It is a pleasure to be on this panel to share something of what we think we now know about the so-called Gnostic Gospels, three decades after Elaine Pagels brought the fascinating texts from Nag Hammadi into the consciousness of the general public. We all are familiar with the main lines of her analysis and the highlights from the Nag Hammadi corpus on which she focused: the understanding of resurrection; the relationship between Episcopal authority and monotheistic claims; the use of gendered categories for talking about the deity; the social realities of persecution and the focus on the passion of Christ; the contested claims to be the true church; and the relationship between self-knowledge and knowledge of God. Whatever nits we might have to pick with Elaine’s analysis, we have all learned something from it about the complexities of the Christian landscape in the second and third centuries.

Since 1979 other “Gnostic Gospels” have come to light that have added new data for the exploration of that contested territory, texts such as the Gospel of the Savior and the Gospel of Judas. The latter, in particular, offers a window into one corner of the Christian world that sounds familiar from Elaine’s analysis. That Gospel offers, on the lips of Jesus, a radical critique of Christian sacramental practice, theology and ecclesiastical leadership. It mirrors in its ironic stridency the bitter polemics of some of the heresiologists.

Along with new data have come new perspectives on the whole body of material in which we are interested. The critiques by Michael Williams and Karen King about the
use of the general category of “Gnosticism” have made most of us more cautious about making large generalizations and about assuming that the traits of one subset of the Nag Hammadi and related literature can easily be transferred to another.

Along with those larger challenges to the categories with which we organize our understanding of the first Christian centuries, detailed studies of particular strains of the literary and religious traditions with which we deal have deepened our understanding of what was at stake. Two areas in particular have benefitted from such new study. The shape of the Valentinian tradition through the second and third centuries has become clearer through a series of important monographs by Christoph Markschies and his colleagues and students in Germany, as well as by scholars in what has become a virtual hotbed of Gnostic scholarship, the Scandinavian world, where Einar Thomassen, Anti Marjanen and Ismo Dunderberg, among others have made significant contributions.

Amidst the diverse contributions of this scholarship, I take the most important to be a clearer sense of the ways in which Valentinian speculative theology was rooted in the patterns and practices of the learned world of the second century. If I may oversimplify a bit, the characterization of Valentinus by Markschies as a philosophically learned litterateur of second century Alexandria rings true and helps to understand some of the intricacies of Valentinian speculation. Similarly, the characterization by Ansgar Wucherpfenning of Heracleon as a Philologos, a literary analyst using the tools of the philological trade as his primary methodological crutch, paints a different picture of that first commentator on John from what we get in Origen’s critical treatment.

Understanding the Valentinian tradition first and foremost as a creative literary movement decidedly within Christianity that only secondarily took on a veneer of a
theological system accounts for some of the discrepancies between the testimonia and the primary evidence, as well as for the conceptual diversity within the movement itself.

A second major area in which there has been substantial progress in recent years is the study of the so-called Sethian tradition. Major contributions have come from both Scandinavia, in the work of Tuomus Rasimus (?) and the US, in the work of John Turner. Both, in different ways, have developed hypotheses about the diachronic development of this important strand of what Michael Williams would call Demiurgic Creationism. But, for me at least, the most interesting part of the story that they tell has to do with what happens in the third century, in the encounter of this tradition with neo-Platonists, particularly Plotinus. The contours of that encounter are still imperfectly understood and I hope that the work underway by one of our doctoral students at Yale, Dylan Burns, will contribute to a better understanding of what is at stake. The most remarkable thing about this encounter is how little that is specifically Christian theology or narrative is in evidence at the stage of the Sethian tradition marked by the revelatory works Allogenes, Marsanes, Zostrianos, and the Three Steles of Seth.. Instead, what seems to be at issue is a concern common to many religious folk of the period, how one might gain experiential access to the mysterious and transcendent through processes of ascesis and introspection. Stay tuned for further developments.

One interesting point about those developments is that they will not involve much of what might count under the heading of a “Gnostic gospel,“ unless we understand that term in a very broad sense. Most of the literature in the Sethian corpus, particularly in its third-century manifestations, comes in the form of exotic revelations, “apocalypses,” if you prefer. If we have learned anything from the analysis of the development of Sethian
materials (and allusions to possibly related materials in things like the Cologne Mani-
Codex) is that apocalyptic literature in all its variety did not become eclipsed with the
delay of the parousia. It remained an increasingly popular form of religious expression as
much outside Christian circles as within.

Finally I would like to turn my attention to the area that interests me most. First a
bit of autobiography. I became interested in Nag Hammadi materials in part because
reading Coptic was a fun thing to do in the shadow of Tom Lambdin and Bentley Layton,
but in part because I shared the assumption widespread in NT circles influenced by
Rudolf Bultmann and the History of Religions School, that some form of Gnosticism
lurked in the background of the Gospel of John (and perhaps some other parts of the New
Testament). Very few of us would at this point subscribe to that old History of Religions
model in its entirety, though there may yet be elements of truth within it. No, we have
come to appreciate the Nag Hammadi materials not as material that contributes to the
study of the “background” or cultural context of earliest Christian literature, but as part of
the ongoing process of the reception, shaping and appropriation of that literature.

Most of what time I tear away from budgets and their woes these days is spent
thinking about the Fourth Gospel. The world of the Gnostic Gospels is of interest to me
at present as part of the evidence for the way in which that deceptively simple but ever so
subtle and complex text was appropriated in the early Church. Some elements of the
Sethian corpus are of interest in that enterprise, but of greatest interest to me is the kind
of treatment of Johannine motifs that we find in certain Valentinian texts. There has been
considerable interest of late in the afterlife of the Fourth Gospel, particularly due to the
work of Charles Hill, who has challenged the widely received wisdom that the Gospel
was at home in the second century primarily in heterodox or (if I may use the banned word) “Gnostic” circles until it was rescued from their fowl grasp by Irenaeus and other polemicists of the late second century. (Hill’s work I take to be part of a larger movement in Biblical scholarship to explore the reception of what came to be canonical texts in the early church and beyond, but that is another story.)

Hill by and large presents a convincing case, although some of us will remain skeptical about the evidence of early and widespread use of the fourth Gospel in the first half of the second century. There may well be allusions in Justin and the like, but they are hardly transparent. That Christians were widely reading and reflecting on the Fourth Gospel in the second century is, I think, assured. But what were they thinking and how did they read the text?

This is where the evidence of the Valentinian tradition becomes particularly intriguing. Not only do we have in Heracleon, not the writer of a Gospel, but a Gospel commentary, the first such work written about a New Testament text, we also, I would argue, have in the Valentinian author of the Gospel of Truth a reader of John, and of much of the rest of the New Testament, that wrestles in a very perceptive way, with some of the fundamental issues of the Gospel.

The Gospel, that is, insists, pace Käsemann, on the embodied Logos as the definitive vehicle for the disclosure of and access to the Father. Yet the embodied Logos is not directly available to anyone here and now, except through word and symbol. Is anything, one might ask, lost in the translation? And how does that Word, now embodied not in flesh and blood, but in slippery words and ambiguous signs, work? The *Gospel of Truth* tries to answer that question, in part by reflecting on how all word work. In the
process it limns a portrait of the human condition which, like that of Paul in the
beginning of Romans, owes much to Greek as well as Jewish sources. The problem that
it detects is that of alienation and ignorance, and here too it echoes the obverse of the
Fourth Gospel’s claim that it is the Truth that will set humankind free. This truth, as in
the Fourth Gospel comes to humanity as the gracious act of a loving God. The truth is
embodied in a name that can be relied upon because it discloses the essence of what is
named. The very utterance of that name is like a perfumed breath that allures and attracts
with its fragrant scent.

It is interesting, by the way, to note that a text coming from a theological tradition
often accused of being virtually docetic uses such sensuous imagery to convey its
understanding of the workings of the divine. But I degress.

I could spend more time unpacking how I think this particular Gnostic Gospel
works, but I’ll leave it there, because this is certainly a text on which more work needs to
be done and when it is done, I predict that it will become more clear that the *Gospel of
Truth* relates to the Fourth Gospel as an imaginative commentary wrestling with the
categories that the Gospel itself uses to understand the work of Christ. There are, by the
way, younger scholars working on this topic as well. These include Katarina Brix,
writing a dissertation at Berlin.

Recalling the caveats about overhasty generalizations when dealing with things
Gnostic, let me repeat that my reading of the *Gospel of Truth* ought not be taken as a
paradigm for the way in which all “Gnostic” gospels work, because they clearly function
in, as Hebrews would say, many and diverse ways. The erudite and subtle reflection on
the truth of the Gospel, perhaps composed for a community in Alexandria or Rome, was,
I suspect, a far cry from what the Sethians were doing with their apocalypses or what was happening in Oxyrhynchus, where we know at least three copies of the *Gospel of Thomas* were circulating in Greek by the third century. Going forward we will have to attend even more to the considerable differences as well as the intriguing commonalities the texts that the sands of Egypt have revealed.