contextual truths about the *Gospel of Judas*? Why did they drop the ball?

**AD:** I think there are probably several reasons. It could just be simple error. But I think that they may have gone into the project with some preconceptions of what was supposed to be in the *Gospel of Judas*. One of the church fathers, Epiphanius, records that the *Gospel of Judas* belonged to a group that he calls the Cainites. They elevated Judas to a power, a high power, from the aeons, and this higher power was all knowledgeable. He descended and was meant to bring about Jesus' death at the moment when Jesus would be too weak to go through with it. And I think that their expectations may have colored the way they interpreted this text initially.

The other problem—and this is just kind of a procedural issue—is that when National Geographic became involved, they selected just a few scholars to work on this and made them sign non-disclosure statements. The scholars couldn't talk to anybody outside the team. So there was no way to really double check what you were doing with people that were not working for National Geographic. Any sort of



initial misreading or error would then just be generated further in the literature as people started to work on it and write on it outside of National Geographic once their original transcription was released.

**MC:** Were they trying to rush the job, do you think that might have been it, or were they given as much time as they wanted?

**AD:** Now I do know that they were rushed. I've been told that by one of the members of the team, they were rushed to complete the project. They wanted to wait and do more work on the text, but they were forced to make this deadline in April of 2006 with their translation and transcription. But their original transcription of the Coptic that was posted says it's a provisional transcription, and it still work in progress. But that didn't seem to stop scholars from using that to write their own books without it being reviewed as a transcription by other scholars. The other thing they did—because National Geographic wanted this exclusive publication into several other languages—is that they didn't wait to fix and finish the transcription before they made their popular English translation. They just released the popular translation when the text wasn't ready to go.

**MC:** Since then you talk about in your book when you encountered Marvin Mayer. Have you had any friction with the original translators of the *Gospel of Judas*? Person to

person, or e-mail, or what they've said?

**AD:** No, these are actually good friends of mine, at least I consider them to be good friends and colleagues. Usually we are pretty cordial together. We can have our disagreements. It's rare that scholars actually agree on a text in all ways, so it's always a situation where it is being discussed, the text is being discussed. This isn't any different, except that it's more public because of National Geographic's involvement, and it's a new text, so that tends to make it more provocative.

**MC:** Could you set the stage for the *Gospel of Judas*, in reference to the two competing Christianities of the time, the apostolic Christians and the Sethian Gnostics?

**AD:** Sure. Christianity in the mid second century was often quite a diverse movement. It had a lot of competing communities—they weren't always in competition, but they were different. Some of them saw themselves as competing with other traditions, but not all of them. The apostolic Christians are what we come to know of as the mainstream Christians. But at the time in the mid second century there wasn't a mainstream Christianity; there were many varieties of it, and they were all in some way jostling to become the dominant tradition. They employed their techniques and their literature and so forth in order to get the upper hand. We can see this happening in the writings of the church fathers, but we can also see it in the Gnostic

materials as well. So what we have is a variety of Christianities. Some of them are tied in more closely with the apostolic Christians, and some of them are counter movements.

The Sethians were a counter movement to the apostolic Christians. They have a completely different way of interpreting Christian scripture, as well as Jewish scripture; they tended to interpret sayings in reverse of the way a traditional interpretation may have run a passage. So in the Genesis story, for instance, Eve is actually a good figure who receives Gnosis (knowledge about God) about her divinity, from the snake who is also a good figure. And these folks are working in opposition to the Yahweh God who was read by the Sethians as the demiurge—a lesser God who is an opponent to the supreme father. And when the demiurge is acting in history, his actions are such that he is trying to stop human beings from knowing the God above, and returning to the God above. He is attempting to suppress that knowledge and to keep that secret from human beings. So there are a lot of stories in which they will read these Biblical stories kind of backwards. And that's what's going on with the *Gospel of Judas*—the Judas materials are being read in reverse.

Another aspect of the Sethians compared to the mainstream or apostolic Christians, is that they had a completely different ritual set. They performed a practice called the Five Seals. We're not quite sure what is involved,

from pieces in literature, but we can tell it was some kind of water ritual where they were immersing people several times. They were anointing people. There were a lot of prayers and chants involved. It was some sort of initiation ceremony in which the initiate was being taken out of this realm, out of the cosmic realm, and into the aeons, the pleroma, to meet the angels there, to be guided up into the highest of the spheres. Sethians did not attend the apostolic churches, rather they had their own sort of church community, which I understand to be more like a lodge in which they work and study and practice prayer, contemplation, initiation and that sort of thing.

**MC:** And do you think the Sethians really revered Christ, or do you think a lot of their works were Christianized later on? That Seth was always the main character, or do they understand that Jesus was Seth *redividus* or something like that?

**AD:** This is a really disputed question that you are asking. This is a fantastic question and I actually really do have a really strong opinion on that. For me, the Sethian materials are probably our oldest Gnostic materials, and they look to me as if they go back to Alexandria in the first century. And I think it was originally just a Jewish movement. It was a large movement that had some connections with the Hermetic lodges that were in Alexandria at this time. Eventually the Christians, when

they came on board, began attending lodge as well, and so you do see a Christianization of these materials. But I think that the movement was initially a Jewish movement. This means that you can have, in a Sethian lodge, you can have people meeting more than one tradition. They may be Jewish. They may be Christian. It shows us a more diverse community.

**MC:** April, before we move on, could you give us a quick recap on what occurs in the *Gospel of Judas*?

**AD:** The text opens with a bit of narration about how Jesus comes and goes among the disciples and so forth. And then the first scene in which he is actually teaching and doing things is the eucharist scene in which the disciples are sitting around and performing eucharists. Jesus comes and laughs at them, and the laugh is not a celebratory laugh, it's a mocking sort of laugh. The disciples respond by saying to Jesus, "But we've done what's right. Why are you laughing at us?" Jesus then tells them that he's laughing because the offering that they are making is an offering to the demiurge, to Yaldabaoth, Saklas and Nebruel. You also get a confession scene in which the twelve disciples err in their confession of Jesus, while Judas steps forward and pronounces that he's from Barbelo, the great mother aeon. Jesus then tells him that he will reveal the mysteries of the kingdom to him, not so that he will go to the kingdom, but so that he will lament

greatly.

You get a scene in which Jesus leaves them, and then when he returns the twelve disciples tell him about a dream vision that they have had, a collective dream vision. And I think that it's the way the text is saying, "See how great we are. We've had this wonderful vision." And they're not quite sure how the vision should be interpreted. They are a little bit disturbed about the contents of the dream. So the dream vision they have is of the twelve priests sacrificing on the altar at the temple, and they tell Jesus that they're killing babies on the altar, as well as their own wives. It's just all quite nasty. And then Jesus tells them that they are the twelve priests who are committing the sacrilege, and that they are committing it to Yaldabaoth.

We get to the next scene, where Judas comes to Jesus and says that he's had this great vision, thinking that he's better than the twelve. He tells Jesus that he saw the twelve disciples stoning him, and so he ran away from them and he came to a beautiful house full of prominent people. And he says to Jesus, let me into that house. Clearly, Judas understands the dream to mean that he'll transcend the twelve, and he's so great that he'll be able to be part of the kingdom and the glorious aeons. Jesus tells him at that point he's misunderstood this dream. Only the holy ones are able to be part of the kingdom, and that Judas will become the thirteenth daimon, or demon, and

he will rule over the twelve, and then again he'll answer this with a mocking laugh.

The text continues with Jesus giving a revelation to Judas, the specific Sethian revelations about cosmology. Then in the revelation Jesus tells Judas again that his star belongs to the thirteenth realm, and that he will be a ruler over the twelve disciples. There is some talk earlier about how sacrifice is, and the disciples are making these terrible sacrifices to Saklas. There's a break in the text and then he says to Judas, "You're going to do the worst sacrifice, because you're going to sacrifice me." And then we get a fragment where someone, we're not sure whether it's Judas or Jesus, is sent into cloud. The text ends with a return to scripture, where a passage from Mark is being addressed where Jesus is in a house and Judas is going to betray him. And that's how the text ends.

**MC:** Yes, and that's telling in itself, because as you mention in your book, the Gospel of Mark is also very anti-apostle.

**AD:** Very much, very much. The Gospel of Mark is not often noticed to be so negative about the twelve disciples. But if you really just sit down with it and you forget how Matthew has rewritten the story, and you forget how Luke has rewritten the story, and you just look at Mark and at the disciples. They are ignorant throughout the text, they never do get it even in the longer ending of Mark, which I

find fascinating—I'm not sure what that means, but it is interesting. They don't fare well in this text, and the only people who know Jesus in the text are demons. So I think we've got in the Gospel of Judas a play off of the Gospel of Mark, because the demons know Jesus, the twelve disciples are very ignorant and never know what's going on, and we have the same kind of thing going on in Judas.

**MC:** And the number that you just mentioned, it's amazing that anybody missed it, is the number 13, Judas being the thirteenth apostle in the thirteenth heaven, is actually a very bad thing, isn't it?

**AD:** Yes, and I think that's the key. I think that this number 13 is really the key to unlocking this text. In Sethian tradition the number 13 is tied to Yaldabaoth. He's called the God of the thirteenth realm, this is his nickname, and to call Judas the thirteenth daimon, or thirteenth demon, means that you are calling him Yaldabaoth. So that was missed by the initial interpreters and translators, which I think is really problematic.

**MC:** Yes, I agreed, then maybe it just got lost, because you know how Saint Paul is called the thirteenth apostle sometimes.

**AD:** Yes, it has been used. I think Constantine is also called the thirteenth apostle in some traditions. But it certainly has its use in early Christianity. In fact it's in



Irenaeus, the piece from him in which he tells how the Valentinians say that the twelve apostles had become aeons. He's really upset about this, because of what it might suggest about Judas, and so he says that, well, the numerology is wrong because we know that Judas is the thirteenth apostle. It seems to be a numerology that was common in early Christianity. But the Sethians are using it in a real specific way in this text to hook him to that demiurge figure.

**MC:** And could we look at some of the other mistranslations that you were able to catch. The most blatant one, and you've touched upon it is the one where the National Geographic translation called Judas a spirit, but he's really called a demon, isn't he?

**AD:** The word *daimon* is used here. I've gone back and tracked that word through the Christian and Gnostic literature in particular, and there's 52 instances of it being used in the Nag Hammadi literature and in every single one it refers to an archon, or one of the archons—nasty angels, malicious powers, the negative powers of the cosmic trial. Those are the daimon in Gnostic literature.

**MC:** And you think that the National Geographic team made a mistake and they use the classic Greek term daimon, as Socrates believed in a daimon as a higher self. Is that what they did?

**AD:** That's it. And that's enough but note, actually, in their translation, they try to explain it because it's unusual. It would be unusual to translate this word as spirit in Christian and especially Gnostic literature. So they do try to hook it back to Plato, but when you do that you're going about 500 years back in time. The word has taken on a certain nuance and meaning in Gnostic literature that might be a bit different to earlier literature, although the Hellenistic literature in the later period does tend to connect the daemons with the lower forces that are around in the cosmos that tend to be more negative. So there is even a movement in the Greek literature to do this.

**MC:** And also in the first translation of the *Gospel of Judas* it states that Judas will be a star, and Plato said also we are all stars. Your translation actually makes him a fool for fate. How did you come about this?

**AD:** Well, the star reference is really important because in Jewish tradition, and also in Christian and Gnostic tradition, stars are connected to angels. The stars in the heavens are the angels and the heavens and the planets are angels, or in the case of Gnostic tradition they are demons. So the notion that he's connected with that particular star is important because that again is hooking him with that realm. What happens in the Gnostic tradition, people who are not Gnostic will always remain under the fate of the star. Stars, the demons that control

this world, will always be controlling their lives. There's no way for them to get released from that. The only people who can get out of it are the Gnostics who have gone through a particular five seal ritual which liberates them and allows them to overcome their fate.

What's really interesting is that the apostolic Christians believed that through baptism the Christians overcame their fate, and that they would be given a new fate, that they would be reborn. But the Gnostics, what the Sethian Gnostics was saying, is, "Your baptism really doesn't work. You really stay under the fate of the stars always. We don't because we have the right ritual."

**MC:** But the Sethians did believe in baptism as well.

**AD:** They used water rituals, and baptism rituals, but unlike the apostolic Christians, what they were doing was multiple baptism. I like to compare it to Mandaean ritual because there you have a modern example of a multiple baptismal ritual where the person will go into the river, they'll be immersed and have water splashed on them several times. Then they'll come up to the shore to a little ritual meal and an anointing ceremony. And this happens frequently in their life, so it's not just a one time deal like it is in the apostolic church.

**MC:** We get in the first translation that Judas sacrificed Jesus is a good thing because it releases Jesus' spirit from his body and allows him to go back to the aeons. But you

say that Judas sacrificing Jesus to the archons is really a negative thing.

**AD:** Sacrifice in the text is not a good thing. It's a horrific act and it's always done to the archons. This was a way of course for the writers here to criticize apostolic Christianity in terms of the eucharist ritual, and also in terms of atonement theories about Jesus' death. This doesn't mean however that the Sethian authors did not have a theory about Jesus' death. In fact when Jesus died the Sethian author does not understand it to be a sacrifice. What he understands it to do is to free Jesus' spirit so that he can conquer the archonic powers. I think that aspect of Gnostic tradition needs to be, I guess, separated from each other. In other words, the apostolic Christians were saying Jesus' death is a sacrifice and there is an atoning benefit for that. The Sethian Gnostics were saying, "No, his death isn't an atoning sacrifice, at least not to the high God." The high God would never commit infanticide, but what his death means is that his soul was released and could conquer the powers. How Judas is involved in that in a Sethian story, he's a demon and works for Yaldabaoth; or he's his alter ego, or something like that, and he is working to stop any sort of redemption that God might have in mind with Jesus. So he's trying to kill Jesus before Jesus can do whatever God has set out for him to do. When this happens, though, Jesus' spirit is released and this turns out to be a trick on the archons and on Judas. They didn't

know that was going to happen and when that is released it actually conquers them. So the interpretation is essentially different from the Sethian in perspective.

**MC:** You mentioned in your book that it's pretty ironic, that though Judas was actually a bad guy he's still the one who gets it right? He had Gnosis.

**AD:** He gets it, and this is a criticism again of the apostolic Christians, saying you guys are all following people who are so ignorant that even Judas the demon knows more than they did. And I think that's quite sophisticated in terms of argument.

**MC:** That ties back to the Gospel of Mark where it's the demons who get Jesus, of all people.

**AD:** Exactly.

**MC:** Do you think maybe the Sethians not only were against the apostolic church and the whole atonement thing, but they were probably in the beginning against animal sacrifice in the second temple, weren't they? John Turner says that's the reason why they may have split off.

**AD:** It could very well be. Sacrifice is just not a good thing in Sethian texts. It's interesting that you should bring that up because, you know, there is a Jewish-Christian tradition where they also talk about Jesus' teachings in terms of anti-sacrifice. Jesus as the true prophet came in order to denounce the temple sacrificial system. So that's

interesting, because that's a Jewish movement too.

**MC:** April, going back to the mistranslations, the one big theme is that Judas will ascend to the holy generation, but in your version you say that he will not ascend to the holy generation. What is the difference there?

**AD:** The difference is that the National Geographic team invented a line by eliminating the negative "not." It's a difficult line because the line before it doesn't connect up grammatically with the line that follows it; and so they worked on the line in order to make it read continuously. And in order to do that they had to emend the text, and when they emended it they dropped the negative. But when you go back and look at the manuscript, what happened is that this line is some sort of scribal error to the next line. In other words, when this text was being copied by a scribe, or translated or something, the scribe missed a couple of lines. The end of that one line doesn't match up now with the beginning of the next line, and you just have to leave it at that. And when you leave it at that and you don't amend the text, you have the text actually says that Judas will not ascend to the holy generation.

Now thankfully, the critical edition that National Geographic put out this summer, has changed that. So they have rescinded the emendation they made. Of course the problem is that scholars were initially quickly publishing that, and were publishing based on the faulty

transcription, and making all sorts of interpretive leaps based on that faulty transcription that had been made.

**MC:** What exactly separates the Sethian Jesus from the orthodox? I think one thing you point out is that Jesus just kind of appears when he wants to appear, as a spirit of sorts.

**AD:** He does. That does not mean however that he was not understood by them to be a real human being. I think this is a misconception that has been generated in the secondary literature, unfortunately. The Sethian Jesus is a great aeon, and he descends through all the cosmic realms, invisible, in disguise, so that the archons don't know that anything is up. What they do notice is when suddenly they see this human being down on earth starting to preach. They don't like what he's saying, because it sounds like he knows something about the supreme God, so they want to try to stop whatever his activity is, which of course they don't know what it is that they want to stop. That's when they decided that they want to kill him and implement Judas in that process. This is maybe not so different from the apostolic Christians who think that Jesus was sent as some sort of great angel or great power, or God himself, who was sent down into flesh and teaches and is killed. So there are a lot of points that I think are more similar than different in this story.

**MC:** For some listeners who might not understand,

obviously the *Gospel of Judas* doesn't mention Sophia, but it does mention Barbelo. Who exactly was Barbelo, who was important obviously?

**AD:** Yes, and I think that Sophia is mentioned once in the *Gospel of Judas*, but Barbelo is the mother figure. She's the mother aeon. She comes from the father and then they produced the son, and that makes up in the Sethian cosmology the pleroma, and each of these great aeons has several aeons that they produce within their realm where they are existing.

**MC:** And do we know what her name means? I've heard different definitions of her name.

**AD:** I don't think that has been resolved at all in scholarship. These names, from what I've been able to tell, are usually some sort of exegetical exercise. They found some word in the Hebrew or the Aramaic materials that indicates the name of a God. Then it starts becoming used in a different language, and so the vowels shift and the consonants shift and you end up with something that is a bit far removed from where it started. And that's what I imagine happened here, although I cannot tell you what the original name was. But I think Yaldabaoth is one of those examples. I think it probably meant "lord of hosts," or something like that, and it ends up becoming just garbled through verbal transmission and translation into other languages.



**MC:** And what most of our listeners might not know, weren't there other books or codices that were found along with the *Gospel of Judas*?

**AD:** Yes, the *Gospel of Judas* is part of a big book that was found. It's being called by a modern designation the Tchacos Codex after Freda Tchacos, who was the antiquities dealer who bought the book, and got National Geographic involved in the restoration process. But in the book, right now we know that we have a second copy of the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, which is also in the Nag Hammadi library. We also have a second copy of a book that in the Tchacos Codex is called simply *James*, but it is a second version of the *First Apocalypse of James* that we have in Nag Hammadi. That text is really complete, and it's wonderful because it's complete in areas that the Nag Hammadi text is not. I think that we're really going to have a fantastic understanding of the text once we study it and do some comparisons with the Nag Hammadi version.

There is a fragmented text that they're calling *Allogenes*, which is unfortunate because that is also the name of a text in the Nag Hammadi library, but it doesn't appear to be the same text. It's something different. This *Allogenes* is very fragmented. We only have a piece of it, and the piece we have looks to me like it is a Gnostic rewrite of the temptation story. So Satan is there and he's tempting a figure called *Allogenes*, which makes me wonder if *Allogenes*, the foreigner, is actually the aeon Jesus. So that

should be interesting to talk about in the future.

And then it appears that there was a fragment, maybe even a whole text, of *Corpus Hermeticum XIII*. There's just a fragment of it that we know of, but it looks like it came from that, and there may have been more of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the Tchacos Codex. We just don't know. There are 50 fragments of the Tchacos Codex that are still outstanding. National Geographic has photographs of them. They have not been published, they have not been released to other scholars. Apparently these fragments are physically in Ohio, and I don't have any idea when or if we'll get to see those. It appears to be the rest of the Tchacos Codex. This thing was huge and I think we only have about half of it.

**MC:** And didn't it have one of the letters of Saint Paul in there too?

**AD:** There were three other books along with the Tchacos Codex. One of them was the letters of Paul. That book has not been recovered from the market. I don't know if that book was destroyed, or if somebody's got it. We don't know about it, but it has not been recovered yet, but we know that it existed because it was seen by, I believe, Stephen Emmel. There is also a book of Exodus, and that book is apparently a really important translation. It was torn up into pieces and sold off to many different places.

And then there was a mathematics treatise, there was a

geometrical treatise. So there were four books. The Tchacos Codex, I think we only have about half of it, the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, the *First Apocalypse of James*, *Allogenes* and *Corpus Hermeticum XIII*.

## Second interview

**MC:** And in the second edition of *The Thirteenth Apostle*, it has some amazing revelations to do with astrology instead of theology. I guess we can call it astrotheology.

**AD:** Astrotheology, there you go. I like that term!

**MC:** Can you tell us the unusual and opposing manner in which Gnostics used the heavens? You give the two examples of the Valentinians and the Sethians, and why it's important in understanding the Gnostic Judas?

**AD:** For years scholars have not really investigated the astrological connections to the Gnostic tradition. When they have looked at the material, they basically have understood the astrological tradition to be kind of a secondary overlay of the Gnostic tradition. The Gnostics were concerned about astrology, but it wasn't really central to their worldview. With my work on the *Gospel of Judas*, and going back and really digging through astrological lore, Hellenistic lore, Chaldean lore, I am finding that the astrological tradition in fact is central to the Gnostic world view. The Gnostic world view won't work, at least in the ancient world, without it.

The reason for this is that Gnostics understood the universe as a place that they had to escape or leave in order to get to another world that was beyond their universe, where the real God lived. This cosmos was

created and it had various layers to it. It had a celestial sphere which consisted of a number of heavens. Usually you have seven heavens, and in those you place the seven ancient planets, which also included the sun and moon, which they saw as rotating around the earth. And then they had an eighth sphere, which was the sphere of the zodiac or fixed stars. In the Sethian tradition, they would sometimes place the Yaldabaoth God in the eighth sphere. And then below this celestial sphere, in the sublunar realm, was what they understood to be the hells, and the hells did also go under the earth, like the old Tartarus. In this period the hells also extended into the air around the earth, up to the sublunar sphere, and in this sphere the devil and so forth rule. They understood there to be five compartments of hell. A major demon ruled each of these locations.

So overall we end up with twelve rulers, seven of these heavens and five of these hells, and then they have the head God in that eighth sphere, so there are 13 kinds of demigods that are ruling the universe. When the person is born they understood the spirit, which came from the world beyond, to drop down through this universe and become incarnated in a human body. And as it did that it collects a soul, which is the rational self, and that soul is created along with the physical body by all of these demons that are ruling the skies and the planets. And the kind of soul you get and the kind of body you get depends

on the location of those planets at your birth moment.

So this is the horoscope, and this birth moment also casts your fate. Fate wasn't understood to be so much like every movement or thing that you would do in your life, but your fate involved, when you're born, that is going to mean your physical condition and social location, and also your death, how you would die. And these were determined by the way the planets, and the gods who rule these planets, were positioned, and so forth, and the time of your birth. If you want to get out of this universe, you have to basically move out of the planetary spheres, you have to get through these hells, you have to give back all other parts of your soul that you received from these demons, and escape.

What the Gnostics were doing in their rituals, they were creating an avenue through the stars in order to escape this world. The different Gnostic groups are mapping that route in different ways. Those are the secrets that you're learning when you are initiated into the various Gnostic communities, this route of escape. What's really fascinating about the *Gospel of Judas* is that it's assuming this, and what it's telling you in this text is who these planets are. It is associating with these planetary rulers, the twelve apostles and Judas, who is the Yaldabaoth ruler of them all. It is also a text that understands Judas as an apostate whose death has been predetermined by his birth, and there is nothing he can do to escape that fate. In the text

he has this dream where he sees himself being stoned, and he comes to a place in the aeon, and he wants to enter into it. He understands the dream to mean that he is going to get to enter this great place when he is stoned. And Jesus tells him, "Sorry, but that's not what's going to happen, you're going to be stuck in the thirteenth realm as the Yaldabaoth ruler, and that's your fate, just live with it." So this is what is going on in terms of astrology in this particular text.

**MC:** Yeah, and you're right for example that the Valentinians, specifically Theodotus, thought that the apostles were substituted for the twelve signs of the zodiac once you were initiated, so you were actually ruled by the twelve apostles, which are benign creatures. But the Sethians believed in this counterpart correspondence. Does this mean that these archons actually had doppelgangers in the material world, just as Judas is the doppelganger of the demiurge?

**AD:** That's it exactly, right. And we see both of these operating in our texts, but this is the interesting thing: the view of the Valentinians is very much like the other Christians were viewing astrology at this time. In fact we have this very notion mentioned by Zeno where he states that in baptism you are freed from the old fate because you are going to enter a new fate that Christ is going to rule. But in the Valentinian tradition—and this gets a little

complicated because my understanding of Gnosticism is so changed by the *Gospel of Judas*—what we've got is different groups having a different kind of relationship with the Christian church and with the synagogues as well. The Valentinians of this time period, I see them doing both of these things. There's something like a lodge-like movement, or a reform movement. In other words they identify themselves with Christianity, with the traditional Christianity of the time. They're attending church normally but they also have some sort of special meetings that they're going to, where they're doing these initiations that I spoke about a little earlier. But their self-identity is Christian and they're not reading the scripture as yet in quite as transgressive a manner as they do later in time as the Christian church begins to expel them and they become unwelcome. In this period—and they are still very much part of the Christian church—they're thinking of astrology very much like other Christians are thinking about it.

Now when you get into this Christian Sethian tradition that's being represented by the *Gospel of Judas*, you've got a different kind of social relationship going on with the Christian church. These people have become separatists. They do not view themselves as traditional Christians any more. They do view themselves as being perfect Christians, but they feel the traditional Christianity is so corrupt that it cannot be redeemed. And that's really what



the *Gospel of Judas* is about, because they're really critiquing the apostolic church here. They're saying, "Look guys, Judas is the main demon who is running your church, and the apostles, who you are following, are his minions." They're the doppelgangers of the archons, who are these evil characters who are associated with the planets and your fate. So if you want to be not under their fate anymore, you've got to leave the Christian church and come and join us, who know the truth and know the avenue out of here.

**MC:** Yes, that's very interesting, because one of the arguments is that the Gnostics were these rebellious people, they were like the Johnny Cashes, or the Elvis Presleys of their time, but what you're saying is basically, they were not, they were forced to become that.

**AD:** Yes, very much so.

**MC:** Once the polemics began against them, as you said, they were thrown out or criticised in the churches.

**AD:** Right, and one of the difficulties of really understanding ancient Gnosticism is that, when we look back at it, the Gnostics got grouped together not only with themselves—and they had very diverse opinions among themselves—but they also get categorised as being with other forms of Christianity that were considered eventually heretical, but were not necessarily Gnostic. And so it's a

very confusing category. There are scholars who have been trying to argue, let's not use this category because it's not useful, but basically these people were just other Christians. And I was willing to go along with that to some extent until I came across this *Gospel of Judas* in which we have a text that very vehemently is countering the apostolic church. It sees the apostolic church as wrong, and itself as the true form of Christianity.

What I think we had going on in the second century, and the third century even, is various groups of Jews and Christians who had different relationships with the traditional church and synagogue. Some of them were more willing, like even today, to self-identify with Christianity and Judaism in its traditional sense, to attend synagogue, but they didn't feel that they were getting everything spiritual they needed there. They would form these groups in which they would do further study, they would have initiation rituals in order to deepen their understanding of the mystery of God. These groups have different tensions and relationships with the church and synagogue. So in some of the more lodge-like movements they were very much hooked in to the traditional religion. Then you get groups that were more reform movements, and they're like—"well, I still think traditional Christianity is great, but we need to tweak it here and there." They started opening maybe their own church. This was maybe what Marcus the Valentinian was doing. He had his own

church going on that he was running. But his tension between him and the tradition is growing. It's not really full blown yet.

And then you get movements that are very tense, they're interpreting the literature, the scripture, in ways that are really transgressive, really upside down compared to the traditional Christian interpretation of the text. These people are not attending the traditional church and synagogue any more, not at all, and they have created their own environment of worship, their own. They still see themselves as Jewish and Christian, but as a true Jew or Christian. The traditional Christians are being misled. By the end of the third century the tensions among those two groups had risen to such a point that the Christians in their traditional church are now kicking these people out. But they are still trying to hang onto the church and want to identify with Christianity. They're really making the separations by this time, because what we see as the end of the third century, even in the middle of the third century, are complaints in the Gnostic texts that they are being persecuted. Also the development of handbooks, and here I'm thinking of the Books of Jeu and the Pistis Sophia and the early fourth century, these are church handbooks that are being created by what I would call your first Gnostics.

These people are identifying themselves as Gnostics, not as Christians, not as Jews, not as any other religion but as

Gnostics. They are forming what I would call a new religious movement by this time. Very eclectic, they are drawing on all sorts of different religious traditions. Think of Mani in the third century drawing from Buddhism and Persian religion as well as from Judaism and Christianity. In the case of Manichaeism it really thrived and survived, and also Mandaism, which moved east into a sort of political environment in which they were able to survive for a while and really grow. In the west you have Constantine coming on board and you get Christianity starting to define itself in very different ways from the Gnostics,; and so the Gnostics aren't in a healthy environment here, and their religion really has trouble thriving in that environment.

**MC:** Another thing I noticed which is very interesting about your book is you bring in the fact that the figure of Yaldabaoth is not solely based on Jehovah, but it is based also on an Egyptian supreme being.

**AD:** Well, yes, again, these people are eclectic. Many of these people are the Egyptians of that time, who were very familiar with the Hermetic traditions and the Egyptian magical traditions. What you have in this time period—I don't know what word to use, we use pagan for it, but there's all sorts of problems with this—but in the pagan environment you have a magical tradition in which if you have a stomach ache, if you want healing from that

stomach ache you could go to the temple, an Egyptian temple, you could perhaps find a practice of healing there by using magic. They would make a gem for you, for instance, which would have on it what I'm calling the "astral lord." He was pictured in many different ways, and I show pictures that show the many different ways that he was pictured.

He's the big guy that governs the celestial spheres and controls your fate and how you were created in terms of your body and so forth. Remember that each of these demons is somehow connected with one of your body parts, has created that part of your body or that part of your soul. So if I have a stomach ache I can know the name of the God I know gave me my stomach, I might be able to persuade the God to heal my stomach ache, and so they would use magic sometimes for medicinal reasons. They would invoke the astral lord who was the lord they feared. I think one of the things that is really misunderstood about Egyptian religion is that they loved their gods. There's no love relationship to be had between them and these gods. These gods were powerful, they could do whatever they wanted to do to you, and you had to appease them, and when you see things on these gems like the holy name Abrasax or something like that.

**MC:** Or Michael.

**AD:** Or Michael, the holy Michael.

**MC:** Yeah, Michael became the replacement.

**AD:** Yes, or the holy Yaldabaoth. This is like saying, "Good dog, good dog, don't bite me!" There's a lot of fear here, and they're using magic and these gems to try to control their medical condition, their fate, their love relationships, all sorts of things. We have recipe books, we have all sorts of information about ancient magic, so we know quite well what was going on and we have one very interesting piece that someone has made that they wore as a pendant that said, "You know, that by invoking your holy name I can control what is going to happen to me." We know how they thought it worked. And the idea is, if I know the name of the demon that rules that body part, or that astral demon, if I know the secret magical name, I can control that demon. So it's very, very important for them to know the names of these characters, and their secret names, because the name to them was power to control that demon.

**MC:** Yeah, and this leads to the other great discovery that you found. Could you tell us how you found this magical gem and how it supported your view of Judas?

**AD:** Yes, it was utterly stunning. I was in my office and this was not this last fall, but before. I had a new graduate student and his name was Grant Adamson. He was working on some gem catalogues for his own research and he came into my office and he said, "Professor DeConick

I've found something in this gem catalog that I think you might want to look at. I don't know if it's really important or not, but take a look at it." So he showed me this page in the gem catalog in which you have a gem with the astral lord character on the one side, who is portrayed exactly like the astral lord we have on the Ophite gem that has the name Yaldabaoth on it. And on the back is the name of the God, Judas. I was just stunned by this! So I started doing some research on the history of this interpretation, and, you know, there was some work done very early on in the 1800s in which they were trying to make arguments that this was Judas Iscariot who was being referred to, but this didn't make much sense with the literature. Epiphanius tells us that he was a Gnostic hero. Why would they have the demon on the one side and the Gnostic hero's name on the other? It didn't match what these gems normally have, which is the demon picture on the one side with often his name and then on the back is his magical name as well. And of course with my work on the *Gospel of Judas*, here I had a literary text that was telling me that the Gnostics had identified Judas with the Yaldabaoth God, the demon God. So it really wasn't till we had discovered the *Gospel of Judas* that we could really make sense of this gem.

**MC:** How did Judas evolve into a demon? Don't you write that it starts way back with a tribe of Judah, and being correlated to a lion?

**AD:** Exactly.

**MC:** Did it slowly evolve through time?

**AD:** First of all what you've got in religious tradition is intersections, a network of ideas that people bring together. When they do this, and it's just sort of a natural process, the way our brains operate, they make the sort of connections and something new comes at the other end. Now we already knew that the angel Michael was being associated with the astral lord on gems. They would also use other angels as well, but Michael was one that they really correlated. They seem to have done this from their reading from some passages actually not from the Hebrew Bible, but from the Septuagint in which they understood the correlation between Judah and the lion of God and Michael the angel. And so it does get wrapped together and they begin to understand this—again, on these gems—the astral lord being Michael. So I think then you also have the New Testament traditions where Judas has a demon controlled by Satan, and he has the name Judas, which correlates with Judah. All of this kind of gets hooked and packaged together by the Gnostics and they then make the leap to identifying the Judas Iscariot with this Yaldabaoth-Michael god. It's fascinating.

**MC:** And going on a little away from astrology, what are some of the other nuances you've discovered that point to Judas being an archon and not a hero, starting with the



Coptic word for ruling, which is very different to the Greek loan word, isn't it?

**AD:** It is, but they use both. They use the Greek loan word and the Coptic translation of that, but you have it in this text, Jesus tells Judas that he's going to rule the thirteenth aeon. This means that he's going to be the ruler, or the archon, of that realm. So the language is real clear there.

**MC:** And also, the thirteenth aeon is not seen as something good, as many have posited, and the Sethians used the whole concept of aeon differently from other Gnostics, didn't they?

**AD:** Well, this is the thing. And I'm really tired of people getting mixed up by this, it's really quite simple. The Gnostic groups, depending on who you are, understand the cosmic set up a little bit differently. In the Sethian tradition, the Sethian texts are really clear in this period that the universe has a ruler who is the God of the thirteenth aeon—that's Yaldabaoth—he's got seven guys under him, and five demons in the abyss. This is clearly mapped out in the *Gospel of the Egyptians*—the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*—and also in the *Apocryphon of John*, and now we've got it in the *Gospel of Judas*. So this is just the way these people understood their world.

The text you're referring to with a thirteenth aeon that is outside this world is *Pistis Sophia*, which is a fourth

century document. It's an eclectic document, it's not Sethian, it's a combination of Manichean, Sethian, Valentinian, Christian and Jewish traditions. This had a very different layout of the cosmos and the world beyond this cosmos; and this cosmos consists of twelve aeons, and then you have a thirteenth aeon which is outside this cosmos, and that is also a negative aeon. It's not a happy place, it's a place of judgment and it's ruled by the grandfather—maybe it's the father of Yaldabaoth. He's the one that's responsible for the Yaldabaoth God coming into this cosmos here. And then you have a world beyond that that's the holy treasury, the treasury of light, the place of good. So you've got a real difference set up there. The reason that we don't have the same set up as Pistis Sophia in the Gospel of Judas is that the thirteenth aeon in the Gospel of Judas is in this cosmos, the place where the star is. Stars are only in this cosmic realm, they're not outside of this universe. So the thirteenth aeon is a cosmic realm inside this universe. And so it's very simple, and I really hope that this gets cleared up, and that people can get their heads around this.

**MC:** So, needless to say, you don't buy Marvin Meyer's argument that Judas is sort of a parallel of Sophia mourning the thirteenth aeon like in the *Pistis Sophia*?

**AD:** No, I do not. He's not Sophia. He has not come from the divine realm, he's not stuck here, he's not been

released from this realm, this cosmic realm. His place is here in this cosmos and he is understood to be the demon ruler of this cosmos,; and that's as far as he's going to get there. In the end his rule is going to be destroyed. And this is the fate that he cries about. The text talks about him weeping, it talks about Jesus laughing at him, and I think this is the laughter that we find in the Hebrew Bible, God laughing at his enemies defeated. Judas is not Sophia.

**MC:** No matter what angle we take, we can't make him so. No matter how much we try. You write that the Sethians obviously had a dislike for the twelve apostles, seeing them as incarnations of the heavens, and the whole correspondence theory. Obviously they had the same argument as Marcion did, with the same attitude as Marcion, but the Sethians seem not to have an affinity to Paul like Marcion. Did the Sethians have any known leadership or veneration for masters, or anything like that for Seth? Or were they just the wild Johnny Cashes of their era?

**AD:** You know, this is a super good question. They seem to have leaders because Plotinus knows them. There seem to be a group of people that Plotinus is aware of. They're attending his school. I wouldn't call them Johnny Cashes, I would call them the intellectuals of the period. They're the ones who are studying the philosophy, they're the ones who are studying the astrology, so I don't think they are

rogue at all. I think they're very much the intellectuals, they're trying to take the intellectual information of the time. In other words, how the intellectuals were talking about the universe, and understanding our place in it, and make sense of the Bible with that. So they're reading the Bible in very different ways to the way that the traditional religions are doing.

**MC:** So you would say their motives were very altruistic, they wanted to help and make things better for everybody?

**AD:** Yeah, absolutely. They are the people who were saying, look, we know this is true about our world. The philosophers tell us this—philosophy and science are a kind of joint enterprise at this time. Astrology is telling us this, ancient religions are all telling us this, it's the way our world operates, but how do we make that work with our scriptures? So that's what they're doing, trying to make the scripture make sense with their contemporary world view. In some ways, like theologians today want to make the Biblical text make allusions, so they want to interpret days as eras. And this is the kind of thinking that the Gnostics were doing. They're saying, "How do we take what we know is true of the world from science and philosophy and astrology and make the Bible makes sense?" And the only way they can figure out to do it is to make the God of the Bible, that is the Yahweh God of the Bible, to be the God

who rules this world. I mean, this is the world he created, so he's the astral lord, he's the one who rules over all this, and in their eyes that ruler had to be demon. Of course when they read the scripture and saw that Yahweh calls himself the angry and jealous God, and punishes generations of children for their fathers' sins, and rips children apart with a bear for calling this prophet a baldy, they start to have some support for their position.

# Miguel Conner

Miguel Conner is host of *Aeon Byte*, the only topical and guest radio show on Gnosticism and other heresies. He is author of the critically acclaimed and popular novel, *The Queen of Darkness* (re-released as *Stargazer*). His articles, fiction, and reviews have appeared in such publication as *The Stygian Vortex*, *The Gnostic*, *Houston Public News*, *The Extreme*, *The Cimmerian Journal*, *Examiner* and many others. He lives in the lawful dystopia of Chicago with his family, patiently waiting for the beginning of the world.

