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I own this book and have read it. It was wonderful for its time, but if I were buying now I'd buy the recent Nag Hammadi Library in English. Mr. Layton's collection isn't as comprehensive and I found his format a little annoying, as well as the New Age cover! The book omits some material from the Nag Hammadi find that I found myself really missing after a while. That said, I've used this book for years and have benefited enormously from it.

The book provides an in depth look at a specific class of ancient Christian literature, the so-called "Gnostic" materials (primarily found in the Nag Hammadi corpus). The book also covers some of the more interesting accounts by the so-called Church Fathers with regards to the various "gnostic" sects. Several important "Gnostics" texts are presented in new translations, all of which are superb owing to Layton's first-rate command of Coptic.

The above review by enemy@enemies.com does not do justice to the content of the work. The sexual acts referred to above are not the assertion of the author (B. Layton), but rather the assertions of a Christian heresiologist covered in the work: Epiphanius. The work itself takes into account the myriad reports given to us via the Fathers and the archaeological record in order to interpret these reports and to reconstruct a plausible socio-historical setting for the various "Gnostic" sects, if indeed there ever were such sects (a topic the book confronts). It is an academic work of the highest quality.

While some have criticised this collection of Gnostic Scriptures, in my own experience Layton's translations of the texts and the accompanying notes are very useful. After all, how is the modern reader, removed by 1700 years from texts which were originally kept from all but the 'initiated', supposed to understand the myths and works of the Gnostics, so far removed from our conventional Philosophy and Religious ideas?

The Gnostics were a fairly amorphous movement of syncretic spiritual seekers who sought direct knowledge or 'Gnosis' of God without an intermediate power controlling their access to God. Gnostics generally rejected churches, temples, and other religious institutions or when they attended them, felt as if they were the 'elite.' This caused considerable annoyance to the religious authorities, especially the Christian ones, as some Gnostics adapted Christian theology and ideas and re-shaped them to their own religious purposes. However, the Gnostics also borrowed liberally from other areas too, from Neo-Platonic Philosophy to Babylonian astrological lore. Indeed at times it is extremely hard to understand what the Gnostics believed in, especially since non-rational modes of mystical experience (such as dazzling visions of heaven and its inhabitants) are so bizarre, unmatched in our own time except perhaps by William Blake.

The Gnostic texts are often rambling and incoherent and weave fervent visions of the spiritual universe in with magical incantations, colourful rites including baptism, singing and shouting, hymns to various heavenly beings, curses against the creator of this world (Iadobloth), as well as various obscure rites and mysteries, such as the 'Bridal Chamber.' The three most beautiful and coherent texts are the Secret Book of John, the Gospel of Truth by Valentinus, and the Gospel of Thomas.

The Secret Book of John purports to record a dialogue between the risen Jesus and the Apostle John, after his faith in Jesus is undermined by a rather unpleasant Pharisee. Jesus, after appearing in an amazing vision, then proceeds to recount to John the stock Gnostic myths of an invisible, ineffable and totally unknowable 'Father' who then for some reason creates a whole series of spirit beings in the spiritual universe, called the Pleorama. At first, everything seems to go fine, until one of these beings (Sophia) decides to try and imitate the Father and instead for reasons not entirely
clear, brings forth a monster called ladobloth. Ashamed of her failure, Sophia hides ladobloth in a cloud of fire, and leaves.

Iadobloth however, not knowing his origin, and having mighty powers (somewhat like Blake's Urizen) proceeds to create a material universe as well as fellow beings called 'Rulers' or 'Archons', who then try to trap 'sparks' of light which live in the Pleorama into matter. Then Adam is created, first as a spirit being, and then by the evil of the Rulers he is trapped in a material body, and a consort (Eve) is made for him. The Father, finally becoming aware of this disaster, then sends another Aeon, Jesus, to redeem the trapped sparks of light in matter through saving Gnosis.

The Gospel of Truth is a work of brilliant rhetorical power by a famous Gnostic poet, teacher and theologian called Valentinus. A very subtle and beautiful attempt to wed Gnostic myth with Orthodox Christianity, Valentinus argues all our pain and suffering come from ignorance of our true Father, who while ineffable, sends forth wisdom and also the Son to redeem fallen humanity. Valentinus attempts to avoid the extremes of myths like John and in the Gospel of Truth there is no explicit cursing of the creator God, yet at the same time Valentinus does say with some subtlety that this world is a bad copy of the original heavenly pleorama, and our true happiness is to be found there. The ideas of Valentinus, presented very systematically and far more logically than by any other Gnostic anywhere else, deeply influence other Gnostic works like the Gospel of Phillip and the Acts of Thomas and John.

The third work, the Gospel of Thomas, is in my view surpassingly beautiful and the finest of all the works in this collection. Much like the simple yet profound Buddhist Heart Sutra, this mystical poetic work purveys itself as a collection of 'secret' sayings Jesus communicated with his disciples, and written down by Thomas, the 'doubter' in John. The work claims to provide the keys to immortality, provided right 'Gnosis' is present: 1 And he said, "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death." (Saying 1)

Saying three for example points out a truth well known to Socrates: Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the (Father's) kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is within you and it is outside you.

Some are somewhat less appealing: "114 Simon Peter said to them, "Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life." Jesus said, "Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven." (Saying 114)

Yet there is also much in this collection which is dark and almost sinister. A lot of the works point out how horrible this world is and how bad a thing it is to be trapped in a body of material; countless references to spirit beings and daemons and emanations from the unknowable Father; various descriptions of a Godhead which is sometimes ineffable and unsayable, other times Mother/Father, Mother/Father/Son, and at other times related to a heavenly Seth. Sometimes it is very hard to understand the mythical worldview of the Gnostics, but then, maybe they didn't wish to be understood by 'outsiders.'

This collection of texts is invaluable for any student of Gnosticism, however one should also purchase the excellent 'Nag Hammadi Library in English' as a companion volume to this. It is also useful to read one of the scholarly introductions to Gnosticism (i.e. Elaine Pagels) because otherwise the ideas and myths which were stamped out 14 centuries ago make no sense to one raised in the Orthodox Christian tradition.

If someone wants to understand the Gnostics, I think this is the best place to start, beginning with the excellent historical introduction and a perusal of key texts (Apocryphon of John, Trimorphic Protennoia, Thunder Perfect Mind, The Gospel of Truth, th Letter of Ptolemy to Flora, and The Hymn of the Pearl).
While no translation of an ancient text or group of texts can be called "definitive," the translations that Bentley Layton presents in this book are certainly among the best available. The historical introduction to Gnosticism that precedes the texts is a very helpful, easy-to-follow summary of a lot of complex doctrines. His introductions to individual texts are extremely helpful.

In a graduate Coptic class, we are currently going through the "Gospel of Philip," one of the texts included in this book. A translation by Wesley Isenberg is also included in James Robinson's The Nag Hammadi Library. We are reading the Coptic, but because of the multiple interpretations of the text that are possible at many points, we sometimes consult published translations such as those of Layton and Isenberg. As I have compared these two translations, I have found Layton's to be more interpretative. That is, he takes a stand on which of various possible meanings he prefers and clearly expresses this in his translation. He does this based on his own extensive knowledge of Gnostic literature and of the type of Greek literature from which the Coptic translations were made. He explains this clearly in his introduction. Thus, one may from time to time disagree with his interpretation, but one will know that Layton did not make his choice on a whim, but based on a profound knowledge of the background of the texts. He has produced a translation that is readily accessible to members of the general public as well as to scholars, and he has provided enough background information to help non-scholars see where each text fits in the Gnostic view of the universe. However, in so doing, he has not overwhelmed the reader with the masses of detail that could be included from the considerable scholarly work on the many Gnostic texts.

Bentley's "Gnostic Scriptures", while it may not be as complete as the Nag Hammadi Library, is for me the more useful volume. The introductions are very detailed, and many conventions of this arcane type of literature are clarified. I don't really understand some of the complaints in the other reviews. Books are grouped by school of thought, and the order seems very logical to me. Many writings are fragmented, and those who wish to read this kind of thing need to learn to deal with brackets. The translation job is generally quite a bit more illuminating than other translations of the same material I have read. This is an excellent resource.

Layton renders some of the enigmatic literature of gnostic Christianity a bit less baffling, primarily for nonspecialists. The general introduction explains his selection of documents (classic gnostic scripture, writings of Valentinus and his followers, and related writings that display gnostic elements) and places them within the milieu of early Christian literature. Introductions to the individual translations explain content, literary background, characters (where appropriate), and textual information. Extensive introductory material, lucid translation, and plentiful annotations, all relatively free of jargon, make this a fine introduction to the thought and literature of Gnosticism. Recommended for academic libraries and for public libraries where there is interest. Craig W. Beard, Harding Univ. Lib., Searcy, Ark.

Bentley Layton's translation of gnostic scriptures provides a great supplement to Robinson's Nag Hammadi Library. He presents one of the best and most concise general introductions to the extremely complicated gnostic mythology of anything I have yet to read. His collection of scriptures includes tractates that are not in Nag Hammadi such as the Hermetic text "Poimandres." Furthermore, each text is introduced with a summary of it's contents, the literary background, a breakdown of it's mythic...more Bentley Layton's translation of gnostic scriptures provides a great supplement to Robinson's Nag Hammadi Library. He presents one of the best and most concise general introductions to the extremely complicated gnostic mythology of anything I have yet to read. His collection of scriptures includes tractates that are not in Nag Hammadi such as the Hermetic text "Poimandres." Furthermore, each text is introduced with a summary of it's contents, the literary background, a breakdown of it's mythic characters, and a narrative outline of the myth itself. The actually text includes footnotes that provide helpful elucidation of obscure content and there are marginal references that direct the reader's attention to other passages that can contribute to an understanding of the text. This is definitely an indispensable source for those who wish to understand gnosticism and the development of early Christianity. (less)

Review: "Bentley Layton's translation and annotation of the Gnostic scriptures (which includes not only the Nag Hammadi texts, but related ones from other sources as well) has my vote as the single
best volume for the lay reader. Layton's lucid translations are supplemented with very helpful introductions, background details, explanatory annotations, and maps. Layton is of no less scholarly standing than other translators, but he has brought the material to life better than most."

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