

Canonization Revisited:  
A Response to the Proposed Nag Hammadi Version of a New Christianity

*Now that scholars have begun to place the sources discovered at Nag Hammadi, like newly discovered pieces of a complex puzzle, next to what we have long known from tradition, we find that these remarkable texts, only now becoming widely available, are transforming what we know as Christianity.*

Elaine Pagels. *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*

Even if by “transforming what we know as Christianity” Elaine Pagels means “an all-together *makeover* of Christianity,” her grand assertion about the impact of the discoveries at Nag Hammadi in 1945 is *still* no exaggeration—at least not according to her description in *Beyond Belief*. For only a half-century ago (much less for mainstream culture), if someone were to ask, “what is authentic Christianity,” the discussion would have inevitably led to a conversation about Eastern Orthodoxy vs. Western Christianity, or perhaps about Roman Catholicism vs. Protestantism, or yet again about any one of the variations of say Presbyterian Christianity compared to any one of the variations of the Baptist, or Seventh Day Adventist, or Mennonite, or Congregationalist, or Methodist, or Pentecostal, or Charismatic, or Church of England versions of Christianity-- to name but *a few* of the Christianities that exist in the modern world today. And yet, for all their substantial differences in form, all these “Christianities” share a relatively broad consensus concerning the fundamentals of Christian faith that is predicated upon a single and shared standard, or *canon*. And because of this shared canon, notwithstanding all their differences, we can still speak of them all together as a single Christianity! And yet, according to many scholars like Elaine Pagels, all this has changed with the serendipitous discovery of a library of Coptic texts in Upper Egypt near the village of Nag Hammadi in 1947.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, before Nag Hammadi, all discussions about Christianity would have inevitably assumed a set of twenty-seven ancient books compiled into a recognized New Testament *canon* against which the claim of authentic Christianity could be measured.<sup>2</sup> And on the basis of the traditional New Testament *canon*, there would have been relative unanimity of agreement about such things as whether or not we should even be concerned for a *set of beliefs* as an expression of authentic Christianity, and if so, whether or not these beliefs have been entrusted to a divinely sanctioned community or “ecclesia” in order to guard and nurture a confessional consensus leading to Christian practice. As to the content of that faith itself, again based upon the twenty-seven books of the traditional New Testament *canon*, each of the above mentioned Christianities would have shared in common the same basic view of such things as the nature of the world, the Kingdom of God in the world but not of the world, the general meaning of Jewish history in relation to Christian history, the person of Christ and the meaning of his existence on earth, the idea of salvation, the problem of sin, human nature, eschatology, etc. But now, predicated upon a new perspective based on Nag Hammadi being promoted by some today, all of this has supposedly changed and the above assumptions are in need of revision- or so it is argued.

Backed by a post-modern sympathy “that all transcendent claims can be reduced to politics,” Timothy Luke Johnson has observed that for many post-modern scholars, “there is no arena of activity free from human self-interest, even religion.” Johnson further explains how “the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ so prevalent in the academy, detects whose interest is at work in any historical development, and the demand for the ‘recovery of other voices’ is thought necessary for a more liberating politics in the present.” He continues, “the recent recovery of the original Gnostic compositions, has provided the wedge to challenge the traditional canon, and with it, the traditional construction of Christian identity... The implicit argument embedded in

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<sup>1</sup> The fifty-two Coptic scrolls, only five of which are called “gospels,” were translated into English in 1977. c.f. James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977). For the authoritative account of how these scrolls were discovered, see James Robinson, “The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 42 (1979), p. 206-224.

<sup>2</sup> As noted by Harry Gamble, “the English word “canon” is a transliteration of the Greek *kanon* which... signified “reed” as a tool for measurement or alignment. From this literal sense there arose metaphorical applications of the term... to mean “norm,” or “ideal standard, a firm criterion against which something could be evaluated and judged.” (c.f. Gal.6:16, “Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this *kanon*.”). Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon, Its Making and Meaning*. (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1985) p. 15.

much scholarly and popular work is that historic orthodox Christianity is little more than a power-hungry conspiracy.”<sup>3</sup> And so, “writing with the ‘instincts of a novelist,’ one reviewer has noted how Elaine Pagels brought the Gnostic heretics to life and made them likeable... “as the forgotten victims and heroes of a class war waged by the politically powerful bishops.”<sup>4</sup>

In brief, the basic argument regarding this new perspective on Christian canonization is basically this: That based upon Nag Hammadi, we now know that there were two versions of Christianity that developed along side of each other during the first through third centuries. And here’s the catch, it is said that the more authentic and true version was later suppressed in the fourth century for political reasons. In other words, the catholic (small “c”) Christianity that has enjoyed relative cultural hegemony from the fourth century until now has now been exposed as the political propaganda that it really was (is)—this by the discovery of the more pure and authentic interpretation of Christ that fell victim to the patriarchal power plays of the fourth century bishops.

And in perfect coincidence with the emergence of a post-modern sympathy, we are now poised to *makeover* Christianity into the more inclusive and individualistic version that blend together the east with the west. As one recent introduction to a Nag Hammadi text has reasoned, in the *Secret Gospel of John* we can draw “connections to Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, kabbalistic Judaism, and Sufism... [an] ardent call for self-awareness and introspection, and the empowering message that divine wholeness will be restored not by worshiping false gods in an illusory material world but by our recognition of the inherent divinity within ourselves.” We are therefore called not to a savior, but to a “deeper insight” wherein “the distinction between savior and saved ceases to exist” such that “you must save yourself and in doing so save God.”<sup>5</sup>

Armed then with the post-modern “hermeneutic of suspicion” the Nag Hammadi texts can be read to coincide with the oppression of women and the modern use of religion for the purpose of political imperialism by the right. Case in point—here is the way Elaine Pagel’s relates what happened then in the suppression of her proposed better version of Christianity out of the Nag Hammadi variety with what is happening now. Speaking of the third century Bishop Irenaeus:

What was discovered in Egypt includes over fifty of the gospels and writings that he (Irenaeus) tried to banish and discredit. And it's no accident—and no surprise, when you think about it—that Irenaeus' kind of Christianity—authoritative, simple, hierarchical—is what many Christians, including many politically minded Christians, still declare is the "only true Christianity" today. For with the surprise conversion of Emperor Constantine in the year 312 the situation of Christians transformed from that of an illegal group to becoming the religion of the empire. Constantine apparently found in it a new way of organizing—and justifying—the politics of imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

And here we have it, a new perspective on canonization wherein the Bible is portrayed as the product of a political conspiracy, opening the way for yet a new Bible based upon the ancient texts once discarded by the power elites of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, almost single handedly, it has been suggested that Pagels “moved the lost Nag Hammadi texts, perhaps the real heroes of the *Da Vinci Code*, from the ivory tower into the public square.<sup>7</sup> What was accidentally discovered in 1946 at Nag Hammadi was studied by a generation of scholars to eventually trickle down into the popular culture-- not least of which was Elaine Pagels who from a graduate seminar at Harvard eventually produced her 1976 publication of the immediate best seller, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, “A new Gnosticism: an old threat to the church” *Commonweal*, Nov 5, 2004. *FindArticle*, Copyright 2005 (hereafter “New Gnosticism”).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Jones & James Garlow, *Cracking the Da Vinci's Code*, (Cook Communications, 2004) p. 158-159. (hereafter “Jones”). For another response to Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, see: Bock, Darrell L., *Breaking The Da Vinci Code : Answers To The Questions Everybody's Asking*. (Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> *The Secret Book of John: The Gnostic Gospel, Annotated & Explained*, Translated and Annotated by Stevan Davies (Skylight Paths Publishing, 2005), “Introduction,” p. NA.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Politics Of Christianity: A Talk With Elaine Pagels [7.17.03]* Edge Foundation, Inc Copyright 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, p. 158-159.

Only a year later, the production of an English translation of all fifty-two Coptic scrolls was published in 1977.<sup>8</sup> And of course, all of this eventually ending up in Dan Brown's ardently popular *The Da Vinci Code*—which showcase as the real hero the Nag Hammadi texts as being read in over 28 languages by well over an estimated 40 million people. For every time it is proclaimed by Brown's Teabing to Sophia: how “many scholars claim that the early church literally stole Jesus from his original followers, hijacking his human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power,” the unsuspecting encounters a kind of evangelistic zeal rarely before experiences since the 20th century.<sup>9</sup>

According then to Dan Brown's caricature based on the new perspective in canonization, the canonical New Testament ought to be discarded as “a product of man, not God,” as “false testimony,” and as compiled and edited by “men (emphasis on “male”) who possessed a political agenda to solidify their power base” as then “commissioned and financed” by Constantine in order to shore up his political base. Here again, the impression given of the early Christian period of canonization is that the true and more authentic Bible was discarded and replaced by a new Bible after the image of the elite power brokers of the fourth century. But good news according to Brown, “the gospels they attempted to destroy have been discovered as apart of an ancient library of Coptic Scrolls and highlight the glaring discrepancies and fabrications of the modern Bible.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Dan Brown's Teabing represents to the unsuspecting reader a *top-down* history of canonization wherein the traditional canon is exposed as an organ of propaganda driven by politically imperialistic motivations for the centralization of power.

As represented by New Testament Scholar Kurt Aland, “there was no less than seven stages through which the New Testament had to pass before the present uniformity was arrived at.”<sup>11</sup> And contrary to the new perspective, the focus of the seven stages is on the growth of consensus that was altogether in tact prior to the end of the second century even. For instance, Kurt Aland's description of the seven stages led him to conclude:

*It goes without saying that the Church, understood as the entire body of believers, created the Canon. But this Canon grew in fact from the bottom upwards, in the communities among the believers and only later was officially legitimized from the top. It was not the reverse; it was not imposed from the top, be it by bishops and synods, and then accepted by the communities.*<sup>12</sup>

And so, if the new perspective wants us to focus on the fourth century and especially the various synodical maneuverings by ecclesiastical powers that were backed by Constantine in order to consolidate political power resulting in the suppression of the opposing interpretations of Jesus for political reasons, the more traditional or “old perspective” wants us to focus on the first two centuries and especially, in the words of Kurt Aland, “the generally accepted *regula fidei*” (“rule of faith”) that was already in tact well before the end of the second century even.

The “rule of faith” according to Aland, was “the single most important standard... the norm by which everything was measured—even the books of the emerging New Testament, so far as any doubts still remained about their general validity.” And this *regula fidei* says Aland, “goes back to the times of oral tradition” and “represented the deposit of the community's heritage of faith which is in process of formulation.” Subsequently, “the question as to whether a writing under an apostolic name can really be accepted by the church is answered in the last resort by asking whether its contents are in accordance with this canon” (e.g. the orally transmitted “rule of faith”).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is further explained by Aland how this *regula fidei* was “one of the authoritative norms in which the church of the second century sees the guarantee of pure doctrine: at its side there stood the multiple unbroken chain of Episcopal office-bearers which in

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<sup>8</sup> James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977)

<sup>9</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, (New York: Doubleday, 2003) p. 233. (hereafter, “Brown”).

<sup>10</sup> Brown, p. 241, 342, 234, 234, 234 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Kurt Aland, *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (London, Mowbray, 1962) p. 9. (hereafter Alan, *Problem...*)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16, 17.

theory goes back to the Apostles and thus—again in theory—ensures the unchanged tradition of the inherited faith and doctrine from one generation to another.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the principle of apostolic succession by means of a succession of office-bearers was directly tied to the succession of a “rule of faith,” not vice versa, even if later the office bearers formally recognize what was in place prior to themselves as a “rule of faith.”

By this brief summation of the two perspectives, a central question is exposed representing two very contradictory responses. According to the new perspective, the “rule of faith” was not established until the fourth century in the Council of Laodicea in A.D. 350. According to the traditional perspective, the “rule of faith” was already established, if but orally, even toward the end of the second century! Which is it? Is it true or not, for instance, that by the fourth century *there was as yet no established “orthodoxy,” there was no basic theological system acknowledged by the majority of church leaders and laity*” as concluded by Ehrman?

The whole question, it seems, turns on the issue of the Old Testament! In short, against the assumption of the new perspective, there is a conspicuous absence in their description of anything “Jewish” relative to the history of Jesus himself, his targeted ministry to the Jews, and especially his use of the Old Testament together with his earliest followers, as a canon *already* assumed. I use the word “suspicious” in that this new perspective is perfectly reflected in the Hammadi texts which in turn corresponds to the teachings of Marcion in the mid-second century-- teachings that were overwhelmingly rejected by an ecumenical consensus that evidently existed *before* the third century even. And to be clear, the significance of this consensus was to establish the continued validity of the Old Testament “rule of faith” as a basis for interpreting the ministry of Jesus and all subsequent teachings by his followers.

It is universally acknowledged, for instance, that Jesus did not emerge into a religious nothingness, but into the distinctive religious context of Biblical Judaism. According then to the canonical New Testament, the assumption of the Old Testament *regula fidei* is proven in Christ’s words, “do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the Prophets [the OT Canon summarized], but to fulfill it,” even as in many ways emphasized throughout both the canonical gospels and epistles.<sup>15</sup> Christ’s ministry was primarily directed to the Jews (Mt.10:6,15:24), even if his message and commission interpreted the Messianic expectations of the Old Testament as a mandate to include all nations (Mt. 12:18, 21, 24:14, 28:16-20, cf. Gen.17:4ff, Dt.26:19, 28:1, Ps.2:8, Is. 2:1-2, Joel 2:28ff, etc) as to create a “kingdom not of this world,” albeit contrary to the some of the post-Maccabean Jewish perspectives that sought after a geo-political “of this world” interpretation of the Messianic expectations of the Old Testament. Moreover, one could argue that the foundational premise of every Pauline text, if not also Petrine texts, as represented in the canonical New Testament is basically “there is therefore no new religion here, but a religion in succession to the religion of the previously established and confessed canonical Old Testament.”

To be sure, the objection could be raised that this begs the question in that it assumes the perspective of the canonical New Testament (contra the Nag Hammadi collection). Yes it does. But here is the present point-- this “battle” was waged *not* in the fourth century, but in the middle of the second century, wherein the “winners” were *not* the politically advantaged by any stretch of the imagination, but where instead those most persecuted under the political oppression of pre-Constantinian imperialism. That is to say that the first real battle for scripture was around A.D. 140 relative to the teachings and proposed written canon of Marcion (A.D. 90-160). It was Marcion’s contention *then* that only certain Pauline texts together with portions of Luke should become a written *regula fidei*, albeit in so far as these texts were stripped of their Jewish aspects.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Mt. 5:17. c.f. Acts 2, Eph. 3:1-6, 1Pet.2:9, Rev. 14:8.

<sup>16</sup> As further clarified by Bart Ehrman, Marcion, the contemporary of Justin, “began to advocate a well-defined canon of Scripture that conformed closely to his own theological agenda... a radical Paulinism that was divested of any trace of Judaism... a canon comprised of 10 Pauline epistles, purged of all Jewish traits and one Gospel, evidently a form of Luke.” Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, p. 20.

And yet, as noted by Harry Gamble, while “this teaching won many adherents, it also evoked sharp criticism and by the late second century was broadly repudiated as heretical.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the teachings of Marcion, viewed by most scholars to be in league with many early Gnostic Christian teachers,<sup>18</sup> and sympathetic to the perspective of Nag Hammadi, were by the late second century condemned as outside of the *previously* recognized “rule of faith” or “canon,” albeit one that was not yet formally recognized and sealed in a compilation of early writings. Before anything “top-down” was in play, the issue of *regula fidei* to included the Old Testament “rule of faith” was established by “the bottom-up” and a consensus that was formed albeit without political or synodical backing. According then to the traditional perspective, the rest is more or less history—one of fine tuning and formally recognizing the *regula fidei* as eventually codified into the twenty-seven books of the canon.

Therefore, even before the commencement of Kurt Aland’s seven stage process of canonization as we will be briefly review here, there was the *regula fidei* of the Old Testament canon that was being used to validate the messianic claims of Christ by the early eyewitness of his ministry, a ministry that was primarily, and providentially, in, with and to the Jewish community. According then to the principle of succession *already* established by the Old Testament canon, Aland’s “stage one” commences as “the oral tradition of Jesus’ teachings stood alongside of the OT.” They circulate orally, but they are also written down in collections of sayings from which quotations are taken” and “toward the end of this period (A.D. 60’s) the letters of Paul also exist, just as do the Gospels.”<sup>19</sup> These writings and epistles are being circulated and read in services throughout the east and west.

Etc. etc.

Summary:

Three early challenges to the revelation of Jesus:

- 1) Gnosis: The challenge of secret revelation (f. c. 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> c.)
  - a. Taught that the true gospel was not passed on publicly but contained in a secret oral tradition and writings
  - b. Opposed teaching of the incarnation and suffering of Christ
- 2) Marcion: The challenge of limited revelation (d. c. 160)
  - a. Taught that God is love to the exclusion of law
  - b. Narrowed the scriptures to ten letters of Paul and an edited version of Luke’s gospel
- 3) Montanus: The challenge of continuing revelation (f. c. 172)
  - a. Taught that they Holy Spirit was being poured out again in the last days and conveying new doctrine through prophets
  - b. Known for its extreme asceticism and division of Christians into elite and common groups

The Muratorian Fragment (or Canon) is an early witness of the results of these pressures.

- Most of the New Testament that we recognize are mentioned
- Books in the canon are justified largely on historical grounds

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<sup>17</sup> Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> Including Basilides (117-138), Valentinus (135-165). c.f. Gamble, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Aland *Problem*, p. 9.