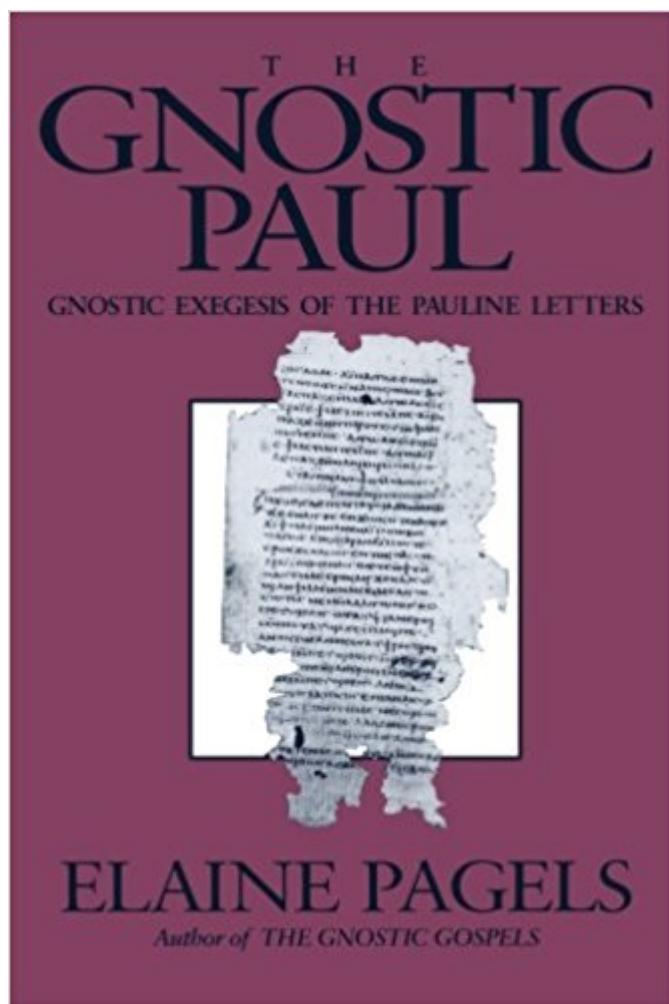


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# The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis Of The Pauline Letters



## Synopsis

In this highly original work, Elaine Pagels demonstrates how evidence from gnostic sources may challenge the assumption that Paul writes his letters to combat "gnostic opponents" and to repudiate their claims to secret wisdom. Drawing upon evidence from the gnostic exegesis of Paul, including several Nag Hammadi texts, the author examines how gnostic exegetes cite and interpret key passages in the letters they consider Pauline -1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Hebrews. Besides offering new insight into controversies over Paul in the second century, this analysis of gnostic exegesis suggests a new perspective for Pauline study, challenging students and scholars to recognize the presuppositions-hermeneutical and theological-involved in their own reading of Paul's letters. Elaine H. Pagels is the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton University. She is the author of *The Gnostic Gospels*, which won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, and the best-selling *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*.

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## Customer Reviews

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Whew! Not for the entrenched "Christian" - will knock off any religious socks that you have left. Spirit inspired and worth the read.

Doctor Pagels has given us an exciting opportunity to look into the dynamic culture of the early Christian church. Up until the last 30 years, we saw everything as being historically seamless. Her work on Paul and other explorations of early Gnostic writings as found in the Nag Hammadi library have opened the windows. We begin to see how the dominant Roman centered Christian church powered by bishops suppressed the inclusive, philosophical, learned Christian expression of a pluralistic branch of the Christian church in favor of a literalist understanding of scripture and male dominance. This more democratic group of Christians were labeled heretics and Gnostic because they saw Christian expression and the Christian story as part of the greater metaphorical tradition of heroic spirituality. I commend this book to any reader who is on an inquisitive journey and willing to take a critical look at early Christian beginnings and Paul's Gnostic vision.

Not bad but the truth is that there was nothing "gnostic" about Paul. The author pretty much admits as much . . . eventually.

Until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, scholars knew little about Valentinian Christian theology: fragments by Valentinians and anti-Valentinian writings. Pagels has now also begun applying what she has learned from the Valentinian Nag Hammadi texts in order to carefully present how the Valentinians interpreted the letters of Paul. For passage after passage from Paul's letters, she demonstrates the Valentinian claim that Paul was writing with two audiences in mind: one literal-minded in their understanding of Christianity, the other symbolically-minded. Moreover, we learn that rather than break away from the literal-minded Christians, Valentinians mingled with them, careful not to offend them but privately finding literal beliefs wanting but with the hope that those who held them could be led to a superior, symbolic understanding of Christianity which Valentinus claimed Paul himself had transmitted privately to initiates. This was, of course, not a teaching that literal minded Christians welcomed and the Valentinians, like other Gnostics, were labelled as heretics. Neither group appreciated the other but the Valentinians displayed an acceptance that the other group did not. Some people may see in the rise of science a threat to Christianity. What seems remarkable (as this book clearly shows) is that as early as the 2nd century of Christianity, far before the rise of modern science, people had rejected a literal belief in Christianity while at the same time recognizing that many people would not be able to benefit from a symbolic understanding without

special efforts, if at all. This division among people into those who understand literally and those who understand symbolically was also noted by Pagels in her earlier book "The Gnostic Gospels". Of course, it extends beyond Christianity and religion in general and into our own time. In the introduction to his book "Misquoting Jesus", Bart Ehrman traces openly his own change from someone who had believed the Bible literally: it doesn't lead him to Gnosticism but it does lead him to question about the Bible "what if God didn't see it that way?". That the Valentinians were acutely aware of conflicts within Christianity in the 2nd century and had developed the rich theology that Pagels presents so as to be able to teach Paul in a symbolic manner while not offending or confusing those who take him literally seems well worth being aware of. Initiation may have served as a way to point out what had been mistakenly taken as literal was intended as mythic. Whether Paul intended his letters to be understood in the way that the Valentinians believe is not answered by Pagels but she doesn't discount it, leaving it to other scholars and her own future research to consider that more. As she noted in the introduction, not all of the Valentinian Nag Hammadi texts have been studied with respect to their exegesis of the Pauline letters. And, of course, we do not know what other hidden texts may be found in the future, if any, that may enhance our understanding of early Christianity.

Good book for someone looking the truth

wonderful expose. would recommend elaine pagels works to anyone.

Pagels does a nice job of presenting a Gnostic view of Pauline letters, though some of the writings attributed to Paul have been questioned as actually having been written by Paul as early as while he was still alive. May not be the easiest to follow for some people.

Very interesting viewpoint.

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