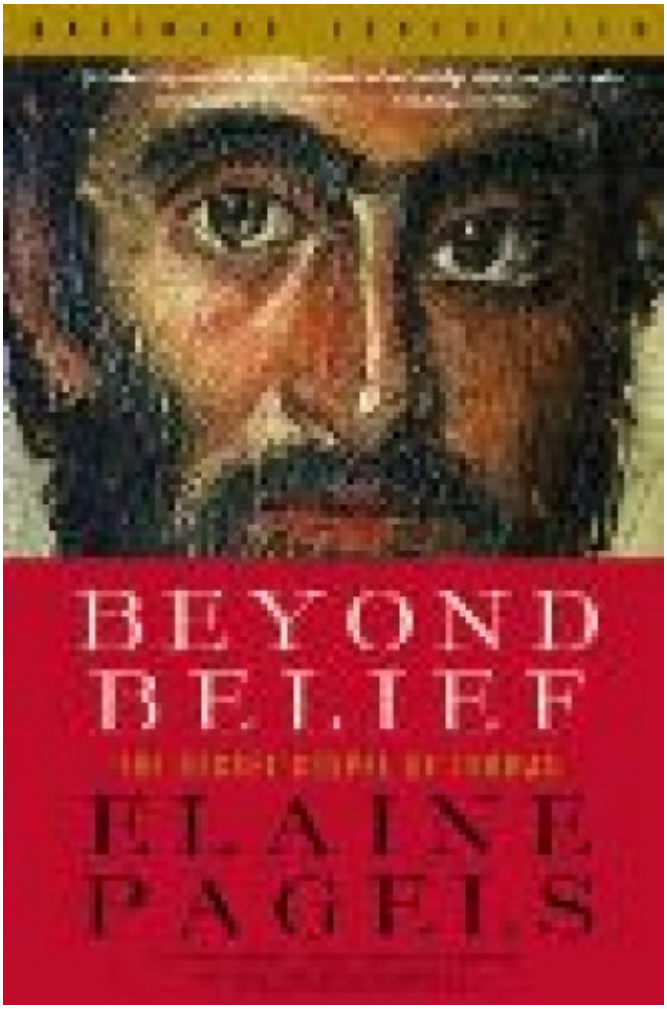
Going creedless

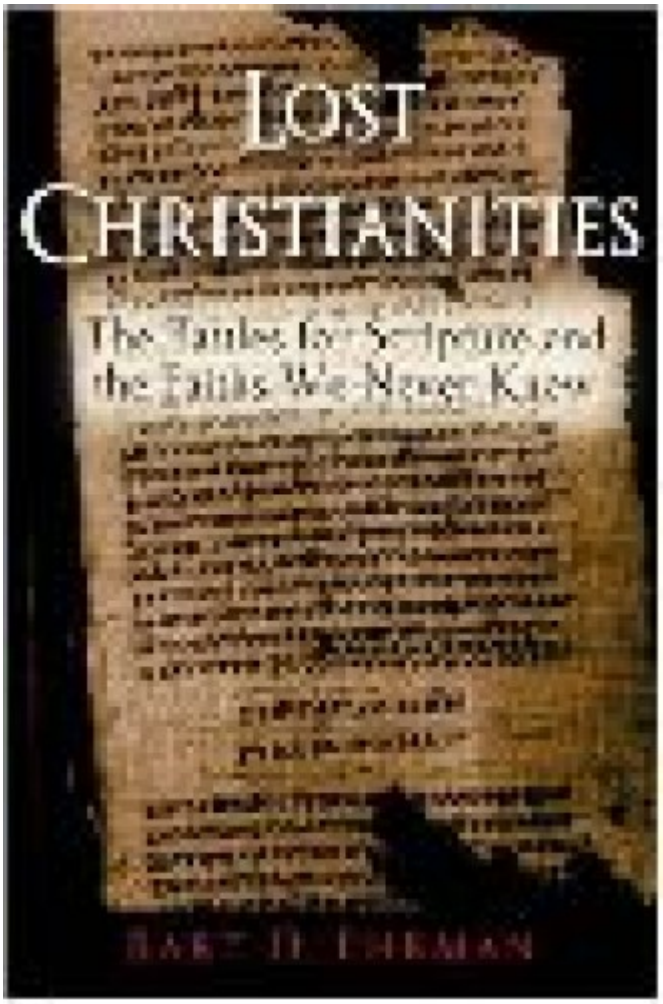
By John P. Burgess in the June 1, 2004 issue

In Review



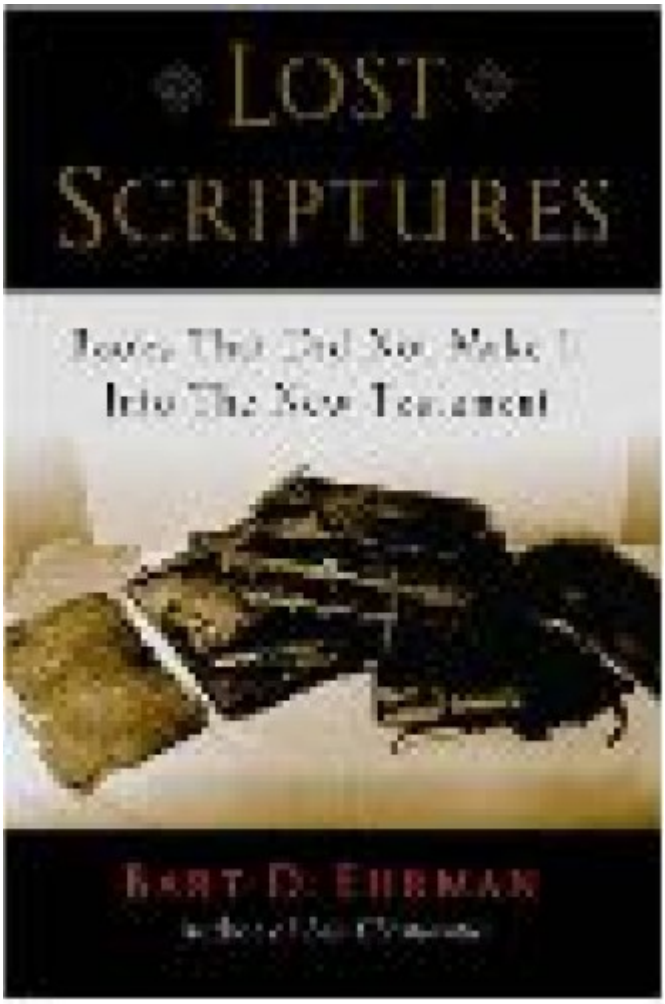
Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas

Elaine Pagels
Random House



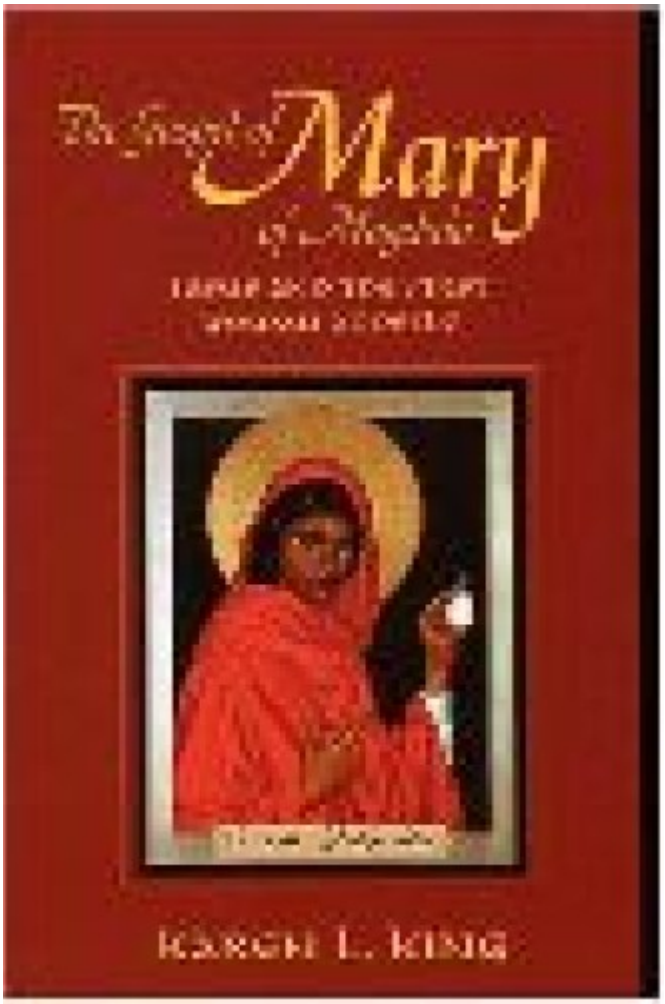
Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew

Bart D. Ehrman
Oxford University Press



Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament

Bart D. Ehrman
Oxford University Press



The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle

Karen L. King
Polebridge

Elaine Pagels begins *Beyond Belief* by recounting how, on a chilly February morning in Manhattan, she stepped into a church again after many years of absence. The truths of Nicene Christianity had not suddenly won her over. Rather, she was there because she had lain awake the night before, grief-stricken at the prospect of losing her two-and-a-half-year-old son, who had just been diagnosed with pulmonary hypertension. As she heard the liturgy intoned, she thought, “Here is a family that knows how to face death.” In the following months, she found friendship and solace in the church as she and her husband confronted their son’s death.

A quest for personal truth brought Pagels part way back into the church, but it also kept her part way out. Like many Americans, she had wandered away from the church's creeds and confessions only to have its rituals and community draw her back. More than seekers but less than adherents, such people are not capable of a simple childhood faith. Something about Jesus' way of life rather than doctrine carries them along. Prayers and hymns, not authoritative teachings, nourish them. Pagels is convinced that Christianity went wrong when it "became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs." What people are seeking, she says, is a personal experience of divine power.

Pagels is interested in early Christian writings that never made it into the canon, like the Gospel of Thomas. She finds in that text a Christianity that seems to affirm the personal search for truth and the experience of the divine. In recent years, Thomas and other alternative scriptures (and books about them) have captured the public imagination and the interest of members of mainline churches.

Bart Ehrman and Karen King share Pagels's interests in noncanonical writings (all three admire each other's work, as evident from dust-jacket blurbs). All believe that knowing the rich diversity of the early church can save us from the notion that only the orthodox got things right. The three teach at prestigious universities (Pagels at Princeton, Ehrman at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, King at Harvard Divinity School) and enjoy the respect of the academic guild. They have also won a popular following, and each has been regularly featured in the media (all three appeared in a December 2003 *Time* magazine cover story about "The Lost Gospels"). All three owe their success in part to their ability to communicate historical complexities to a lay audience. Pagels's and Ehrman's books in particular are page-turners in which early Christian history unfolds with the drama of a first-rate detective story.

But something more is going on here. These scholars also represent the spirit of 21st-century America, with its love of diversity, its suspicion of traditional authority and its respect for personal experience. Their work is not to be confused with the fictionalized conspiracy theories of Dan Brown's best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* , but their popular success is not unrelated to his. Historian Philip Jenkins in *Hidden Gospels*: *How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* has gone so far as to assert that the alternative gospels tell us less about the beginnings of Christianity than about "the interest groups who seek to use them today; about the mass media, and how religion is packaged as popular culture; and . . . more generally, about the changing

directions of contemporary American religion.”

Pagels and Ehrman tell a similar story: Under the threat of persecution, certain church leaders, especially Irenaeus, became convinced that Christianity could survive only if it became more unified in doctrine and structure. When Constantine came to power, the state promoted the church’s unity for the sake of its own. The “orthodox” established a canon of writings, which had to be rightly interpreted by authoritative confessions and teachers. Christianity became a matter of right belief, rather than a vital search for divine truth.

Pagels and Ehrman write sympathetically as well as critically about these developments. Irenaeus was not the Grand Inquisitor of the second century. He did not worry about heresy in order to protect his own power or prestige. Rather, he was deeply concerned that the appeals of the “heretics” to personal experience (including visions and new revelations) inevitably divided and weakened the church. Personal claims to truth needed to be tested against the truth that the church had received in the canonical Gospels’ witness to Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Right belief would ensure unity, and unity would ensure strength.

In addition, Ehrman notes that only orthodoxy had the ingredients that would allow Christianity to become a great world religion. The major alternative movements—the Ebionites, Marcionites and Gnostics—had historical liabilities. The Ebionites made demands for Jewish ritual purity that would have repelled gentiles. Marcionism’s rejection of Judaism made the faith look like a historical novelty, with no roots in antiquity and hence no clear claim to abiding significance. The various forms of Gnosticism promoted a spiritual elitism that would have had difficulty winning the masses. Historical factors thus conspired to ensure that orthodoxy alone would prevail and profoundly shape Western civilization.

Yet all three also believe that orthodoxy’s triumph, however inevitable, was also tragic, since it came at the cost of repressing Christianity’s origins. Orthodoxy began to think of itself as divinely ordained, rather than as part of a larger historical conversation about the meaning of Jesus. To Pagels and company, the discovery of the ancient texts in the Nag Hammadi library in 1945 has had the salutary effect of forcing Christianity to reconsider its past. The heretics can now speak for themselves, rather than be seen only through the lenses of the orthodox writers.

Pagels, Ehrman and King suggest three ways in which the alternative scriptures can benefit Christians today. First, the diversity of early Christianity gives us greater insight into the development of the church. By better understanding orthodoxy's opponents, we more clearly see what was at stake in its attacks on "heresy." Would gentile Christians have to keep the Jewish law? Was the Father of Jesus Christ a different God from the Creator of the universe and the God of Israel? Were the body and the material world a prison, a place of temptation and trial? Was Jesus a God-human whose death on the cross mysteriously won redemption for humankind, or a great human teacher so intensely in touch with the divine that he could offer others a liberating but esoteric wisdom? These were the central questions under debate.

Second, the diversity of early Christianity reminds us that orthodoxy was never the only Christian response to Jesus' life and message. Ebionites, Marcionites and various kinds of Gnostics also thought of themselves as faithful followers of the man from Galilee. Pagels and Ehrman take note of points at which orthodoxy shared the theology of the heretics even as it rejected that theology. Moreover, some heretical emphases may have helped shape orthodoxy. The church had to respond to the Ebionite concern to honor Israel, as well as to the Marcionite insistence that Christianity was something truly new in history. Gnosticism's contribution lay in directing orthodoxy to value continuing spiritual experience. King goes even further. The noncanonical Gospel of Mary, she believes, points to an early Christian concern for gender equality and nonhierarchical relationships, a concern that the church desperately needs to recover today.

Finally, the diversity of early Christianity teaches us to honor the variety of contemporary Christianities. We do not always have to pick one way as right (although King says we must do so on the issue of human equality); we can learn from each. Pagels suggests that orthodoxy and Gnosticism represent not opposites but two rungs on a ladder. The orthodoxy built on the Gospel of John calls us to believe the basic story about Jesus and his significance to the early church; the Gnostics invite us to a second conversion, a faith seeking understanding that transforms the self. As Pagels eloquently states, all of us have to take responsibility for our own spiritual journeys. We must draw insight from any source that helps us to live more fully in relationship to the divine and to each other.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the German theologian and social philosopher Ernst Troeltsch argued that a desire for personal religious experience has been a revitalizing force in religion in every era. He might view today's popular interest in

alternative scriptures and Christianities as sociologically inevitable and ecclesiologically essential. Pagels, Ehrman and King have lifted up a mystical impulse in early Christianity that attracts people. If churches are to find their way into the future, they should not reject this popular spirituality but seek to understand it and speak to it.

The three authors take a descriptive claim—early Christianity contained a variety of forms—and make it prescription: there *should* be a variety of Christianities. While the historical questions surrounding their approach are complex, I suggest that members of orthodox churches should hesitate about following it, even as they learn from Pagels and company. Several issues are central.

One of the issues is *eschatology*. How do we know the presence of God under the conditions of this world? To what degree can we experience God's glory, power and wisdom here and now? The Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary both contain a strong dose of realized eschatology. The kingdom of God is not a historical horizon but an inner, existential reality. "What such people seek," writes Pagels, ". . . [are] insights or intimations of the divine that validate themselves in experience—what we might call hints and glimpses offered by the luminous *epinoia*."

Nicene Christianity, however, has insisted that realized eschatology is inevitably tempted to become, in Luther's words, a theology of glory rather than a theology of the cross. Our claim that we experience God here and now must continually be corrected by a faithful longing for the kingdom that is yet to come and that will come by God's grace alone. We see now, but only through a glass darkly.

These writings also raise issues of *ecclesiology*. Thomas and Mary, as read by Pagels and King, encourage a personal search for truth. Each of us can receive revelation immediately and directly. Each of us can be an authoritative teacher, guided by the divine Spirit.

Nicene Christianity, in contrast, has insisted that the search for truth is a profoundly communal enterprise, in which each person remains a lifelong pupil of the Holy Spirit. Truth is found not in special moments of personal ecstasy but in daily patterns of life together. As a community of faith gathers to read, hear and study sacred texts, as it sings hymns of praise and confesses its sins, and as it practices acts of hospitality, compassion and justice, it learns and relearns how to receive and embody God's truth. Such truth always comes mediated through texts, traditions

and communal practices and therefore as incomplete and fragile, calling us to listen again with each other's help for a divine Word.

The gospels of Thomas and Mary challenge us to reflect on what it means for a text to be *scripture*. The question is not simply what belongs to the canon. Rather, what does it mean for a community to listen to a sacred text? Pagels and King see texts first of all as sources of special information. Scriptures teach us what Jesus said or what the early church said about Jesus. Moreover, different scriptures teach us different kinds of truth. In Pagels's and King's scheme, the gospels of Thomas and Mary point us to the hidden truth about our inner, spiritual lives, whereas the canonical Gospels rehearse external facts that orthodoxy asks us to believe about Jesus as the unique God-human.

But Nicene Christianity has regarded sacred texts less as repositories of information than as living witnesses to the divine truth who is Jesus, the crucified One now risen. The texts have a sacramental character. They point beyond themselves. They open our eyes to a kingdom that is hidden from our sight, yet already near at hand. They call us to trust in the promises of God as offered in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The purpose of a sacred text is not to show us the way to the true self within. Rather, scripture asks us to listen beyond ourselves to the One who is the Way.

Finally, what does it mean to *confess* the faith? In Pagels's and King's reading of alternative scriptures, faith is primarily a way of life with God, not a set of words about God. It is discipleship, not theology. But Nicene Christianity has insisted that the two are inseparable. How we confess the faith inevitably shapes how we live it. Truth is for the sake of goodness; theology, for the sake of piety.

Pagels and King are right to remind us that the church's confessions of faith have always been human products, riddled with political intrigue and too often employed for political ends. But the history of the composition and reception of confessions also teaches us that the church has found life-giving orientation in them. At its best, confession is a way of telling the story that bears a pilgrim people from past to present to future. Humans live by words—and the words of the great confessions help us rightly to read the scriptures as words of promise, not empty belief. As Karl Barth wrote, the point of confessing the faith is above all to give God the glory.

Pagels, Ehrman and King consistently define orthodoxy in terms of *right belief* that stands in opposition to “the trust that enables us to commit ourselves to what we hope and love.” But Nicene Christianity has also understood orthodoxy in a richer and deeper sense: as *right praise*. To be orthodox is to strive to stand rightly with others before the mystery of the true God. To be orthodox is to join with a community of faith in adoration of God’s *doxa* (glory), which already casts light on the day when God will finally make everything right. Belief is never correct when it becomes nothing more than a political mechanism to ensure the unity of an institution. Belief is right only when it points us in the right direction: to glorification of the true God, who promises not to give us a secret wisdom, but to be graciously present to us, even and especially where our vision and knowledge are weak.

Is my depiction of Nicene Christianity nothing more than a personal fantasy or an appeal to a long-forgotten communal memory? Many contemporary churches couldn’t care less about their Nicene heritage. Liberals and conservatives alike ignore the Nicene Creed and replace it with their own lists of right belief or right practice. If Pagels and company caricature orthodoxy, perhaps it is because orthodoxy has already done such a good job of caricaturing itself.

Nevertheless, Nicene Christianity over the centuries has not ignored the insights that the three scholars try to mine from alternative scriptures. On the contrary, Nicene Christianity has again and again explored these very questions of the right relationship between belief and trust, personal integrity and communal commitment, canonical scripture and other sources of spiritual insight. We do not need alternative Christianities. Our challenge is to rediscover the richness, complexity and vital witness of our orthodox heritage. We need to attend again to our own scriptures and confessions, our own worship and ethics, so that we might rightly praise the triune God.