



Beyond Belief

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In *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, noted religious historian Elaine Pagels reflects on the significance of the rich collection of non-canonical gospels and manuscripts discovered by a villager in Nag Hammadi, northern Egypt, in 1948. Pagels examines the collections of Jesus's sayings in the Gospel of Thomas, and compares them with the Gospel According to John, noting fundamental doctrinal differences in Christology, the Kingdom of God, and the means of salvation.

The Gospel of Thomas teaches that God's light dwells within each one of us. We can know God through our own divinely given capacity and find the way for ourselves. John, in contrast, teaches that Jesus alone embodies the divine light and salvation is only possible through Christ. How did the early church decide which gospels were heretical and which were canonical? Pagels speculates that there was intense rivalry between various groups of disciples. After the conversion of Constantine in 312, there was intense pressure to unify the church around a clear set of doctrines of orthodox belief, defined in the Nicene Creed and found only in the twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament. All other apocryphal books and divergent beliefs were suppressed.

Pagels speculates that the Nag Hammadi texts were buried by members of a fourth century Egyptian monastic community to prevent them from being destroyed. Their rediscovery in 1948 gives glimpses of a more diverse early Christian community and raises fundamental questions about the formation of Christian orthodoxy.

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