

14. Dart, John, *The Jesus of Heresy and History: The Discovery and Meaning of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library*, "A revised and expanded edition of *The Laughing Savior*" (Harper & Rowe 1988)

Dart is one of those who comes under criticism (as do Crossan, Pagels and others, according to item # 22, by Jenkins) for his assertions regarding the importance of Gnostic works in understanding early Christianity. He lists the Gospel of Peter as a very early Christian work on page 135 which makes him one of the few to do so as suggested in item # 8, by Copan, above.

Dart was of course not aware of the Jenkins book (# 20 below) calling into question the use of these materials to understand the earliest Christians, because the materials cited come from much later times than the New Testament. But he cites an earlier critic making the same point, Joseph A. Fitzmyer. Here is how Dart describes the man's charge and his response to it (pages 120-121):

Part of Fitzmyer's displeasure derived from his contention that Christian Gnostics "were simply not around" for the first century of Christian existence, only "Christians with protognostic tendencies at the end of the first century." That question has had many good scholars on opposite sides, and Fitzmyer mused: "It has been mystifying, indeed, why serious scholars continue to talk about the pertinence of this material to the study of the New Testament.

Fitzmyer may be right in thinking that it is difficult to prove a direct influence of the classic Gnostic myth on the New Testament, although the proposed Gnostic influence on the prologue to the Gospel of John may be an exception. What seems undeniably important for New Testament studies, however, is that some Nag

Hammadi texts, despite Gnostic additions, have preserved valuable words and ideas from the early Jesus movement. In this research, the focus is not on Gnostic elements in the texts. The attention is on authentic traditions about Jesus transmitted independently of the New Testament and recaptured for modern critical study.

So, the critic has a point, but not the whole line. What is "proto-gnosticism"? According to a discussion by James M. Robinson on pages 132-133 of item # 21, by Hedrick, it is the "substantive precursor" to second century Christian Gnosticism. It is apparently, when used by the experts like the one cited above, a restrictively defined technical term generated by "those whose argument rests its case on the positivistic observation 'no texts, no history.'" It is an unfortunately defined term, since its meaning is purposely and quite arbitrarily manipulated to exclude a discussion of gnosticism in the first century of Christianity, but instead it applies to every other gnostic tendency "anywhere from Iran to Orphism." Robinson quite obviously believes the term is bogus, that there was indeed a gnosticism in the first century that flowed over in the new Christian movement quite naturally from its pagan and Jewish fountains, especially as those groups, particularly the latter, became Christians. In fact there is good evidence (see # 19, below, by Hedrick) that one of the very first Christian-Gnostic tracts was written to convert non-Christians who were very familiar with and believed in the tenets of Gnosticism.

However, see item # 9 by Couliano for a very different picture. He is of the no-documents/no-history school and does not even allow proto-Gnosticism until about 70 A.D. and then only among Christians!

Getting back to Dart, on his page 21 he describes the dating

problem. The manuscripts are dated from 333 to 348 and were buried at Nag Hammadi in 367, with a few items added until about 400 A.D. The texts, Dart says, are undoubtedly copies made from older materials, and the approximate dates for the content of the gospels and other materials is being based on literary and historical comparisons. Since some were mentioned in anti-Gnostic polemics of the church fathers like Irenaeus and others, we know when some were extant prior to the date of copying and burial.

It is in his introduction that Dart most directly addresses the topic that led to this rather lengthy series of book reviews, the influence of Gnosticism on and in early Christianity. This discussion, on his pages x through xii, though the subject continues to be interesting for several pages more. The highlights of the discussion for my purposes was the alleged suggestion by unnamed scholars that the Church owes much to the Gnostics and their speculative theologies, it forced them to decide what to believe and how to organize to keep these speculationists under control, resulting in creeds, the canon, and the hierarchy. Gnostics have also been credited with keeping alive the ideas of "freedom, redemption and grace" according to the scholar Robert M. Grant. Dart continues (page xii):

At the same time, there was a caustic, bitter strain basic to Gnostic thought. "Gnosticism was the religion that expressed most clearly the mood of defeatism and despair that swept the ancient world in the early centuries of the Christian era," says James M. Robinson of the Claremont Graduate School. A foretaste of this mood was seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes' apocalyptic writings showed how a people "that had again and again lost its freedom to one world prove [sic, I believe the word was meant to be 'power'] after another gave up any realistic hope of succeeding in the

world," according to Robinson.

"Qumran led in part to Nag Hammadi," he writes, referring especially to religious imagery. "Essene dualism condemned this world with its children of darkness and heralded an apocalyptic deliverance for the sons of light; Gnostic mythology portrayed this world as an evil god's prison for the sparks of the divine, and imparted the knowledge with which they could escape to their lost origin above." This otherworldly escapism was halted in Judaism by orthodox rabbis about 100 C.E., but the trend was not erased from Christianity until two or three centuries later. A Gnostic-like religion, Manichaeism, flourished for a while longer, then faded. A small group of Mandaeans living in Iraq are considered the only remnants of the Gnostic faith today.

That is not to say there are not Gnostic elements in current and past Christianity, or even Judaism, however. But the dualistic world-despising version of Gnosticism ceased to be popular until the Bogomils and the Cathars revived it for a time. The world-loving strain of Gnosticism, according to me, remained alive and well, though barely so and subtly, in the Christian and Judaic traditions. They are here now, still, in all who see the inner knowing of God as important to their present and future lives.

Dart wrote a fascinating book with many nuggets of wisdom from the Gnostics compared with the same ideas in the Christian canon, much as Allegro did in the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls. But, the purpose of my review was to look at the question of who were the original Christians, and we have that answer from Dart: there were various leanings among the early believers, and among them were Gnostics.