

The Nag Hammadi Codices and Gnostic Christianity

How the Nag Hammadi texts discovered in Egypt reintroduced the world to Gnostic Christianity

Until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in 1945, the Gnostic view of early Christianity had largely been forgotten. The teachings of Gnostic Christianity—vilified especially since they were declared heretic by orthodox Christianity in the fourth century—had been virtually erased from history by the early church fathers, their gospels banned and even burned to make room for the view of Christian theology outlined in the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

But when two peasants discovered the Nag Hammadi texts, a 13-volume library of Coptic texts hidden beneath a large boulder near the town of Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt, the world was reintroduced to this long-forgotten and much-maligned branch of early Christian thought, Gnostic Christianity, from the Greek word *gnosis*, “knowledge.” The Nag Hammadi codices are 13 leather-bound volumes dated to the mid-fourth century that contain an unprecedented collection of more than 50 texts, including some that had been composed as early as the second century.

Once the Nag Hammadi codices had been translated and published by a team of scholars led by Claremont Graduate University’s James M. Robinson, the documents showed that Gnostic Christianity was not the depraved cult described by orthodox Christian writers but rather a legitimate religious movement that offered an alternate testament to Jesus’ life and teachings.

The Nag Hammadi texts, which represent a range of attitudes and beliefs in Gnostic Christianity and include everything from competing gospels to apocalyptic revelations, all assert the primacy of spiritual and intellectual knowledge over physical action and material well-being. The Apocryphon of John, for example, is the most important tractate of classic Sethian Gnosticism. In it the risen Jesus reveals to John, son of Zebedee, the truth of creation.

According to this Gnostic myth, the God of the Hebrew Bible is actually a corrupted lower deity. Only through the intervention of Sophia (Wisdom) can *gnosis* be revealed and salvation attained. Thus, while adherents of Gnostic Christianity certainly acknowledged the role of Jesus in their faith, their theology placed greater significance on the intellectual revelation of his message than on his crucifixion and resurrection.

Also among the Nag Hammadi texts was the fully preserved Gospel of Thomas, which does not follow the canonical Gospels in telling the story of Jesus’ birth, life, crucifixion and resurrection, but rather



The Nag Hammadi texts were contained in 13 leather-bound volumes discovered by Egyptian farmers in 1945. Dated papyrus scraps used to strengthen the bindings of the books helped date the volumes to the mid-fourth century A.D. *Photo: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA.*



The Nag Hammadi codices, detail *Photo: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA.*

presents the reader with an early collection of Jesus' sayings. Although this mystical text was originally believed to be one of the early texts of Gnosticism, it now seems to reveal yet another strand of early Christianity.



From a historical perspective, the Nag Hammadi codices provide a clearer picture of the diverse theological and philosophical currents that found expression through early Christianity. Indeed, Gnosticism and its classically inspired philosophical ideals permeated not just early Christian thought but also the Jewish and pagan traditions from which Christianity arose. The Nag Hammadi codices, widely regarded as one of the most significant finds of the 20th century, revealed this complex religious milieu and offered an unparalleled glimpse into alternative visions of early Christianity.

The Nag Hammadi codices contain more than 50 early Christian texts, including the Gospel of Thomas. The forgotten gospel preserves sayings of Jesus that were not included in the canonical Gospels. *Photo: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA.*