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## Nag Hammadi Library in English: Revised Edition and The Jesus of Heresy and History: The Discovery and Meanings of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library (Book Reviews)

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Texts (15-85); (2) Illustrating Missions (87-154), (3) Translation Treasures (155-196); (4) Mission Mottoes and Quotations (197-203). The last three sections are intended as sermon illustrations with "reference to the actual experiences of missionaries (10)." While this book is written for pastors, a lucid writing style and some moving stories make it worthwhile reading for a person who has not had a formal theological training.

DeRidder and Greenway offer sixteen homiletical outlines which, however, are not intended to be used slavishly. All of these are preceded by a brief paragraph on the passage's central idea and a discussion of the text's background, context, and/or other matters. My reaction to the homiletic outlines is mixed. While some of them are insightful and helpful (e.g., Matthew 28:19-20, John 10:15-16, 2 Corinthians 2:14-16), I found others disappointing. Several outlines have too many points for a sermon (six or seven points). More seriously, although DeRidder and Greenway do not make any unbiblical claims, their outlines often assume an exemplaristic exegesis which does not evidence asking whether a biblical author intends a character to be understood as an example. Furthermore, occasionally the connections between the outline and the text are superficial. At times, it seems that a text has been chosen to fit the authors' agenda.

Here are some examples of my criticisms. The authors claim that the central idea of Gal 2:1-10 is that God's people are story tellers with a truthful message. That truism has little to do with Paul's purpose in narrating his relationship with the Jerusalem apostles. It is claimed that the central idea of Jonah 3-4 is: "God cares about cities." Jonah in the homily symbolizes a person who is overwhelmed by urban difficulties and consequently wants to go only to small towns. This alleged central idea of Jonah 3-4, which is actually eisegesis, disregards the text's critique of Israel's failure to carry out her mission and its powerful mission message that God's mercy extends to all peoples. On an Acts 1:8 homily, one reads that the Jerusalem church is a model church, instead of how Acts 1:8 is the programmatic statement for the whole book of Acts and the history of the church which extends beyond Acts.

In regard to the homiletical outlines, I might note three other concerns. First, a homily is presented on Mark 16:19-20, which is designated as the alternative ending of Mark. But that designation does not adequately address

*The Nag Hammadi Library in English: Revised Edition*, James M. Robinson, General Editor (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). 549 pp. + v-xv, \$24.95.

*The Jesus of Heresy and History: The Discovery and Meanings of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library*, John Dart (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). 204 pp. + v-xvii, Paperback \$10.95, Hardcover \$18.95. Reviewed by Gerald W. Vander Hoek, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Both of these books deal with Gnosticism and a fourth century Gnostic library. Since Gnosticism is not a

household word, my review will begin with some explanatory comments. The English term Gnosticism is the fact that Mark 16:19-20 is part of one addition (vv. 9-20) to the Gospel by manuscript copyists. Although the other scribal addition has rarely been included in English translations, would one preach a sermon on it? Secondly, a homily which is said in the table of contents and in the book's body to be based on 1 Corinthians 1:8-11 appears actually to be based on 2 Corinthians 1:8-11. Finally, the first section of this book would have been improved greatly by more exegetical notes, as is done in the better homiletical outlines.

The book's second section contains thirty-eight illustrations. Many of these are anecdotes about conversions or effective witnessing in mission situations. While not all of these stories are actually drawn from missionary experience (e.g., 123-124), many of them are moving stories of the power of the Gospel and would be very helpful for sermon illustrations.

Twenty-seven items are included in the book's third section. These are all based on texts which reflect a key biblical concept. DeRidder and Greenway report on what we can learn from Bible translators' attempts to find accurate expressions to convey these concepts in the many languages in which the Bible is being translated today. In addition to their use as sermon illustrations, DeRidder and Greenway state that this section can also be used as the basis for short devotional talks. Apart from the authors' tendency to moralize, most of these examples are interesting and would be helpful in making sermons.

Sections two and three could both have benefited from bibliographical references, none of which are provided. Some preachers probably would want to do further reading on some of the material in these sections before using them.

Section four contains mottoes and citations from the Bible and leading missionaries in the history of the church. This section would be more useful if it had bibliographical references for the citations and brief introductory remarks on the people cited. Unless a reader is extremely well read, one is left to guess what precisely is meant by a motto and the identity of some of the authors.

In short, I would not say that this book is a gold mine or a treasury. It needs more work before it could be called such. Nevertheless, it can be used as a resource for sermon preparation. Its greatest contribution is its second and third sections. Even the weaker homiletical outlines can be used as a catalyst for sermon ideas.

household word, my review will begin with some explanatory comments. The English term Gnosticism is

derived from a Greek word for knowledge (*gnosis*). Gnostics believed that a person is saved by knowledge. This knowledge was usually related in elaborate myths which included an unknowable divine Father and a series of emanations or divine beings descending from the Father. This evil world was created by the lowest and often ignorant and malicious god, the demiurge. He was often equated with the God of the Old Testament. According to Gnostics, some divine sparks are trapped in the gnostic elect, to whom a redeemer comes from the Father to awaken these sparks. Once Gnostics are aware of the divinity within themselves, they are able to transcend this evil world and to return to the Father at death because they know more than the lesser deities. In some Gnostic texts, the redeemer is Jesus Christ; in others, he is another figure (e.g., Seth).

Fully developed Gnosticism appeared in the second century A.D. The Church Fathers then and thereafter vigorously condemned it as heresy. It was also repudiated by Plotinus, a third century Neo-Platonist philosopher. After Christianity triumphed in the Western world in the fourth century, Gnosticism began to die out. Only one group has survived today from early Gnosticism. In Iraq, there is a small group of about 15,000 Mandaeans ("knowers") who claim John the Baptist as their heavenly redeemer. Occasionally modern scholars have attempted to appropriate Gnosticism (e.g., C. G. Jung). There is also a gnostic church today (e.g., the Ecclesia Gnostica in Los Angeles). (Gnosticism probably appeals to some modern people not because of its myths, but because its understanding of the self as divine fits modern self perceptions.)

Twentieth century biblical scholarship has witnessed a lengthy controversy over Gnosticism. Rudolf Bultmann and the tradition associated with him argued that second century A.D. Gnostic myths were actually pre-Christian and were used by New Testament writers to depict Jesus as a redeemer from heaven.

The Nag Hammadi library is a Christian Gnostic collection of fourth century Coptic codices (ancient books) which were found in 1945 near Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt. This discovery yielded fifty-two separate tractates. While some are duplicates or copies of already known documents, approximately thirty complete and ten partial tractates were previously unknown. Before the Nag Hammadi discovery the primary resource for information on Gnosticism was their opponents. Now scholars have new primary sources for Gnosticism, although not all of the Nag Hammadi documents are Gnostic or fully Gnostic.

Although these documents were discovered in 1945, it was not until 1977 that the complete library was published in English in the first and provisional edition of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (hereinafter *NHLE*).

Political turmoil in the Middle East and politics in the academic community delayed the publication. Since 1977 work has continued on translation and analysis of these manuscripts and has resulted in, among other things, a nearly completed published multivolume critical edition for these texts, *The Coptic Gnostic Library*. Translations in the latter appear in the 1988 edition of *NHLE*.

*NHLE*'s general editor James M. Robinson, who also did much to expedite the publication of these documents, has revised his introduction to reflect recent discussions. Robinson discusses what he perceives to be the Gnostic stance towards the world in a brief historical overview, as well as the state of the manuscripts and the story of their discovery. Robinson's proposed continuity between Jesus' non-conformism in regard to the authorities of his day and later Gnostic self-transcendence is not persuasive. The new managing editor Richard Smith introduces *NHLE* in a preface with bibliographical references and traces modern claimants to ancient Gnosticism in an afterword, "The Modern Relevance of Gnosticism."

Most of the translations in *NHLE* have been reworked and are consequently more readable. Many of the introductions to the documents have doubled or tripled in length and present helpful overviews. The attempts to date the documents in the introduction are in most cases necessarily cautious. Given the fact that a critical edition for these texts is nearly published, I would have preferred the introductions in *NHLE* to be less oriented to specialists. Also, this edition would have been more helpful as a tool for study if the index of proper names of the first edition had not been dropped and if a Scripture index had been included.

*NHLE* is a superb resource for the person interested in Gnosticism (and especially for those who don't know Coptic). This collection of documents is a library in the modern sense of the term. It contains a wide variety of literature (e.g., prayers, letters, apocryphal Gospels, a translation of Plato). This library also shows the variety in Gnosticism, as is also attested by the Church Fathers. Gnostics strove to develop different myths within their common framework. They also had different views of Jesus. For example, while some were close to the New Testament and the orthodox church, others were convinced that Jesus could not have really died on the cross. To demonstrate that, they told stories of Simon of Cyrene being crucified while Christ was elsewhere laughing at the ignorant people who believed he actually died. This story is really a critique of the orthodox church. Some Gnostics also had sharp criticisms for their fellow Gnostics. The library also reveals how some Gnostics used the Bible. In their interpretation of Genesis 3, the heroes are the Serpent and Eve because they imparted knowledge while the Old Testament God is depicted as ignorant and malicious.

Not only is *NHLE* of interest to students of Gnosticism; it is also crucial for church historians of this period since it shows some of the groups against whom the Church Fathers were arguing and possibly overreacting. Since Gnostics appropriated neo-Platonism, among other things, *NHLE* is also important for philosophers. Other academicians, some pastors and persons interested in biblical studies may also be interested in *NHLE* as a reference work. Whenever new documents are discovered that might have some bearing on biblical studies, an assimilation process follows the discovery. Because of their dates, the extent to which these Nag Hammadi documents are relevant for the New Testament is debated. Some of them were written in the second century and some have been argued to contain first century traditions. *The Gospel of Thomas* (hereinafter *GT*), for example, is being claimed by quite a few scholars to contain authentic sayings of Jesus. Some scholars have also drawn historical lines of continuity between some of Paul's and John's opponents and later Gnostics texts. The assimilation process is reflected in recent major commentaries and some of the more extravagant claims make the newspapers.

A survey of the beginnings of the assimilation process is part of what John Dart does in *The Jesus of Heresy and History*. Dart, a religion writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, has attempted to write a non-technical popular overview as a news reporter of scholarly discussions. His book, which is a revision of his 1976 *The Laughing Savior*, has been described as a popular companion to *NHLE*.

*The Jesus of Heresy and History* has four main sections. The first part, "The Discovery," narrates the story of the discovery and the long road before the manuscripts were published. The second part, "The Jewish Connection," reports on a theory, which is gaining more advocates, that Gnosticism arose within Judaism. Dart also explains an argument by Bultmannian scholars that a second century Gnostic document contains an earlier source which was used in John 1:1-18. As Dart explains these hypotheses, he has several elucidating comments on Gnostic texts.

A third section, "The Jesus of Heresy," presents some Gnostic views of Jesus and discussions of the role of women and feminine images of divine figures in Gnosticism. This section also contains helpful introductions to some key Gnostic concepts. The book's final section, "The Jesus of History," describes arguments for historically reliable traditions about Jesus in Gnostic sources (e.g., *GT*) and the Jesus Seminar. The latter, which has been reported in several newspapers, is a group of scholars who have been meeting to vote with colored ballots on whether sayings attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels and noncanonical Gospels are authentic.

While most of the book is cast in the form of reporting claims by scholars, Dart concludes the fourth section and his book with a report on his work on *GT*. Dart presents a theory on a three-stage compositional history of *GT*. His theory, which is one way of explaining how *GT* attributes both Gnostic and non-Gnostic sayings to Jesus, is in my judgment plausible, although it is not demonstrated. It is at least more plausible than another section where Dart appears more as originator than reporter (e.g., 140-145).

As mentioned previously, most of Dart's work is a report on scholarship. His alleged objective reporting of scholarship for a popular audience gives me some of my greatest reservations about the book. Although Dart does cite competing points of view on some questions, mere citation of a scholar's opinion can mislead the reader who is not acquainted with the literature. The reader loses some of the thesis and counter-thesis character of scholarship and has little basis to evaluate whether a cited opinion is really a serious option. And all the opinions cited are not equally valid.

A more serious problem with the book is Dart's portrait of scholarship which permeates the book. According to Dart, New Testament scholars divide between those who work under the constraint of creed or doctrine and those who are free to use historical-critical methods (126). The good guys in this scenario, the real scholars, are those who use historical-critical methods as presented by Dart. But most scholarship today, except for extremes on the right and left, is beyond Dart's simplistic portrait. Actually what is highlighted in Dart's book is not historical-critical scholarship, but its left wing which, *a priori*, knows that the New Testament basically is historically unreliable and which has sought for two centuries to demonstrate that assumption (cf. 161). Thus the reader is left with a skewed picture of what scholarship is about. It appears that Dart has selected what confirms his assumptions.

Dart's book also has an acute tension in its profile of the rise of Gnosticism. He adopts the position that Gnosticism arose within Judaism. In order to explain how Jews could in effect repudiate their faith by considering the God of the Old Testament a lower ignorant deity, scholars point to the shattering crisis when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. Dart concurs with this plausible hypothesis. But Dart also suggests that scholars must address the question of the influence of Gnostic ideas on Jesus and the early Jesus movement because Nag Hammadi studies have shown that Gnosticism goes back to a period contemporary with Jesus and within Jewish circles (175). Not only have Nag Hammadi studies not shown that truly Gnostic ideas are as early as Jesus (before *circa* 33), Dart's suggestion of Gnostic influence on Jesus vies with the theory of a

post-70 crisis in Judaism as the catalyst for Jews disavowing their faith. Ironically, earlier in the same chapter Dart used evidence of Gnostic ideas in *GT* as a basis for considering some sayings as later additions to this document.

Another problem with the book is a confusion of Doceticism and Gnosticism (93, 101). Doceticism is a Christological heresy which denied that Christ really became a human being and which is reflected in the New Testament (see 1 John 4:2-3). Not all Docetists were Gnostics and not all Gnostic were Docetists, though some were. Dart depicts Ignatius, a church Father who was martyred in about 115, as contending with Gnosticism when

*A Karl Barth Reader*, Rolf Joachim Eiler and Reiner Marquard, eds. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986). 128 pp. \$6.95. Reviewed by John C. Vander Stelt, Professor of Theology and Philosophy.

After having become a famous twentieth-century Protestant theologian in the West, Karl Barth commented on how he saw himself and his work as a biblical theologian:

I also admonish you in all seriousness, don't make a myth out of me, for the angels will certainly not like that, and the perspicacious will see through it to my shame . . . . I do not want the result of my life to be the formation of a new school. I want to tell everyone here who will listen that I myself am not a "Barthian," for when I have learned anything, I have wanted to remain free to learn more. Understand what I say: Make as little use of my name as possible . . . . Good theologians do not live in houses of ideas, principles, and methods. They pass through every house and out again into the free world. They keep on the move . . . . If it ever comes to light who has been the greatest theologian of this century, then perhaps some little man or woman who has very quietly taught a Bible class somewhere will be discovered and will actually prove to have been the greatest theologian of this century. (111-112)

As a "member of the Christian church" who crusaded against theological liberalism, Barth viewed his own achievements as "no more than a molehill" (113). The last word he had to say was not a "concept like grace" but only a "name [like] Jesus Christ," who "is grace" and "the ultimate one beyond world and church and even theology" (114).

This selection of Barth's sermons, letters, addresses, and published writings was prepared for the 1986 celebration of the centennial. For students and nonstudents, it provides a devotional and inspiring introduction to his life and views.

Barth was not first of all a biblical theologian but a critic

he actually was fighting Docetism. A complete lack of any reference to Gnosticism in Ignatius' writings continues to be a problem for those who postulate a first century Gnosticism.

Nevertheless, Dart's book is worth reading. His writing style is engaging. He has a knack for telling stories with an element of suspense. His book is valuable as it retells the story of the Nag Hammadi discovery and as a superb non-technical introduction to some key Gnostic concepts. It is also valuable as a report on a segment of scholarship, providing it is read as reporting on only a segment.

of a Western culture which had succumbed to human autonomy, become arrogant in denying God's revelation to humanity, and reduced God to a product of human projection. To express this critique, he used theology as an instrument.

Despite his intention not to establish another "school," he did leave behind in his numerous speeches, letters, and writings a distinct way of thinking and witnessing. This is evident from his views on such things as faith as decision in the present moment, theology as faith, church as context for theology and faith, free God and free man, God as the unknown Other, tension between Gospel as God's Word in Christ and Law as creation, principles, and structures of society, the dialectic between God's YES (in Christ) and man's NO, and Scripture as witness in relation to Christian faith.

Barth's peculiar way of thinking, living, reading Scripture, preaching the Gospel, warning against evils, and providing pastoral care for victims of evil, especially prisoners, reflects the tremendous formal and substantive impact of existentialism upon his critique of Western rationalism and, in this connection, his understanding and use of theology.

Despite these questionable thought-patterns that are present in this selection of his sermons, addresses, and letters, and for which he has been severely criticized by Reformed and other Christian thinkers, there is nevertheless a biblical thrust to his work. It is as though one can not only feel in Karl Barth Esau's hairy arms (e.g. compromise with existentialism) but also hear, albeit in muffled form, Jacob's voice (e.g. Scripture's witness to God's sovereign grace). At a student conference in Switzerland on August 7, 1934, Barth responded to an objection that he had not taken real life into account:

I was a pastor for ten years and had the task of preaching the gospel. I came up against the problem you all know well, that is, secularism, a