

James M. Robinson, Gnosticism and Gospel scholar, dies at 91

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue

James M. Robinson, a prominent scholar of the Gospel source known as “Q” and of Gnosticism, died March 22 at age 91.

He taught at the school now named the Claremont School of Theology from 1958 until 1964. After that he was professor of religion at the school now named the Claremont Graduate University until he retired in 1999. A member of the Jesus Seminar, he also directed the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity from 1968 to 2000.

He earned a doctoral degree in 1952 from the University of Basel, where he studied with Karl Barth, and another from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1955.

Robinson was general editor of the English edition of the Nag Hammadi Library, made up of ancient Gnostic texts discovered in Egypt in 1945, and editor of *The Critical Edition of Q*.

In an article in the *Christian Century*, George Nickelsburg praised Robinson’s “Herculean efforts” to make the documents publicly available.

“Until the discovery of these writings, we were largely dependent on Christian heresiologists and pagan antagonists for our knowledge of Gnosticism,” Nickelsburg wrote. “We can now view that phenomenon from within.”

Among Robinson’s other publications were *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* and *Jesus According to the Earliest Witness*.

In a 1966 article for the *Century*, “Hermeneutical theology,” Robinson argued that investigation into the diverse strands of early Christianity was relevant for contemporary theology.

Robinson wrote: “The original Christian message was a flow of Jewish-Hellenistic language and hence was never ‘pure’ in the sense of being exclusively Christian. Except in the case of speaking in tongues, the Christian message was intelligible to

the non-Christian because it was proclaimed in his language. Such proclamation always involved both an affirmation, usually only implicit, of the relative usefulness of a given non-Christian culture, represented by its language, and, by the proclamation of its subjection to Christ, a rejection, often explicit, of the same culture's orientation."

*Editor's note: Logged-in magazine subscribers can search for articles from before 1998 via the EBSCOhost platform from [our archives page](#).*