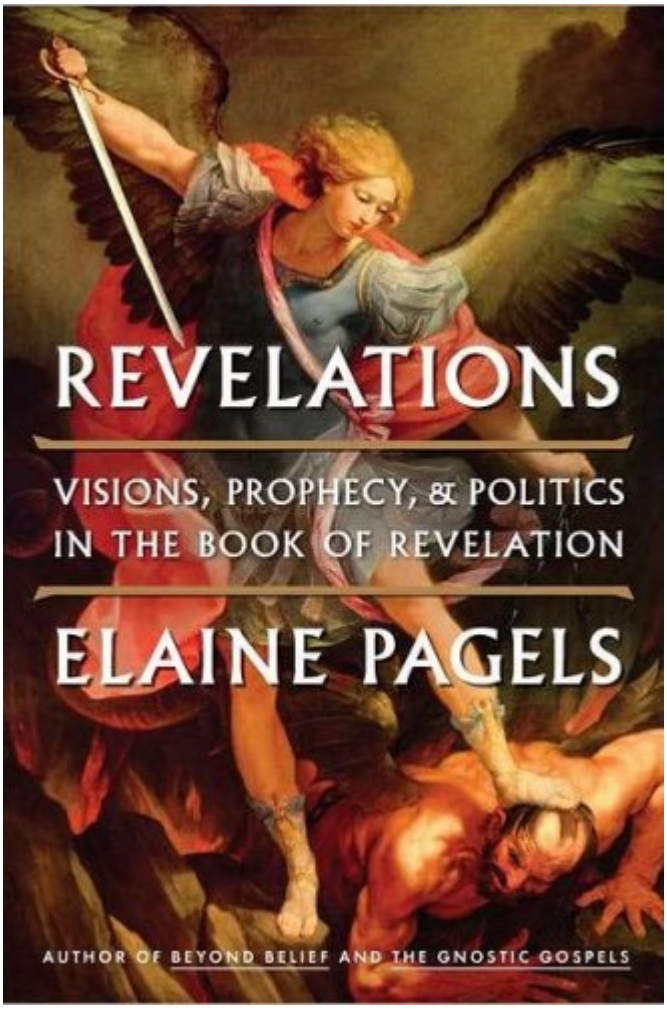
Apocalyptic visions

by J. Nelson Kraybill in the June 27, 2012 issue

In Review



Revelations

By Elaine Pagels
Penguin

Discussion of Gnosticism at a recent gathering of local clergy generated a comment from one pastor that perhaps Christian scriptures should be kept in a loose-leaf binder so we can add and remove documents at will. How unfortunate that our

Bibles come on gilt-edged paper securely bound between leather covers. Truth should not be so defined and confined!

Elaine Pagels's *Revelations* could be a resource for a project to remove canonical boundaries. This readable and tendentious book repeats a formula that has become a winner in an era of spiritual self-empowerment: highlight parts of the canonical New Testament or early church orthodoxy that are most likely to ruffle modern progressive feathers and contrast those with selections of Gnostic writings that are most likely to resonate with contemporary preferences. In this contest early church leaders and canonical scriptures come across as patriarchal, authoritarian and vindictive in contrast to the alleged inclusivity, generosity and feminism of Gnosticism.

The astonishing cache of ancient writings discovered at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945 provides most of the Gnostic texts Pagels cites. These spiritual books display the diversity of theologies and spiritual writings that swirled around the Mediterranean world in the early centuries of the Common Era. Loose-leaf binders had not yet been invented, but they are in effect what the church had; the canon of authoritative Christian documents had not yet stabilized. Churches scattered across and beyond the Roman Empire had not yet formed consensus on how to express central doctrines such as the Trinity. Who or what would serve as theological authority for doctrinal discernment? Only apostolic eyewitnesses to the Christ event? Could there be later revelations?

Pagels begins her treatment of these questions with a summary of scholarly consensus about the last book of the canonical New Testament. She explains that John of Patmos, working within an established literary tradition of apocalyptic symbolism, wrote a scathing anti-imperial tract that accuses the Roman government of colluding with Satan. The four horsemen of John's apocalypse represent scourges inflicted by empire, and John, a devout messianic Jew, considered the Roman emperor cult to be blasphemous. The war, persecution and hubris that Nero brought to the ancient world also play into the book of Revelation. The destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 explains much of the high-voltage outrage in John's work. John's beast symbolism has roots both in the Hebrew scriptures and in Babylonian creation mythology.

After putting John of Patmos into historical and literary context, Pagels turns to the heart of her discussion: the struggle that ensued as the early church sought unity on

doctrine and canon in the face of multiple revelations. Modern readers might assume that the last book of the New Testament was the only apocalypse circulating in the early church. Pagels shows otherwise. Nag Hammadi books illustrate the fecundity of revelations in the early Christian centuries, among them the *Gospel of Thomas,* the *Revelation to Peter,* the *Fourth Book of Ezra* and the *Secret Revelation of John*. The latter posits that the transcendent male God can be known through a lesser form of divine being, “often characterized by feminine form,” with the name Protennoia, which can be translated as primordial consciousness or Mother or even Holy Spirit.

These Gnostic books reflect ongoing revelation and experiential knowledge of God, in contrast to what Pagels depicts as the narrow-mindedness of authoritarian male leaders such as Tertullian, Irenaeus, Athanasius and Eusebius—men who closed the canon, formulated creeds and created hierarchy. Gnostics were free-thinking individualists unencumbered by accountability to community or external authority. Their theology is all over the map, but general patterns emerge: No kingdom of God is coming because that is only a metaphor for individual enlightenment. Jesus is not Lord or Master but simply a kind of guru who helps people find the good and divine within themselves. There is no sin from which mortals need salvation, only ignorance that the Gnostics can dispel.

One ancient Gnostic text, the *Gospel of Truth*, declares that persons with spiritual eyes opened realize that “they themselves are truth . . . and the Father is within them.” The author of the book *Allogenes* exults that when he came to see “the good that was in me, I became divine.” The *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* proclaims: “The Son of Man is within you; follow him!” The *Teachings of Silvanus* counsels readers to “knock upon yourself as upon a door. . . . Open the door for yourself.” Nag Hammadi scrolls abound with such self-referential notions.

Brooding bishops squelched this independent thinking, Pagels declares. Then the entire weight of the church came down upon it after Constantine’s conversion. The canonical book of Revelation sometimes provided ammunition for traditionalists who associated Gnostics and other “heretics” with the beast seen by John of Patmos. John’s apocalypse, Pagels implies, is vindictive in that it “conjures cosmic war” with “good fighting evil” and hurls nasty epithets such as “cowards, the faithless, abominable, filthy . . . liars” at opponents.

The vision of John of Patmos indeed has been exploited over the centuries by wackos and bigots, and there are portions that make me cringe. But what if we reversed Pagels's formula and compared the best of Revelation with the worst of Gnostic literature? What if we contrasted the Revelation 7 vision of people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" worshiping God, with the chauvinistic statement attributed to Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas*, that "every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven"? How does the orthodox concept of God-with-us in suffering stand up to the Gnostic idea in the *Revelation to Peter* that the one crucified on Golgotha was simply a stand-in and a "home of demons" while the real Savior was laughing nearby?

I am grateful that early Christian leaders struggled over canon, creed and authority to steer the church away from a lot of esoteric rubbish, and I do not share Pagels's idealization of the ancient Gnostics. But her new book is a worthy read as a window into the spiritual and political complexity of the first centuries of the Christian era. It is fascinating, for example, to see how early monastics collected and preserved diverse writings, including works of pagan philosophy and scrolls such as those found at Nag Hammadi.

There were many revelations in the early church, and there are eloquent parts of the Nag Hammadi library that may contain otherwise lost sayings of Jesus. Most of the Gnostic texts, however, issue from centuries after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather than showing us something authentic about Jesus or the apostles, they show us the psychological and theological imagination of a Jewish messianic movement cross-fertilizing with the pagan Hellenistic world.

This book would be stronger if it did not include factual errors in its treatment of canonical biblical texts. In discussing the first verses of Ezekiel—dated to 593 BCE—Pagels says, "by that time Babylonian soldiers had demolished the Jerusalem temple." The temple actually fell seven years *after* the prophecy in question—so that verse has a dramatically different context. Pagels refers to Paul's Damascus Road experience as happening decades after Jesus died, when all evidence points to it having taken place within two or three years of Jesus' ministry. She states that Paul spent "three difficult years in Asia Minor and Greece" after his conversion when in fact he spent that time in Arabia. Such sloppiness does not change her overall argument, but it creates the unfortunate and mistaken impression that she is not closely familiar with the canonical texts.

In her 1979 best seller *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels offered insight that should inform reading of her current book:

> Had Christianity remained multiform, it might well have disappeared from history. . . . I believe that we owe the survival of Christian tradition to the organizational and theological structure that the emerging church developed.

I agree. Pagels's statement of three decades ago prompts a question: does the orthodoxy that was emerging in the early church—despite distorting sins such as patriarchy and violence—still deserve to be seen as God's gift? Yes, it does, even if the Spirit today leads us to some correctives. Orthodox Christians of the first centuries focused on finding consensus, fostering community and strengthening the church; Gnostics were on an individualistic trajectory that atomized the Christian movement and made it into a precursor of psychotherapy. In our increasingly fragmented modern church, we need intellectually rigorous orthodoxy a whole lot more than we need romanticized rehabilitation of the failed theologies of ancient Gnostics.