

ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A CRITIQUE OF ELAINE PAGELS'

THE Gnostic GOSPELS

SUBMITTED TO

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CH 501 HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY 1

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NOVEMBER 5, 1998

INTRODUCTION

Late in the first century, a body of beliefs known as gnosticism appears to have spread from Syria and Egypt into the Graeco-Roman world.¹ The name gnosticism derives from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge”. According to the Gnostics, they possessed a special, mystical knowledge, reserved for those with true understanding. That knowledge was the secret key to salvation.² This new belief challenged orthodox Christianity for nearly two centuries, but had virtually disappeared by the end of the second century. Elaine Pagels, in her book *The Gnostic Gospels*, successfully demonstrates that the orthodox victory over gnosticism was crucial in ensuring the continued growth and strength of the Christian church, but she fails to prove her thesis: that political motivations on the part of the church fathers played the primary role in that victory.

The Bodily Resurrection

Pagels’ argument that the New Testament is ambiguous concerning the bodily resurrection of Christ is unfounded. She cites Luke 24:13-35 in support of her argument that Jesus did not return in his former earthly form as the other gospels attest, but in *another form*.³ This is simply a misreading of Luke, as it is clear that it was by divine intervention that “they were kept from recognizing him” (Lk. 24:16, NIV) and not because Jesus had returned in another form. There is no mention in Luke of Jesus actually changing shape or form, only of the disciples not recognizing

¹ J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995), 33.

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984), 58-59.

him at first—which is understandable considering their belief that he was dead. Pagels’ second reference in support of this argument is to Mark 16:12, in which it says Jesus appeared in “a different form” (Mk. 16:12, NIV). Pagels, however, fails to note that this portion of Mark is almost certainly not authentic, being absent from important early manuscripts.

The New Testament is unequivocal in its assertion that Jesus rose physically from the grave. Matthew states that after Jesus rose, the disciples “came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him” (Mt. 28:9, NIV). In Luke, after his resurrection, the disciples give Jesus a piece of broiled fish, and “he took it and ate it in their presence” (Lk. 24:43, NIV). Luke later affirms that Jesus “showed himself to these men [the apostles] and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days” (Acts 1:3, NIV). In the book of John, Jesus appears to the disciples, of whom at least one (Thomas) is doubtful. So Jesus offers to him, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (Jn. 20:27, NIV). Most convincingly, Paul writes that Jesus “appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living” (1 Cor. 15:6, NIV). Any claim that Jesus did not actually rise physically from the dead and appear to his followers is absolutely contrary to the whole of the New Testament witness, as well as to the witness of history.

It is incomprehensible to argue, as Pagels does, that the apostles invented the resurrection accounts to secure their own authority in the church. Pagels implies that the apostles and early church fathers claimed to have witnessed the post-resurrection Christ, or to follow in the footsteps of those who did, in order to secure their own leadership positions in the early church. It is simply psychologically impossible that the apostles, after the brutal execution of their leader (whom they hoped would be a victorious earthly messiah), would immediately conspire to invent resurrection

³ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House), 5.

stories. It is an even greater stretch of the imagination to suppose that they would then become martyrs for a faith they knew to be false, as all but one of them did. And finally, Pagels simply does not address the important fact that *the tomb was empty*.

Gnostic Heresies

We cannot reduce the early Christian debate over God's nature and characteristics to mere political maneuvering between the church and its opponents. Pagels correctly states that the religious and philosophical arguments of the early church also involved "social and political issues".⁴ However, one does not need to look beyond the religious arguments to understand why the church regarded the Gnostics as heretics. The Gnostics taught their initiates to "reject the creator's authority and all his demands as foolishness". Furthermore, they claim that "the creator makes false claims to power ('I am God, and there is no other') that derive from his own ignorance". Gnostics claimed that the creator of the heavens and the earth was not God, but a *demiurge*, subordinate and inferior to God.⁵ Also, as Pagels states, the Gnostics ridicule "those literal-minded Christians who mistakenly refer the virgin birth to Mary, Jesus' mother, as though she conceived apart from Joseph".⁶ Instead, the Gnostics argue that the virgin birth refers to a "mysterious union of the two divine powers, the Father of All and the Holy Spirit".⁷ Such male/female dualism is strikingly Eastern in its orientation, while it is completely foreign to the faith of the Jews and Christians. Such assertions are so contrary to the whole of Scripture that we need not assume, as Pagels does, that the early church leaders had selfish political motivations behind their desire to refute gnosticism.

⁴ Pagels, 34.

⁵ Pagels, 37.

⁶ Pagels, 53.

Martyrdom and the Orthodox Church

Pagels scandalously asserts that the early church fathers had a hidden agenda when they urged Christians to be willing martyrs—their desire that the organized church might prosper. Pagels correctly claims that “persecution gave impetus to the formation of the organized church structure that developed by the end of the second century”.⁸ However, she is incorrect in stating that the fathers supported the confession of Christ before the authorities and martyrdom as a “tactic” to stoke the fires of persecution and thereby consolidate the churches.⁹ The idea that the faithful should offer themselves willingly as martyrs is not a new idea that the church fathers concocted, but can be traced back to the Old Testament book of Daniel, when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, before king Nebuchadnezzar, refused to worship the image he had made and instead chose to be thrown into a fiery furnace (Dan. 3:13-18, NIV). And in the New Testament, Jesus plainly stated that “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Mat. 16:24-25, NIV). To “take up his cross” meant to be willing to be killed, just as Jesus was killed. Again, Jesus states “whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God” (Lk. 12:8-9, NIV). When the church fathers praised the martyrs and encouraged the faithful not to recant under pressure, they were being faithful to the teachings of Jesus and the Scriptures, not simply furthering their own political agendas.

⁷ Pagels, 53.

⁸ Pagels, 98.

Gnosticism and Eastern Thought

Gnosticism was more likely eastern religious thought and practice garbed in Christian language than any serious contender to the claim of orthodoxy. Pagels claims that the early church fathers (as well as contemporary Christians) claimed that Jesus was the only means to knowledge of God in order to secure the position of the church as the source of truth.¹⁰ To the contrary, it was Jesus himself who said that “I am the way and the truth and the life. *No one comes to the Father except through me*” (Jn. 14:6, NIV). Instead of looking to Jesus, Gnostics tended to look inward for truth. They claimed that “the psyche bears within itself the potential for liberation or destruction”.¹¹ Take for example a passage from the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*:

“If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

Instead of looking to Jesus to reveal God, Gnostics looked inwardly. This idea is very much in agreement with pantheistic Hindu thought, in which God was in everything. Gnostics also engaged in meditative exercises and ascetic practices to induce an ecstatic state in which they had transcendent spiritual experiences. A passage from a Gnostic text called *Allogenes* is typical:

...[I was] very disturbed, and [I] turned to myself. ...[Having] seen the light that [surrounded] me and the good that was within me, I became divine.

Thus the Gnostic discovers that the good is within him and that he himself is divine, which is almost certainly an Eastern concept, probably influenced by Hinduism.

⁹ Pagels, 98.

¹⁰ Pagels, 119.

¹¹ Pagels, 126.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would argue that Elaine Pagels has incorrectly attributed ulterior motives to the early church leaders who rejected the Gnostic heresy. Her argument is that we should consider the social and political motivations that may have influenced the early church leaders, rather than simply their theological arguments. While it is certainly wise to consider the historical context of all theological arguments, Pagels does not argue effectively that the Gnostics were rejected for reasons other than their unorthodox theology. The church fathers had complete Scriptural authority to reject gnosticism for what it was, a complete heresy.

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