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Few books to have emerged from the Academy have been as famous, as successful, and earned their author as much praise and, frankly, as much scorn as *The Gnostic Gospels*. It was Elaine Pagels' third book, destined to change her life, just as it indeed changed much of what we do as scholars of Gnosticism and how we do it. My assigned task today is to place *The Gnostic Gospels* into context as a scholar of what I will be forced to call "Gnosticism," with a whiff of irony, simply for convenience's sake.

Let me start with a word about the considerable controversy that this book evoked. The trouble for Elaine started when, in *The Gnostic Gospels*, she painted Gnostics as people not just to be taken seriously, but esteemed. Certain issues that Pagels made front and center in *The Gnostic Gospels* remain controversial because they remain perennial issues for Christians. My husband and I were discussing, recently, Pope Benedict's words on the welcoming of married Anglicans into the Catholic clergy. The question of whether or not married men can be Catholic priests is one that is culturally bound; it's difficult to imagine it still being an issue in 2,000 years. But some of the issues Pagels addresses in *The Gnostic Gospels* concerning doctrine or authority, are still pressing now -- for instance, the issue of whether one's authority comes from tradition or from revelation. It's easy to see this as an enduring issue for Christians. Elaine's unstinting gaze into these ancient debates that remain vital was both controversial and, I think, tremendously brave. She couched problems in early Christianity in terms of what's important -- what was important now, and then highlighted how these same issues were important *then*.

Each of the chapters of *Gnostic Gospels*, like her scholarly articles, thus engages a single provocative idea sure to engage modern readers. At the same time, considered from a structuralist perspective, each remains steadfastly based on certain key textual hermeneutical principles:

- 1) There is a hidden argument, debate, or conflict behind an ancient text that is only partially represented, and which can be teased out through a careful consideration of the text's socio-historical setting;
- 2) The origins and consequences of theological debate extend well beyond theology;
- 3) Presuming diversity in early Christianity is key;
- 4) However their opponents thought of them, the Nag Hammadi authors saw themselves as the true Christians and the true interpreters of scriptures, particularly Christian scripture. They deserve, therefore, to be

taken seriously as thinkers who engaged with the same texts as other Christians.

Many have pointed out that that *The Gnostic Gospels* is actually misnamed; only a few “Gnostic gospels” still exist, and this book does not focus exclusively on them. In fact, one could argue that *The Gnostic Gospels* is not really a book about Gnosticism -- at least not in the same manner as classic studies such as Hans Jonas’s landmark *The Gnostic Religion*. Rather, in *The Gnostic Gospels* Pagels takes on Christianity in the second century as a whole -- or more precisely, she rightly insists upon emphasizing Christianities in Roman antiquity. Although *The Gnostic Gospels* is replete with language explaining what Gnosticism is, the primary work it does, as I see it, is to initiate movement into thinking harder about diversities in early Christianity, pushing further a model first established by Walter Bauer. The book presents early Christian centuries as rife with conflict, in the competitive market atmosphere of the Roman Empire.

If we have to talk about early Christianities, it is fair to say we have to think about Gnosticisms as well. One criticism of *The Gnostic Gospels* is that it erroneously makes Gnosticism monolithic in the very way that it will not permit early Christianity to be. I do not believe this was Pagels’ intention, nor is it the lasting legacy of the book. She was, after all, influenced (as were all other scholars of Gnosticism at the time) by the driving, phenomenologically-oriented definition of Gnosticism established at the Messina conference of 1966. Pagels’ insistence on deconstructing early Christianity paved the way for later deconstructionist work in Gnosticism scholarship, which saw the movement parsed out into various schools and sects — the Valentinians, Sethianism, and so forth. It must be said that Pagels has entirely supported, even driven, this effort in the thirty years that have passed since her book was published. In fact, when she was my doctoral advisor in the ‘90s, she vexed me mightily by banning the use of the words “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism” in my dissertation, on the grounds that they were imprecise and misleading. (Imagine my irritation to write my dissertation under the author of *The Gnostic Gospels*, only to find she wouldn’t let me use the word “Gnostic” in my own work!)

To put all this differently, although Elaine Pagels did not initiate the movement to abandon the term “Gnosticism” and all its derivatives in scholarship -- and although *The Gnostic Gospels* can be read in such a way as to encourage thinking of Gnosticism as in fact monolithic, she has been vocal and instrumental in forcing us to rethink the very position she herself once held. She has not produced one book and built a career off endlessly reiterating or defending those ideas; she herself has moved on.

I’m reminded here of my first encounter with *The Gnostic Gospels*, which I devoured one summer as a junior in college. It was 1989, and by that time *The Gnostic Gospels* -- which blew my little mental universe

quite apart -- was already a decade old. With youthful naiveté, I resolved to throw myself at the master's feet and study with her. And I remember her asking me, as I interviewed as a prospective graduate student, why I was there. "I read your *Gnostic Gospels*," I gibbered, "and I want to study Gnosticism with you!"

"Oh," she replied, kicking a huge pile of photocopies at her feet, "I'm not really working on Gnosticism anymore. Now I'm working on Satan." Then she turned to me, a glint in her eye. "What do you know about Satan?" I was disappointed, of course, but more shocked. I was about to enter a community, I soon learned, where "what do you know about Satan?" was a viable conversational opener.

If *The Gnostic Gospels* changed anything, it allowed us to entertain 'big picture' views. The field of Early Christianity had long been dominated by a first-century focus -- in part, because that's where the important and interesting sources were. Along came the Nag Hammadi discovery, and Pagels gave us something to do with these texts, allowing us to see them as sets of debates that mattered deeply in people's lives.

In a 1980 review of *The Gnostic Gospels*, the Dutch scholar Gilles Quispel remarked: "[Pagels] points out, for the first time in the history of research, that their [i.e. the Gnostics'] problems were not only theological but had social and political implications" (VC 1980, 100). Indeed, it is the unique contribution of Elaine Pagels to have seen "Gnostics" as offering rational responses to pressing issues, both theological (for instance, the resurrection) or the social (for instance, martyrdom). As Quispel noted, this perspective has changed the field. It is all too easy to read a difficult text such as the *Hypostasis of the Archons* as the ramblings of a fragmented mind, or else, by someone bent on the wanton inversion or desecration of Christian ideas. This, after all, was the heresiologists' explicit characterization of the Gnostics' intent, and they were successful enough to have created an enduring, if lazy, hermeneutic. And yet Pagels' insistence on the implicit dialectical and dialogical logic of these texts -- that they responded seriously to current debates and engaged scripture with equal seriousness, even reverence -- was new. It turned on its head not only the position of Christian theologians (and, I should say, some Christian theologians to this day, who still persist in the view that the Gnostics were "crazies," to quote the words of Thomas Gannon) but also of scholars of Gnosticism, who saw the movement as purely a set of theological innovations arising more-or-less naturally from universal human tendencies such as existentialism or cosmic pessimism.

Thus while other scholars of Gnosticism looked to Manicheism, oriental religions, nihilism, the Age of Anxiety, or exotic esotericism to understand the worldview of Nag Hammadi texts, Elaine sought to figure out how, precisely, Christians of the second century read Paul, or the Gospel of John. She was the first to find logic, consistency, a desire to

explain and to resolve issues of difference at the heart of Gnostic exegesis, not absurd imaginings and grandiose but empty cosmologies. She gave them the dignity that the heresiologists had systematically stripped away.

Pagels therefore initiated a school of thought -- still thriving in Gnostic studies today -- that insists that we can only understand many Gnostic texts by taking as a starting point their Christian foundation. How unusual an approach this is can only be appreciated by considering studies of Gnosticism contemporary with *The Gnostic Gospels*, which find a Gnostic "spirit" as extending backward chronologically into an ancient Near Eastern milieu, then contemporaneously and immediately into Manicheism, only to emerge much later in the religion of the Cathars. These approaches frequently distill Gnosticism into a "message" or an "inclination" that naturally manifests in different people, places and times. By contrast, Pagels' approach is to situate Gnostic texts into their very immediate socio-historical context, and to refuse to engage distant "resonances" without first having considered immediate influences and debates. To give an example, I can cite the case of the classic Gnostic tripartite anthropology, the division of humanity into hylic, psychic and pneumatic. Pagels claims -- albeit not in *The Gnostic Gospels* but in a later article -- that this anthropology was neither invented by the Gnostics nor pilfered from some lost orientalist source, but derived from an innovative reading of 1 Corinthians, as they sought to discern Paul's teaching on the nature of the resurrection. The obviousness of how Valentinian thinkers, in particular, searched the Christian scriptures first in order to develop their theologies had been virtually entirely overlooked in the study of Gnosticism until Pagels turned our gaze there; some of us have continued to look there, as the wonderful work of Karen King on the *Apocryphon of John* as our very earliest exercise in Christian exegesis demonstrates.

I once asked Elaine, years ago, if there were a part of *The Gnostic Gospels* that she would take back or rewrite if she could do it over. She laughed and said, without hesitation, her chapter "God the Mother, God the Father." I think this chapter, in particular, developed its own following and its own life, to the point that Elaine was made into a feminist hero. Produced in what she described as a bit of a "bra-burning frenzy," the chapter certainly threw gasoline on the flames of certain feminists who used *The Gnostic Gospels* as a way of decrying the patriarchalization of Christianity, Christ, and God herself.

Now, for women, generally, Elaine has indeed been a pathbreaker: back in the 1970s, she was one of only a small number of female graduate students in religion at Harvard. She was one of the only women working in Nag Hammadi until the late 1980s. In fact, Elaine's status as a feminist historian is important for the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of *The Gnostic*

Gospels. It paved the way for a number of important feminist studies in Gnosticism, notably Karen King's *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, Deirdre Good's work on Sophia, Anne McGuire's work on *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and Jorunn Buckley's study *Female Fault and Fulfillment*. The place of the feminine in Gnostic communities and in Nag Hammadi texts in particular has been quite thoroughly plumbed, to the extent that many of Elaine's original claims in *The Gnostic Gospels* have been rehearsed, refuted, revised, and rethought. But Elaine's work paved the way for making the subject of the feminine in Gnosticism a licit, respectable scholarly endeavor.

But I find Elaine "feminist" in a particular way: she spearheaded a style of self-reflexive writing that emerges in *The Gnostic Gospels*. Her authorial voice is clear and unwavering, but we hear Elaine *think* in *The Gnostic Gospels*, and more significantly, we read what she feels: her outrage, disdain, scorn, her being touched by what she finds beautiful. The magic of *The Gnostic Gospels* is the subtle force by which she writes herself into her study -- a technique she continues in, most recently, *Beyond Belief*. I think this is "feminist" because of her refusal to deny the importance of experience in understanding, and for her courage in unmasking the dominant voice of the authorial view. What matters to her as a scholar is in no way unrelated to what matters to her as a woman or a mother. For me, this resonates, and certainly resonated when I first read *The Gnostic Gospels* as an undergraduate.¹

Through her ability to write history empathetically, *The Gnostic Gospels* also advanced *how* we write history within the guild. Elaine's status as a popularizer has drawn no small degree of scorn from many academics. And yet, she has paved the way for creating an interface between an interested general public and us, a rarefied group of academics in dire danger of losing our relevance to the rest of the world. Her success with this book underscores that what we do *matters*, and Elaine has been a pathbreaker in modeling a style of presentation that is both substantive and engaging. Her publication of countless articles in the finest academic journals in our field has, at times, been unfairly overlooked as our gaze shifts to Elaine the public intellectual. My hope is to highlight both elements here today -- the way in which *The Gnostic Gospels* motivated a generation (even two or three generations of scholars) to engage seriously with Gnosticism as a legitimate field of study, and also the unusual capacity of this book to transgress the rigid

¹See the review of Joan E. Hartman, *Women's Studies Quarterly* (1993): 197: "she also writes self-reflexively, revealing her own investment in ancient controversies. She is important to feminists because she historicizes what conservatives theologize: the nature of women and men, and the relations between the sexes. These might have been otherwise, she argues..."

boundaries of the Academy such that ordinary people both cared and felt themselves to be inspired and transformed by it. This is a remarkable achievement, and we must not be so myopic as to dismiss such an impact as not germane to our interests or identities as professional scholars.

As the primary introduction to Gnosticism written for a general public, *The Gnostic Gospels* experienced a sometimes unexpected *Nachleben*: an impact on two other what we might call “para-academic” circles. The first are those deeply engaged in the spiritual revival of Gnosticism, a community for whom Elaine figures as a sort of modern-day prophet. I am quite sure that this role is not one that Elaine anticipated upon the publication of her book, just as I am quite sure that many times she has chafed against being seen this way. A second community deeply impacted by *The Gnostic Gospels* has been those involved with the arts. In the past twenty years, Nag Hammadi texts have emerged, surprisingly, in the performing arts, in dance, opera and chant, in novels. Here Elaine’s past history as a dancer, and her continued ties with dancers, composers, authors and musicians, gave *The Gnostic Gospels* a remarkable afterlife as the inspiration for some truly extraordinary contemporary works. Elaine’s work has had a curious afterlife as standing behind films like Martin Scorsese’s *Last Temptation of Christ* or Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*. Even if these highly popular and popularizing renditions of her work and ideas have left Elaine more aggravated than flattered, more misunderstood and misquoted than faithfully rendered, any consideration of the reception history of *The Gnostic Gospels* must at least acknowledge the power of its ideas on American popular culture. I remember, too, the great American Ballet Theater choreographer, Jacques D’Amboise, sitting in on our graduate seminar on Gnosticism, or finding quotations from *Thunder, Perfect Mind* in Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz*, or hearing Elaine speak of teaching the all female a cappella group The Anonymous Four how to pronounce, and sing, in Coptic for their own production of *Thunder, Perfect Mind*. Elaine would say that all this was not the influence of *The Gnostic Gospels*, but of the beauty and power of the Nag Hammadi texts themselves. While this is to some degree true, the beauty and power of these texts would never have become known to artists, writers, directors and musicians without *The Gnostic Gospels* to point them in their direction.

Finally, there is a more intangible impact of *The Gnostic Gospels*. For those of us who are scholars of Gnosticism, it’s difficult to imagine our field without this book. Collecting data on the reach of this book, anecdotally, I have been struck by how many of my colleagues smiled at the mention of *The Gnostic Gospels*, saying that it was the book that propelled them into the Academy. Certainly this was the case for me. The influence of this book remains profound and real in the lives of so many of us, whether or not we chose to become scholars of Gnosticism, and I

am thankful to have this opportunity to recognize it, and to celebrate its thirtieth birthday, here today.