

# Beyond the Gnostic Gospels

Edited by  
EDUARD IRICINSCHI,  
LANCE JENOTT,  
NICOLA DENZEY LEWIS  
and PHILIPPA TOWNSEND

*Studien und Texte zu  
Antike und Christentum*

82

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**Mohr Siebeck**

Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum  
Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity

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82





# Beyond the Gnostic Gospels

Studies Building on the Work  
of Elaine Pagels

Edited by

Eduard Iricinschi, Lance Jenott,  
Nicola Denzey Lewis and Philippa Townsend

Mohr Siebeck

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ISBN 978-3-16-152834-7 / eISBN 978-3-16-158681-1 unveränderte eBook-Ausgabe 2019  
ISSN 1436-3003 (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was printed by Laupp & Göbel in Nehren on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Nägele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	V
Abbreviations .....	IX

PHILIPPA TOWNSEND

Explorations at the Edges of Orthodoxy: Elaine Pagels' Study of the Early Christian World .....	1
--	---

### Part I: The Social World of Early Christians

MICHAEL A. WILLIAMS

A Life Full of Meaning and Purpose: Demiurgical Myths and Social Implications .....	19
--	----

KAREN L. KING

Rethinking the Diversity of Ancient Christianity: Responding to Suffering and Persecution .....	60
--	----

EINAR THOMASSEN

The Valentinian Materials in <i>James</i> (NHC V,3 and CT,2) .....	79
--	----

### Part II: Creating Orthodoxy and Heresy

GEOFFREY S. SMITH

Irenaeus, the Will of God, and Anti-Valentinian Polemics: A Closer Look at <i>Against the Heresies</i> 1.12.1 .....	93
--	----

DAVID W. JORGENSEN

Nor is One Ambiguity Resolved by Another Ambiguity: Irenaeus of Lyons and the Rhetoric of Interpretation .....	124
---	-----

APRIL D. DECONICK Gnostic Spirituality at the Crossroads of Christianity: Transgressing Boundaries and Creating Orthodoxy .....	148
---	-----

### Part III: Ritual and Myth

NICOLA DENZEY LEWIS The Problem of Bad Baptisms: Unclean Spirits, Exorcism, and the Unseen in Second-Century Christian Practice .....	187
---	-----

JOHN D. TURNER Baptismal Vision, Angelification, and Mystical Union in Sethian Literature .....	204
---	-----

MARVIN MEYER <sup>†</sup> Thought, Forethought, and Afterthought in the <i>Secret Book of John</i> ....	217
--	-----

### Part IV: Christianity in Egypt

HUGO LUNDHAUG Begotten, Not Made, to Arise in This Flesh: The Post-Nicene Soteriology of the <i>Gospel of Philip</i> .....	235
--	-----

ANNEMARIE LUIJENDIJK Buried and Raised: <i>Gospel of Thomas</i> Logion 5 and Resurrection .....	272
--	-----

EDUARD IRICINSCHI The Teaching Hidden in Silence (NHC II 1,4): Questions, Answers, and Secrets in a Fourth-Century Egyptian Book .....	297
--	-----

LANCE JENOTT Clergy, Clairvoyance, and Conflict: The Synod of Latopolis and the Problem with Pachomius' Visions .....	320
---	-----

DEIRDRE GOOD Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Egypt .....	335
---	-----

## Part V: New Testament Studies

ISMO DUNDERBERG	
How Far Can You Go? Jesus, John, the Synoptics and Other Texts .....	347
HAROLD W. ATTRIDGE	
Plato, Plutarch, and John: Three Symposia about Love .....	367
HOLGER M. ZELLENTIN	
Jesus and the Tradition of the Elders: Originalism and Traditionalism in Early Judean Legal Theory .....	379
JOHN G. GAGER	
Paul the Zealot, A Man of Constant Sorrow .....	404
JOHN W. MARSHALL	
<i>ḥ Ezra</i> and Apocalyptic Judaism in Asia Minor .....	427
Bibliography .....	447
Contributors .....	487
Index of References .....	489
Index of Subjects .....	511





## Abbreviations

<i>ABR</i>	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
<i>ACW</i>	Ancient Christian Writers
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> (ed. Temporini and Haase)
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology</i>
<i>BCNH</i>	Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi
<i>BETL</i>	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum Iovaniensium
<i>BIS</i>	Biblical Interpretation Series
<i>BZNW</i>	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CCSL</i>	Corpus Christianorum: Series latina (Turnhout, 1953–)
<i>CRINT</i>	Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
<i>CSCO</i>	Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientaliū
<i>DCLS</i>	Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
<i>ECTT</i>	Early Christian Texts in Translation
<i>FC</i>	Fathers of the Church
<i>GCS</i>	Die griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
<i>HFS</i>	Historisk-filosofiske skrifter
<i>HNT</i>	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
<i>HR</i>	<i>History of Religions</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>Hyp</i>	Hypomnemata
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JJH</i>	<i>John, Jesus, and History</i> (2 vols.; ed. Paul N. Anderson et al.)
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JRH</i>	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
<i>JSNTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library
<i>LSJ</i>	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (ed. H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones)
<i>MGH</i>	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
<i>Mus</i>	<i>Muséon: Revue d'études orientales</i>
<i>NHMS</i>	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies

NHS	Nag Hammadi Studies
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
<i>NPNF</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
NTTSD	New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts
<i>OTP</i>	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> (ed. James H. Charlesworth; 2 vols.)
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
<i>RBL</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
RGRW	Religions in the Greco-Roman World
<i>RHE</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique</i>
<i>R&amp;T</i>	<i>Religion and Theology</i>
SAPERE	Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris ad Ethicam Religionemque pertinentia
SBB	Stuttgarter biblische Beiträge
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLECL	Society of Biblical Literature: Early Christianity and Its Literature
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SCHNT	Studia ad corpus hellenicum Novi Testamenti
SEAug	Studia ephemeridis Augustinianum
SGRR	Studies in Greek and Roman Religion
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions: Supplements to <i>Numen</i>
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STAC	Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity
StNAM	Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern
StPatr	Studia Patristica
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (10 vols.; ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich)
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
TUGAL	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
UNT	Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCSup	Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZAC</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>
<i>ZWT</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftliche Theologie</i>

# Explorations at the Edges of Orthodoxy: Elaine Pagels' Study of the Early Christian World

PHILIPPA TOWNSEND<sup>1</sup>

Elaine Pagels has long been one of the foremost scholars in the field of early Christian studies, and a pioneer in communicating the work of this field to the public. In the year of her seventieth birthday, this volume looks back on her many scholarly contributions, and shows how they have shaped current debates. It includes the latest research from some of the most distinguished scholars in the field, as well as from more junior scholars at the beginning of their careers. This introduction sketches out the key stages of Pagels' intellectual trajectory over the past forty years (without, of course, attempting to offer a complete catalog of her publications), and then briefly indicates how the essays in this volume build on Pagels' work.

## Early Explorations of Valentinianism

Pagels' fascination with Christian texts that have been relegated to the margins of history began during her time as a graduate student at Harvard, when her professors George MacRae and Helmut Koester first introduced their students to the still unpublished Coptic texts from Nag Hammadi. Pagels' doctoral work focused not primarily on these documents however, but on the works of Valentinian authors such as Heracleon, preserved in fragmentary form in heresiological texts. Soon after completing her dissertation research, Pagels published her first book, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*.<sup>2</sup> In this volume and several accompanying articles,

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Eduard Iricinschi for all his help in researching this introduction. Thanks too to Peter Hayakawa, Eduard Iricinschi, Lance Jenott, and Kevin Wolfe for reading it and making helpful suggestions, and to my research assistant Amanda Ernst for gathering books and articles. "At the edges of orthodoxy" is a phrase from Elaine Pagels' most famous book, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979; repr. Vintage Books, 1989), 150.

<sup>2</sup> Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (SBL Monograph Series 17; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973; repr. 1989).

Pagels developed a multi-faceted and highly original series of arguments, which prefigured many of the themes of her later work (not to mention many of the directions of future scholarship in general). Her research represented a major advance on scholarship which had frequently, if unconsciously, adopted the heresiologists' hostile characterizations of the Valentinians.<sup>3</sup>

Pagels showed that the seemingly contradictory Valentinian interpretations of the Gospel of John, rather than being the result of an arbitrary and irrational exegetical approach as some previous scholars had claimed, were completely coherent when understood within the threefold Valentinian schema of *pleroma*, *kenoma*, and *cosmos*: the divergences in interpretation depended on which of these three "frames of reference" the exegetes were employing.<sup>4</sup> She went on to draw out the implications of Valentinian exegesis for religious practice, indicating early on a dissatisfaction with the traditional assumption that "Gnostics" were only concerned with abstract theology and not with ritual.<sup>5</sup> Further undercutting stereotypes of "Gnosticism," she rejected the view that the different experience of ritual by "pneumatic" and "psychic" Christians stemmed from a deterministic soteriology, and argued that it actually reflected a complex and dynamic model of spiritual transformation.<sup>6</sup> She then extended her critique in order to challenge the very terms of the previous scholarly debate, which had pivoted on whether the Valentinians believed in "free will" or "determinism"; she argued that those concepts were anachronistic and did not accurately convey the concerns of the Valentinians themselves, which could be better understood in terms of a theology of election.<sup>7</sup> Finally, in a move that presaged her later explorations of the ways in which early Christian debates shaped philosophical ideas that would become fundamental to western thought, she argued that the very concept of soteriological free will as developed by Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen, emerged from their attempts to refute and delegitimize the Valentinians.<sup>8</sup> The originality and percep-

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<sup>3</sup> For an early article by Pagels on the ways in which Irenaeus distorted Valentinian eschatological and soteriological beliefs, see "Conflicting Versions of Valentinian Eschatology: Irenaeus' Treatise vs. the Excerpts from Theodotus," *HTR* 67 (1974): 35–53.

<sup>4</sup> Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 57–82. On Valentinian rituals, see also Pagels, "A Valentinian Interpretation of Baptism and Eucharist: And Its Critique of 'Orthodox' Sacramental Theology and Practice," *HTR* 65 (1972): 153–69.

<sup>6</sup> Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 98–109.

<sup>7</sup> Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 104, 109.

<sup>8</sup> Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 110. Pagels elaborates on these points in an early article, arguing that the Valentinians developed a theory of divine election largely through allegorical exegesis of Paul's Epistle to the Romans; Paul's "Jews" who stand "under the law" are interpreted as psychic Christians, and the "Gentiles" who are "outside the law"

tiveness with which, in her earliest work, Pagels was able to dismantle the stereotypes of polemical Christian authors (both ancient and modern) contributed significantly to the development of a more sophisticated scholarly approach to “heretical” Christian groups, and in certain ways anticipated three of the most important and influential recent books deconstructing the concept of “Gnosticism,” by Michael Williams, Karen King, and Ismo Dunderberg (all contributors to this volume).<sup>9</sup>

In her second book, *The Gnostic Paul*, published only two years after the first, Pagels extended her examination of Valentinian exegesis of New Testament texts, this time focusing on interpretations of the Pauline epistles.<sup>10</sup> Despite the traditional characterization of Paul as an opponent of “the Gnostics,” and of “Gnosticism” as unbiblical and inherently at odds with “true Christianity,” Pagels argued that “two antithetical traditions of Pauline exegesis . . . emerged from the late first century through the second. . . . [O]ne reads Paul *antignostically*, the other *gnostically*.”<sup>11</sup> While her book was not a study of the historical Paul, she argued that it is important to consider how the anti-gnostic exegesis of the heresiologists may have influenced our understanding of Paul’s letters – in other words, how the reception history of texts impacts the way those texts themselves are understood.<sup>12</sup> Here again, Pagels showed how traditional scholarship on the Valentinians had been shaped by the polemics of the second- and third-century heresiologists, and employed close textual analysis to deepen our understanding of both Valentinian and non-Valentinian Christianity.

### The Politics of Orthodoxy

It was not until after the publication of her first two books that Pagels began extensive work on the Nag Hammadi Codices. With the support of grants from the American Council of Learned Societies and the American

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become the pneumatic Christians; see Pagels, “The Valentinian Claim to Esoteric Exegesis of Romans as Basis for Anthropological Theory,” *VC* 26 (1972): 241–58; and cf. *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975; repr. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1992), 13–46.

<sup>9</sup> Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> See also Pagels, “Valentinian Claim to Esoteric Exegesis,” and “‘The Mystery of the Resurrection’: A Gnostic Reading of 1 Corinthians 15,” *JBL* 93 (1974): 276–88.

<sup>11</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Paul*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Paul*, 9, 162–64.

Philosophical Society, she travelled to Cairo and joined the team of scholars transcribing, editing, and translating the Nag Hammadi texts.<sup>13</sup> For the next few years, her work focused on interpreting these esoteric documents.<sup>14</sup> Studying them alongside the writings of the heresiologists enabled her to see that disputes between early Christians over seemingly abstruse points of theology actually had concrete political and practical implications. Her interest in the intersection of politics and religion became increasingly evident during this period in a series of articles in which she suggested that the scholarly obsession with dogma as the dividing issue between “orthodox” and “gnostic” Christians simply reproduced the accounts of the heresiologists themselves, while obscuring deeper questions. Examining disputes over monotheism and differing interpretations of Jesus’ passion and resurrection, Pagels argued that we couldn’t understand the high charge of these debates unless we considered the ways in which different views legitimized diverse models of church hierarchy, spiritual authority, and responses to persecution.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, she was careful to avoid reductionism, insisting that considering these implications “does not reduce theological issues to political ones. Rather it shows how these issues are interconnected in the actual life of second-century communities.”<sup>16</sup>

This nuance in Pagels’ approach to political matters was also evidenced in her work on gender and religion. In an early article on “Paul and Women,” Pagels steered a course between those who saw Paul as “the eternal enemy of woman” in George Bernard Shaw’s words, and scholars who were attempting to rehabilitate him as, on the contrary, “the only certain and consistent spokesman for the liberation and equality of women in the NT.”<sup>17</sup> Instead Pagels argued that we should attempt to read Paul on his

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<sup>13</sup> For Pagels’ account of this period, see *The Gnostic Gospels*, xxviii–xxvix.

<sup>14</sup> Pagels participated in the First International Congress dealing with the Nag Hammadi texts, at which she presented a paper, later published as Elaine Pagels, with Helmut Koester, “Report on the *Dialogue of the Savior* (CG III, 5),” in *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis: Papers Read at the First International Congress on Coptology, Cairo, December 1976* (ed. Robert McL. Wilson; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 66–74.

<sup>15</sup> See Pagels, “‘The Demiurge and His Archons’: A Gnostic View of the Bishop and Presbyters?” *HTR* 69 (1976): 301–24; “Visions, Appearances, and Apostolic Authority: Gnostic and Orthodox Traditions,” in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas* (ed. Barbara Aland; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 415–30; and “Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ’s Passion: Paradigms for the Christian’s Response to Persecution?” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978*, vol. 1: *The School of Valentinus* (ed. Bentley Layton; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 262–88.

<sup>16</sup> Pagels, “The Demiurge and His Archons,” 322–23.

<sup>17</sup> G. B. Shaw, “The Monstrous Imposition upon Jesus,” reprinted in *The Writings of St. Paul* (ed. Wayne A. Meeks; New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 299–303; Robin

own terms, not as if he were addressing our modern situation and concerns.<sup>18</sup> Yet, she did not advocate abandoning Paul's letters as "canonical" altogether, but, in an interesting move, suggested we return to the sense of the word "canon" as a guideline, rather than as a prescriptive set of rules.<sup>19</sup> Early on, then, Pagels was entering into modern theological debates, while managing to avoid the trap of simply reading into ancient texts what she wanted to see there. This approach continued in her work on gender in non-canonical texts: while exploring the expanded possibilities of understanding the divine as feminine that many Nag Hammadi texts offer, she was careful to avoid "a hasty and simplistic reading of the evidence" which might inaccurately suggest that gnostic communities were radically egalitarian, and the orthodox church irredeemably patriarchal.<sup>20</sup>

In her first decade out of graduate school, then, Pagels had already achieved an admirable series of scholarly feats. She had called into question some of the most fundamental assumptions underlying the study of "Gnostic" sources; uncovered a coherent field of Valentinian reading practices; unpacked many of the literary and hermeneutic techniques with which second- and third-century heresiologists had denigrated their opponents; participated in editing and translating the most important textual discoveries for the study of early Christianity in modern history; and begun to explore the contemporary political connotations of ancient religious controversies.

## A Public Intellectual

As her work progressed, Pagels increasingly displayed a concern with the implications of her research for broader current debates. In 1979, she made the crucial move to open up her scholarly work to the public – a decision that would have far-reaching consequences not only for her own career, but for the field of early Christian studies in general. Pagels adapted a series of her scholarly articles on the Nag Hammadi texts, by paring down the footnotes and working them into an engaging book-length narrative.<sup>21</sup>

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Scroggs, "Paul and The Eschatological Woman," *JAAR* 41 (1972): 283–303. Both quoted in Pagels, "Paul and Women: A Response to Recent Discussion," *JAAR* 42 (1974): 538–49.

<sup>18</sup> Pagels, "Paul and Women," 547.

<sup>19</sup> Pagels, "Paul and Women," 547.

<sup>20</sup> Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," *Signs* 2 (1976): 301.

<sup>21</sup> The articles included "Visions, Appearances, and Apostolic Authority," "The Demurge and His Archons," and "God the Mother." Pagels followed this pattern of adapting her scholarly research for a non-academic audience with her subsequent books.



In doing so, she displayed an unusual faith that non-specialists would be interested in (and able to understand) the results of scholarly research, that these ancient texts speak to the concerns of modern people, and that complex ideas can be communicated in accessible clear language without sacrificing rigor or sophistication. The resulting book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, was an instant success, becoming a best-seller and winning the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, as well as contributing to Pagels' selection for a MacArthur Fellowship. From reading her earlier, highly technical works on Valentinianism one would hardly have guessed that Pagels would later make the move into popular writing. Yet her lucid style, narrative instinct, and interest in the social and political implications of seemingly esoteric theological ideas, enabled her to cross the divide between academic and public discourse with ease.

The response to *The Gnostic Gospels* showed not only that there was huge public interest in historical scholarship, but also that Pagels had struck a chord with people's pressing spiritual concerns. In a period when many Americans had become dissatisfied with traditional Christianity, viewing its institutions as patriarchal, its sexual mores as repressive, its reliance on creeds and clergy stifling, and its association with establishment power alienating, the story of these lost gospels offered an alternative vision – not a different set of creeds or authorities to follow, but rather an understanding that Christianity could be *other than it is*. While many children of the 1950s and '60s were turning away from Christianity to explore Buddhism, Hinduism, and "New Age" mysticism, Pagels delved back into the depths of the Christian past to discover alternative spiritual paths, and in doing so, she brought many people along with her. Ironically, despite the vitriol sometimes aimed at her by conservative Christians, Pagels has no doubt "saved" Christianity for many people, giving them a way to reclaim it for themselves.<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, many of those who have been inspired by her work have pursued quite different paths from Pagels' own, whether in setting up Gnostic churches, or in developing fantastical theories about Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene as detailed in Dan Brown's bestseller.<sup>23</sup> However, one thing that anyone who has spent time with Elaine Pagels knows is that instead of dismissing popular concerns, she finds a way to engage them intelligently and considerately – whether by responding graciously to a question from a fan, or entering into the "Da Vinci Code" controversy in the popular media. Rather than simply mock-

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<sup>22</sup> This point is illustrated beautifully by an anecdote in one of Pagels' later books about the American Roshi Richard Baker, who told Elaine he wouldn't have had to convert to Buddhism if he'd read the *Gospel of Thomas* first! See Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 74.

<sup>23</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

ing the wild conspiracy theories inspired by Dan Brown's novel, Pagels used the publicity to engage again with popular interest in early Christianity and to analyze *why* people found Brown's story so fascinating, while drawing attention back to what she felt they should be focusing on:

Those possibilities opened by the "Gnostic" gospels – that God could have a feminine side and that Jesus could be human – are key ideas that Dan Brown explored in "The Da Vinci Code," and are no doubt part of what made the book so alluring. But the truth is that the texts he based his novel upon contain much deeper and more important mysteries than the ones Tom Hanks tries to solve in the movie version that opened this weekend.<sup>24</sup>

It would be hard to exaggerate the impact that *The Gnostic Gospels* and Pagels' later books have had on the public dialogue about early Christianity. She gave her readers a way into texts that otherwise would have been impenetrable – broken, esoteric documents in an obscure ancient language – using her own scholarly expertise and training to translate them for a general audience in the best tradition of engaged scholarship. In doing so, she opened up access to a tradition that many have found spiritually and intellectually intriguing and she exemplified the culturally enriching role that academics can play in society.<sup>25</sup> In an era of increasing specialization and professionalization in academia, in which communicating scholarly ideas to the public is often viewed with suspicion and consequently left to those who are unqualified for the task, Pagels has steered a remarkable course over the past few decades, steadily contributing to cutting-edge academic research while remaining an influential voice in the public sphere.

Pagels' popular writing has not only illuminated the social and political contexts of ancient heresiological debates for a broad audience, but has popularized the detailed scholarly case she has made throughout her career that the texts found at Nag Hammadi were not rejected by the church because of inferior theology, but for specific political reasons; furthermore, that the very fundamentals of what we understand Christianity to be were always contested and never obvious. It is these claims, and her success in communicating them to the public, that have made her seem so threatening

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<sup>24</sup> Pagels, "The Truth at the Heart of 'The Da Vinci Code,'" *San Jose Mercury News*, May 21, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, some would argue that engaging with the public is a responsibility of the intellectual. The words of Edward Said seem apt: "The intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion *to, as well as for, a public*. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publically to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them) . . . and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug." Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994), 9 (my italics).

to some conservative Christians, who accuse her of attacking the church and even Christianity itself.

Yet Pagels' attitude to the institutional church, and to those who consolidated it in the early centuries, has in fact always been more complex than her critics have acknowledged. In the Conclusion to *The Gnostic Gospels*, she explicitly recognized the role that the heresiologists played in sustaining Christianity through the centuries when so many other religious movements died out:

I believe that we owe the survival of Christian tradition to the organizational and theological structure that the emerging church developed. Anyone as powerfully attracted to Christianity as I am will regard that as a major achievement.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, Pagels also clearly recognizes the loss entailed in that process of institutionalization, and sees suppressed currents of Christianity as rich resources for those who, throughout history, "have found themselves at the edges of orthodoxy":<sup>27</sup> dissidents, artists, intellectuals – those who find more spiritual solace in asking questions than accepting answers.

### Sex, Society, and Satan

After *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels continued to follow the model of publishing scholarly articles, and then adapting them into more accessible books. In the 1980s, she began research on the ways in which early Christian readings of Genesis informed and legitimated certain views of nature, and consequently of sexuality and politics. The resulting articles would become the basis of another influential and hugely popular work, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*.<sup>28</sup> This line of inquiry developed the interest she had shown in her first book in exploring the religious origins of ideas that later

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<sup>26</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 142.

<sup>27</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 150.

<sup>28</sup> Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988). This book drew on the following articles: "Adam and Eve, Christ and the Church: A Survey of Second-Century Controversies Concerning Marriage," in *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honor of R. McL. Wilson* (ed. Alastair H. B. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 146–75; "Christian Apologists and the 'Fall of the Angels': An Attack on Roman Imperial Power?" *HTR* 78 (1985): 301–25; "Exegesis and Exposition of the Genesis Creation Accounts in Selected Texts from Nag Hammadi," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 257–86; "'Freedom from Necessity': Philosophic and Psychological Dimensions of Christian Conversion," in *Genesis 1–3 in the History of Exegesis: Intrigue in the Garden* (ed. Gregory A. Robbins; Lewiston, NY: E. Mellon Press, 1988), 69–97; "The Politics of Paradise: Augustine's Exegesis of Genesis 1–3 versus that of John Chrysostom," *HTR* 78 (1985): 67–95.

became hugely influential in Europe, and even more so in America (for example, the separation of church and state and the value of the individual). Pagels' work demonstrated that from the beginning Christian and Jewish texts have been great resources for ideas about freedom and equality, but also that there is nothing inevitable about this interpretive trajectory, that biblical texts can and have been construed in ways that legitimate the opposite ideas; it is not the text alone that holds the key to meaning, but the act of interpretation, which is always also a political act, rooted in contingent historical circumstance. Importantly, and in part because of Pagels' work, this insight and its implications have become central to the popular discussion of the history of Christianity. And they could not be more relevant to current public debates about religion (for example, with respect to the frequently crude and essentialist caricatures of Islam in the media).

Consideration of the relationship between theology and social context has led Pagels to brilliant insights into the development of concepts that now seem natural or obvious. After her work on the interpretation of Genesis, she began to investigate the development of the figure of Satan in ancient Jewish and Christian texts.<sup>29</sup> Instead of tracing a story of influences, she looked at the *social function* of Satan, and explained why this figure became particularly compelling to Jewish groups in the first centuries BCE/CE. The Satan, as a supernatural adversary, remains in the bible one of God's own messengers; he is not a being fundamentally opposed to God or God's people, like the monstrous Leviathan, for example. It is only in later Second Temple Jewish tradition that he begins to become a much more powerful and malevolent figure. Pagels argued:

one primary function of the image of Satan is to articulate patterns of group identification distinct from the traditional Israelite pattern – the identification of the people of Israel, God's chosen nation, against 'the nations and their gods.' . . . In particular, my observations suggest that those who developed and elaborated the image of Satan were Jews involved in struggling not only against the nations, but also, and in some cases primarily, against other Jews, often against a dominant majority.<sup>30</sup>

The mythology of Satan and the rebellious angels, then, enabled these groups of "dissident Jews"<sup>31</sup> to articulate their experience of opposition from "intimate enemies."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Pagels' wrote three articles on this subject: "The Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy': A Preliminary Sketch," *HTR* 84 (1991): 105–28; "The Social History of Satan, Part II: Satan in the New Testament Gospels," *JAAR* 62 (1994): 17–58; and "The Social History of Satan Part Three: John of Patmos and Ignatius of Antioch: Contrasting Visions of 'God's People,'" *HTR* 99 (2006): 487–505. Her book *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995) drew on the first two of these articles.

<sup>30</sup> Pagels, "Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy,'" 108.

<sup>31</sup> Pagels, "Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy,'" 106.

<sup>32</sup> Pagels, "Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy,'" 112.

This insight enabled Pagels to undertake a sustained exploration of the changing dynamics of Jews' and Christians' relationships with each other and with outsiders – from the Maccabean period, through the Gospels, and eventually to the Book of Revelation – and to show how these dynamics shaped theological and mythological discourses. Pagels' research on the figure of Satan, conducted over a period of twenty years, ends up not just tracing the history of an idea, but exploring the ways religious imagery and myth are implicated in our social relationships, and particularly in our ability to construct and demonize (literally) others.<sup>33</sup>

### Beyond “Gnosticism”

As the scope of her research on Satan shows, Pagels' work over the past thirty years has dealt at least as much with canonical and other “orthodox” texts as with those that have traditionally been categorized as “gnostic.” In fact, she has been a leading figure in integrating the study of ancient Christian sources, and thus refusing to abide by the categorizations of the heresiologists. As her work has progressed, she has become increasingly dissatisfied with the label “Gnostic” (as have a number of other scholars) and she has continued to explore connections as well as differences between texts later assigned to opposing sides of the heresiological divide.<sup>34</sup> This approach is particularly apparent in her work on the relationship between hermeneutics and ritual beginning in the 1990s. In a number of scholarly articles, she integrated the imagery of the “bridal chamber” in the *Gospel of Philip* into broader second-century Christian debates; explored connections and controversies between the gospels of Thomas and John with respect to their exegesis of Genesis and its ritual implications; and continued to dismantle the dominant narrow view of heresy as primarily about differences of doctrine, which she had first criticized back in the 1970s.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In *The Origin of Satan*, Pagels discusses the troubling afterlife that this association of one's enemies with forces of evil has had in Christian history, particularly in terms of the demonization of Jews and heretics. Yet she ends by meditating on the potential for a very different approach to one's enemies that also has a basis in Christian scripture: “Concluding this book, I hope that this research may illuminate for others, as it has for me, the struggle within Christian tradition between the profoundly human view that “otherness” is evil and the words of Jesus that reconciliation is divine” (184).

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, her comments in “Ritual in the *Gospel of Philip*,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration* (ed. John D. Turner and Anne McGuire; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 280.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to “Ritual in the *Gospel of Philip*,” see Pagels, “The ‘Mystery of Marriage’ in the *Gospel of Philip* Revisited,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. Birger A. Pearson in collaboration with A. Thomas

# Reference Index

## Hebrew Bible

### *Genesis*

1 11n35, 113  
1:1 113  
1:2 304, 304n20  
1:3 114n61  
2:7 249  
2:10–14 36n49  
2:21 304  
1–3 8n28, 15, 298  
3:8 116n70  
14:14 143n70  
15:6 387n16  
17:23 143n70  
21:19 215n17  
38:18 130n21

### *Exodus*

3:14 89n41  
13:6–9 393  
19:15 397  
20:5 311n44  
20:8–11 394  
22:21 415  
31:13 398n31  
35:1–3 394

### *Leviticus*

14:5 215n17  
14:6 215n17  
14:50 215n17  
14:51 215n17  
18 376  
19:18 401  
19:30 395  
26:2 395

### *Numbers*

5:17 215n17

15:32 394  
15:38–40 393  
19:17 215n17  
22:5–24:25 419n35  
35:4–5 394

### *Deuteronomy*

6:4–9 393  
22:12 393  
25:3 416

### *1 Samuel*

21:1–6 397

### *Psalms*

33:9 114n61  
90:13 197n31  
148:5 114n61

### *Isaiah*

1:3 339  
11:2 89n43  
18:1–3 32n41  
19 342  
19:1 341  
45:12 114  
53:10 318

### *Jeremiah*

17:21–22 395

### *Ezekiel*

20:25 425

### *Hosea*

6:6 390n19  
11:1 336

<i>Amos</i>		<i>Zechariah</i>	
5:21–22	390n19	14:8	215n17
<i>Habakkuk</i>			
3:2	339		

## Biblical Apocrypha

<i>Ben Sira</i>		2:42	429n4
3:21–22	283n39		
<i>2 Esdras</i>		<i>6 Ezra</i>	
1	427	15:11–12	433n25
2:45–47	427	15:20	442
15–16	427, 430	15:24	442
<i>4 Ezra</i>		15:35	433n27
3:1	429n4	15:43–55	433n21–22,26
6:10	429n4	15:53	433n24
7:2	429n4	15:60	433n21
7:25	429n4	16:1	433n21,23
7:49	429n4	16:40–47	442
8:2	429n4	16:49–51	433n22
8:19	429n4	16:68–78	431, 434–35
14:1	429n4	16:76	442
14:38	429n4	<i>1 Maccabees</i>	
<i>5 Ezra</i>		1:12	416n24
1:1	429n4	1:48	415n22
2:10	429n4	<i>2 Maccabees</i>	
2:33	429n4	4:2	407

## New Testament

<i>Matthew</i>		3:11	196n26
1:1	398	3:11–17	194n16
1:14	336	3:16–17	251n70
1:16	337	4:22	338
1:18	337	5–7	337
1:21–25	337	5:17–20	387
2	336, 341, 342	5:21–22	401
2:13	336, 341	5:21–48	401
2:14	341	5:39	425
2:20	341	5:41	425
2:21	336	5:47	387n14
2:22	341	6:9–13	337
2:22–23	338	7:12	401

7:13–14	344	3:18	407
7:16–19	45n76	3:30	200n41
7:24–27	144n77	3:31–34	356
8	338	4:22	282n37, 284n44
8:6	338	5:1–20	200
9	338	5:2	200n41
9:18	338	5:8	200n41
9:20	393	5:13	200n41
10:1	200n41	6:7	200n41
10:4	407	7:1–23	392n22
10:5–6	387n14	7:14–19	391n21
10:17	416, 418	7:25	200n41
10:26	282n37, 284n44	8:31–33	70
10:32–33	67, 71	12:8	384
11:28–30	400–1	14:3	355
12:1–8	394	14:50	360
12:9–14	400	15:41	364
12:43	200n41		
13:44	138	<i>Luke</i>	
14:36	393	1:2	361
15	338	1:1–4	359
15:1–11	388	1:36	364
15:22	338	2: 41–52	353n26
15:21–28	387n14	3:16	196
19:11	143n69	3:21–22	194n16, 251n70
20	338	4:33–36	200n41
21	385	6:15	407
20:21	338	6:18	200n41
20:1–16	143	8:17	282, 282n38, 283n43, 284n44
22:1–14	261	8:29	200n41
22:23	384	9:42	200n41
22:31	385	10:19	197
22:33	385	11:24	200n41
23:1–10	392	12:2	282n37, 284n44
23:4	400	20:27	384
23:6	338	21.11	36n49
23:9	337	22:49–51	69
23:15	409	23:49	360
23:23–24	402	24	288n59
23:34	417n28	24:12	360, 362n63
24:15–20	399		
26:6	355	<i>John</i>	
26:56	360, 364	1:18	104n28
28:18–20	387n14	1:29–34	194n16
		1:35–42	361n57
<i>Mark</i>		2	353
1:9–11	194n16	2:6	352n17
1:11	196	2:13–22	353, 377
1:23–27	200n41	3:27–30	357
3:11	200n41		



4:7–15	215n17	8:1	407
6:53	257	8:3	407
6:53–56	260	8:7	200n41
6:71	361n57	9:1	407
7:37–39	215n17	9:15	413
8:44	156n47	10	194n16
9:7	352	10:2	418
10:7	261	10:14	200n40
10:9	261	10:22	413n20
11:1–46	354, 354n29	10:28	200n40
11:5	355n31	11:5–10	413
11:6	356	11:8	200n40
11:35	355n31	13:15–44	187n1
11:46–54	354	13:45	416
11:48	353n22	13:47	413
12:4	361n57	14:2	416
12:9–11	353n22, 354	14:19	416
13–17	367, 375	16:14–15	194n16, 413n20
13–21	360	16:31–34	187n1, 194n16
13:12	370	17:5–6	416
13:21–30	360n53	17:18	414
13:23	361n57, 370	18:6	416
13:31	376	19:9	416
14:5	376	21:17	413
14:8	376	22:12	413
14:22	376	23:8	384
14:31	368	23:9	413
15:4–5	45n76	25:8	413
15:18	376	28:17	413
17:17–21	377	28:28	413
19:25	364		
19:25–27	356, 360, 360n53,	<i>Romans</i>	
	362n63	2:25–3:2	290, 290n66
19: 35–36	360n53	3:1	412
20:2–10	360, 360n53	3:21	410, 412
20:4	355	4	387n16
20:28	318	6:4	289n61
20:30–31	362n62	7:13–25	290
21:7	360n53	8:1–17	62
21:20–25	360n53	10:6–8	290
21:24–25	359, 362n62	11:1	410, 412
		13:1–7	77
<i>Acts</i>			
1:13	407	<i>1 Corinthians</i>	
2:36	413	1:1–5	133n39
5:14	413	1:23	408
5:16	200n41	2:6	421
5:17	384	2:9	290, 290n67
4:12	413	4:7	290
6:3–11	194n16	4:8–13	55

4:16–18	290	3:4–9	410
5:1	420n37	3:5–6	388n16, 406
5:9	412n18		
6:12	412n18, 421	<i>Colossians</i>	
6:13	420n37	1:15	115
6:18	420n37	1:24	69
7:12–16	420		
8:14	412n18	<i>2 Timothy</i>	
10:1–13	420	4:13	435
10:8	420n37		
15	3n10, 272, 280, 288, 289, 291n69, 292	<i>Hebrews</i>	
15:1–4	289	9:9	142
15:4	289	11:9	142
15:38	114n61		
15:43–48	298	<i>James</i>	
15:50	62, 256, 260	2:20–21	418
15:51	257		
		<i>2 Peter</i>	
<i>2 Corinthians</i>		3:15–16	418–19
2:1–2	405		
4:1–2	133n39	<i>Revelation</i>	
4:8–10	405	2:2	419
11	418	2:9	419n34
11:23–29	405, 416	2:14	419
12:1	406	3:9	419n34
12:1–5	411	3:20–22	433n22
12:8–10	411n17	7:15–17	215n17
12:10	406	12:17	419
12:7	411n17	14:3–4	420
		14:8	433n21
<i>Galatians</i>		14:12	419
1:6–8	404	14:20	433n27
1:12	411	16:9	433n21
1:13	404, 407, 425	16:13	200n41
1:13–14	406	17:1	433n22
1:23	407	17:2	433n24
2:11	404	17:5	433n21,22
3:1	405	17:6	433n24
3:21	412	17:15–17	433n22,26
4:13	411n17	18:2	200n40, 433n21
5:11	409	18:4	433n25
5:12	405	18:8	433n25
		18:9–23	433n26
<i>Ephesians</i>		18:10–18	433n21,22
1:10	251	18:21	433n21
1:23	251	19:2	433n22
		21:6	215n17
<i>Philippians</i>		22:1–2	215n17
2:27	404	20:4–6	294
		22:17	215n17

## Other Jewish Writings

<i>Apocalypse of Ezra</i>		<i>3 Enoch</i>	
5:1	434n32	3–16	211
<i>Apocalypse of Sedrach</i>		Jerusalem Talmud	
12:1	434n32	<i>Gittin</i>	
14:10–12	434n32	4:3 (45c–d)	383n
Babylonian Talmud		<i>Mo'ed Qatan</i>	
<i>Bava Metzi'a</i>		3:1 (81c–d)	838n3
59b	383n8	<i>Pesahim</i>	
<i>Eruvin</i>		6:1 (33a)	398n31
21b–22a	392n22	Josephus	
<i>Gittin</i>		<i>Antiquities</i>	
36a	383n8	4.238	416n25
<i>Hagigah</i>		13.288–96	382n6
10a	395n28	13.297–98	381
<i>Sanhedrin</i>		14.9	382n6
9a	115n64	15.1	382n6
<i>Shabbat</i>		15.10–11	382n6
13b	389n18	16.392–394	338n7
132a	399n33	17.2	382n6
<i>Yebamot</i>		17.6	382n6
46a	415	17.187	338n7
<i>Community Rule (1QS)</i>		18.1	407n7
I, 3–4	402	18.11–22	382n6, 384
I, 19–20	115n63	20.17–46	414
XI, 11	115n63	23	407n6
<i>Damascus Document</i>		<i>Life</i>	
10.17–18	396	223	370n15
10.20–23	396	<i>War</i>	
11.7–8	396	2.119–66	382n6
11.13–17	396, 400	2.122	391
<i>1 Enoch</i>		2.134	391
24.4–5	43n72	2.135	401n36
32.3–6	43n72	2.139	401n35, 402n37
<i>2 Enoch</i>		2.140	392
22	206n4, 210	2.147–48	395
22.8–10	210n11	2.149	390n18
		7.51–52	435
		<i>Ma'aseh Merkabah</i>	
		9	211n14
		<i>Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael</i>	
		1	399n33

- Mishnah
- Avot*  
2:8 372
- Berakot*  
6.2–3 115n64
- Hagigah*  
1.8 383n8  
2.1 319n73
- Makkot*  
3:12 416n26
- Nedarim*  
9:1 (41b–c) 392n22
- Sanhedrin*  
10:1 384n10
- Shabbat*  
7:2 395n28
- Sukkah*  
4:1 398n31  
4:3 398n31
- Toharot*  
2:2 389n18
- Yoma*  
8:9 401
- Zavim*  
5:12 389n18
- Odes of Solomon*  
11.7–16 206n4  
24.1–5 206n4
- Philo
- On the Confusion of Tongues*  
166 116n65  
196 116n65
- On the Creation of the World*  
16 116n65  
17–18 114n58  
44 116n65  
77 116n65  
138 116n65  
149 116n65
- On the Decalogue*  
12.58 115
- Embassy to Gaius*  
245 436n40
- On the Eternity of the World*  
3 26n24  
9 26n24
- On Flight and Finding*  
149–51 130n21  
152 130n21
- On Planting*  
14 115n65
- On Providence*  
2.40–41 141n65
- On Rewards and Punishments*  
152 414n21
- Questions on Exodus*  
2.2 415
- Special Laws*  
1.52 414n21
- Sibylline Oracles*  
1–2 437  
2.23 36n49  
8.175 36n49
- Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*  
4Q491c  
1.7 211n12
- Testament of Levi*  
18:6–7 206n4
- Toledot Yeshu*  
BnU 3974 424–25
- Tosefta
- Hagigah*  
1:11 395n28
- Sanhedrin*  
7:9 370n16
- Vision of Ezra*  
38 434n32

## Other Christian Writings

<i>Acts of Andrew</i>		25.9	80n7
14	200	25–26	80n8, 84n25
		25.21	81n9
<i>Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles</i>		26.11–19	84
10.24	141n64	27.8–12	89n41
		27–29	81n10
<i>Acts of Thomas</i>		29.12	81n11
59	200n42	31.2	81n12
148	83n22	33.2	81n15
167	83n22	33.4	82n18
		36.1–13	81n14
<i>Allogenes</i> (NHC XI)		CT	
45.22–30	209n9	10.1	80n7, 89n42
48.15–17	209n9	10.23–24	84n26
48.34–38	214	11.14–15	89n42
49.5–26	209n9	11.15	80n7
60.14–61.8	214n16	12–13	80n8, 84n25
66.30–38	208n8	12.5	81n9
		13.25–14.2	89n41
<i>Ammonas</i>		14–15	81n10
<i>Letters</i>		16.1	81n11
13	269n169	17.9	81n12
		19.24–25	81n15
<i>On the Anointing</i> (NHC XI)		19.26	82n18
40.11–19	197n30	21.25–22.17	83
		22.23–23.10	81n114
<i>Apocalypse of Adam</i>			
69.1–70.6	36n49		
69.2–18	38n52		
70.7–25	38n52		
75.9–12	36n49		
76.14–15	44n75		
78.9–13	38n52		
78.11	38n52		
80.1–8	38n52		
80.13	38n52		
81.4	38n52		
82.19–83.4	38n53		
84.4–26	192		
85.13–14	38n53		
85:25–31	192		
<i>(First) Apocalypse of James</i>			
NHC V			
24.12	80n7, 89n42		
24.30	84n26		
25.8	89n42		
		<i>(Second) Apocalypse of James</i>	
		53.18–20	57n119
		<i>Apocalypse of Paul</i> (NHC V)	
		20.16	83n22
		22.20	83n22
		<i>Apocalypse of Peter</i> (NHC VII)	
		70.20–22	74n64
		71.14	74n64
		73.27–28	74n65
		76.18–20	75n70
		76.31–34	74n65
		77.31–32	73n61
		78.8–15	75n69
		79.24–28	73n62
		81:4–24	74
		82.21–26	74n66
		82.27–30	74
		83.7–8	74

- |                            |          |                                    |             |
|----------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| 83.7–10                    | 73n63    | 19                                 | 228–29      |
| 84.6–11                    | 75n71    | 20                                 | 220         |
|                            |          | 21                                 | 220, 224n14 |
| <i>Apocryphon of James</i> |          | 21.16–22.16                        | 304         |
| 2.19–20                    | 143n71   | 21.19–22.2                         | 37n51       |
| 2.23–26                    | 72n57    | 21.27                              | 304         |
| 4.31–5.6                   | 71n50    | 22                                 | 225         |
| 5.1–6                      | 71n52    | 22.10–11                           | 37n51       |
| 5.7–9                      | 70n45    | 23                                 | 220, 225    |
| 5.26–29                    | 70n45    | 23.23–31                           | 30n33       |
| 5.33–6.1                   | 70n46    | 23.27–28                           | 37n51       |
| 6.1–6                      | 70n47    | 24.13–15                           | 30n33       |
| 6.14–20                    | 71n52    | 25.16–27.30                        | 51n96       |
| 6–7                        | 141n62   | 25.25                              | 51n97       |
| 7.10–16                    | 71n52    | 25.31–33                           | 51n98       |
| 8.3                        | 143n71   | 25–28                              | 304         |
| 8.10–15                    | 71n51    | 26                                 | 220         |
| 10.30–32                   | 71n54    | 27.22–30                           | 52n99       |
| 11.38–12.9                 | 72n56    | 27.33–28.5                         | 30n33       |
| 13.19–25                   | 71n53    | 29.1–3                             | 30n33       |
| 13.23–25                   | 70n48    | 30.12–31.25                        | 30n33       |
| 14.8–10                    | 71n49    | 30–31                              | 220         |
| 14.30–36                   | 72n57    | 31                                 | 221         |
| 16.1–2                     | 71n55    | 31,22–24                           | 206         |
|                            |          | 31.34–37                           | 307n33      |
| <i>Apocryphon of John</i>  |          | Berlin Codex 8502                  |             |
| NHC II                     |          | 27.10–11                           | 30n33       |
| 1                          | 218      | 34.2–3                             | 307n35      |
| 1.1–5                      | 304n19   | 44.5–9                             | 23n10       |
| 1.21–24                    | 308n39   | 45.1                               | 304n21      |
| 2.9                        | 307n35   |                                    |             |
| 2.25                       | 304      | <i>Apophthegmata Patrum</i>        |             |
| 4                          | 218, 222 | 8.21                               | 302n13      |
| 4.19–26                    | 44n74    |                                    |             |
| 4.19–28                    | 209n9    | Athanasius of Alexandria           |             |
| 6                          | 219      | <i>On the Incarnation</i>          |             |
| 6.5                        | 30n33    | 33                                 | 342n13      |
| 8.18                       | 307n35   | <i>Life of Antony</i>              |             |
| 10                         | 219      | 1.1                                | 315n59      |
| 10.7–9                     | 23n10    | 66–67                              | 322n7       |
| 11.26–35                   | 37n51    | <i>Festal Letters</i>              |             |
| 12.25–13.1                 | 23n10    | 39                                 | 321n6       |
| 13.13                      | 304n21   | <i>Orations against the Arians</i> |             |
| 13.18                      | 304      | 3.34                               | 267n163     |
| 13.19–21                   | 304n22   | 3.41                               | 252n75      |
| 14                         | 219      | 3.51                               | 262n135     |
| 14.18–24                   | 30n33    | 3.60                               | 120n88      |
| 15.7–9                     | 310      |                                    |             |
| 15.10                      | 310      |                                    |             |
| 15.29–19.10                | 37n51    |                                    |             |

- Augustine of Hippo  
*Against Felix*  
 1.1 285n49  
*Against the Letter of the Manichaeans*  
 11 285n49  
*Christian Instruction*  
 1.86 146n84  
 2.30–31 144n78  
 3.86 144n78  
*Barnabas*  
 6.10 142n67  
 9.8 143n70  
 11.11 193n15  
 16.8 201n44  
 17.2 142n68  
*Book of Thomas* (NHC II)  
 138 359n51  
 Clement of Alexandria  
*Excerpts from Theodotus*  
 6–7 104n28  
 7.1 104, 108n38, 108n40  
 7.3 105n29  
 22.7 89n42  
 23 421n44  
 49.1 55n111  
 61.8 51n93  
 74.2 44n73  
 76.2–3 187  
 77.1 187, 188  
 77.3 187  
 80.3 187n2  
 82.2 197  
 83 188  
 84 188n3  
*Stromata*  
 2.114.3–6 201n43  
 3.1.1 62  
 3.6.49 63  
 4.4.18.3 66n25  
 4.15 129n19  
 7.16 129n19  
 7.17 421n45  
 2 *Clement*  
 1.8 116n73  
*Clementine Recognitions*  
 1.70 423  
 2.71 201  
 27–71 423  
*Concept of Our Great Power*  
 45.25–46.5 44n74  
 Cyprian  
*Letters*  
 11.1 64n18  
 Cyril of Alexandria  
*Commentary on Isaiah*  
 4.2 268n165  
 4.2.91 254n89  
*Commentary on John*  
 2.1 261n125  
 3.6 264n141  
 4.2 264n141  
 8.32 261n131  
*Epistles*  
 1.10 253n80, 253n81  
 1.10–11 253n83  
 1.13–33 243n27  
 44.62–63 235n2  
 55.7 258n117  
 81.1 258n116  
 81.2 259n118  
*On the Unity of Christ*  
 62 254n90  
*Dialogue of the Savior* (NHC III)  
 142.5–8 57n119  
 Epiphanius  
*Ancoratus*  
 43.6 246n43, 246n44  
 43.10 246n42  
 82.3 244n28  
*Panarion*  
 26.11.1–2 55n111  
 26.13.2 87n39  
 29–31 386n12  
 30.11.4 416n27  
 30.16.6–9 421n40  
 33.1 97

- 40 25n17  
64.63.14–64.8 259n119  
64.64.2–9 259n120
- Exegesis on the Soul*  
130.35–131.19 422
- Eugnostos*  
NHC III  
70.2–12 25n17  
70.20 29n31  
74.12–19 25n15, 25n17  
81.5–6 54n110  
86.17–23 54n110  
89.6–15 25n15
- NHC V  
16.15–25 25n15
- Eusebius of Caesarea  
*Demonstration of the Gospel*  
6.20 342  
7.3.18 303n15  
9.2 342
- Ecclesiastical History*  
2.18.1 302n14  
3.39.11 140n61  
5.24 132n34  
5.24.6 129n17  
5.24.11–13 129n19  
5.4 72n59  
5.13.8 302n14  
6.38 421n41  
8.2.2–3 64n18  
10.8–9 77n75
- Ezrik of Kolb  
*On God*  
416 53n102
- Gospel of Judas*  
47.5–50.11 26n19  
49.5–50.11 26n21  
50.11–51.1 26n20
- Gospel of Ps.-Matthew*  
18–20 340n9  
23–24 340
- Gospel of Philip*  
51.29–32 167n123, 244n30  
52.21–24 244n31  
55.14–19 29n32  
55.23–26 100n14  
55.23–28 249n62  
55.27–28 250n64  
56.13–15 251n73  
56.26–29 256n101  
56.29–34 256n102  
56.26–57.1 255n94  
56.32–57.3 257n111  
57.1–8 256n103  
57.3–6 257n108, 257n109,  
261n130  
57.4–5 264n145  
57.6–8 264n144  
57.9–19 255n98  
57.11–14 256n104  
57.14–15 256n105  
57.15–16 256n106  
57.18 255n99, 256n100  
57.18–19 256n107  
57.19–22 257n110  
58.5–10 261n128  
58.10–17 260n124  
59.18–22 29n32  
58.20–22 248n51  
60.15–22 55n113  
61.1–10 55n112  
61.12–20 199n38  
61.20–26 43n73  
61.20–35 261n126  
63.21 264n142  
63.21–24 248n55  
64.12–21 55n113  
64.22–31 189n5, 199  
65.1–12 62  
65.3–27 199  
66.16–20 255n94  
67.23–27 252n76, 261n127  
67.26–27 253n82  
67–68 231  
68.22–26 248n52  
68.24–26 249n61  
69.1–4 254n88  
69.5–6 247n46  
69.5–8 248n54  
69.8–14 261n129  
69.12–14 247n47



70.9–17	249n61	1–7	273
70.9–22	199n39	4	274
70.22–24	249n62	5	277, 278, 279n26,
70.22–26	249n62, 249n63		282, 286n53, 287–95
70.24–25	251n68	6	277–79, 288n60,
70.34–71.15	250n66		294n80, 304
70.35–71.8	248n54	7	276n10, 294, 294n82,
70.35–71.11	244n31		295n86
70.35–71.15	248n56	12	304
70.36–71.1	250n67, 253n84	17	290
71.2–3	89n42	22	294, 295n85
71.4–6	251n70	24	273
71.6–7	251n69, 253n85	26–33	273
71.8	251n72	29	290
71.11–13	251n71	36–39	273
71.16–18	251n68	50	88n39
71.16–21	251n68	51	276, 276n16
71.18–21	248n52, 251n68	52	293
72.4–17	244n31	53	290, 290n66
73.1–5	280n28	70	290
73.8–19	248n55	77a	273
74.1–12	248n52	82	359n48
74.14–24	248n54	87	290
74.15–16	252n79	91	293
74.15–24	252n74	98	359n48
74.16–18	248n56	113	276, 277n17
75: 1	263n137	114	308
75.2–10	29n32		
75.10–13	247n45		<i>Gospel of Truth</i> (NHC I)
75.13–14	248n53, 255n93	16.35–36	105n30
75.14–17	263n137	19.27	105n34
75.14–21	248n54	23.33–24.9	105n33
75.19	264n143	29.1–30.16	47
75.20–26	199	30.3	47
75.21–25	199, 264n146	30.4–6	43n73
77:3–4	263n137	30.5–6	47
79.18–25	55n113	33.1–5	54n106
81.19–21	245n40	36.39–37.15	105n31
81.22–23	245n37	37.15–18	105n32
81.23–24	245n39	38.6–7	108n38
81.24	245n38	38.24–39.28	108n41
82.2–8	62		
84.23–25	29n32, 270n172		<i>Hippolytus</i>
86.1–18	269n168		<i>Apostolic Tradition</i>
86.11–16	269n169	16.8	202
		20.3–4	202
		20.7–8	202
		21.12–18	202
<i>Gospel of Thomas</i> (NHC II)			
Logia			
1–3	288n58		
3	290		

## Ps.-Hippolytus

*Refutation of All Heresies*

1.pref.1	152n17, 165n114
1.pref.2-3	154n33, 155n43
1.pref.2-5	159n70
1.pref.3-4	159n72, 174n161
1.pref.5	174n159
1.pref.6	160n80
4.51.10-14	157n57
5.1-4	164n102
5.1.4	153n20
5.6.1-2	178n182
5.7.14-15	53n102
5.9.14	45n80
5.9.14-20	157n57
5.11.1	175n168
5.16.5-7	45n78
5.16.14-15	45n80
5.17.7	45n78
5.23.2-3	153n20, 164n102
5.26.11-13	36n49
6.29.2-36.4	98
6.29.5	94n1
6.33	55n111
6.34.8	55n111
6.41.2-5	153n23, 159n74, 165n114
6.52.1-2	157n56, 162n91
8.38	97
9.10-11	53n102

*Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*

## NHC III

49.16-20	30n34
51.23	30n34
52.3-16	307n35
55.1-5	54n110
56.23-26	30n34
57.25-58.22	30n34
57.25-58.1	30n34
59.9-12	31n34
59.25-60.2	44n73
61.1-3	36n49
61.1-23	35n48
61.10-12	35n47
61.17	31n35
62.24-63.23	206
65.1-3	44n73

## NHC IV

60.1	30n34
50.18-19	30n34
53.13	30n34
72.29	31n35
72.10-12	36n49
72.10-73.6	35n48
72.18-21	35n47
74.9-75.11	206
74.29	206

*Hypostasis of the Archons*

86.21	422
86.26-27	304, 307n34
87.8-11	24n14
87.26-33	310
88.16-24	39n54
89	226
90.32-34	39n54
92.4-14	39n54
93.4	307
93.13-16	45n77
93.18-32	307n36
93.32-94.2	308n38
93-95	308
94.8	24n14
94.9	25n14
96.4-11	308n37
96.11-13	31n36
96.13	24n14
98.18	25n14

## Ignatius of Antioch

*Philadelphians*

7	321n5
---	-------

*Smyrnaeans*

1.1	116n71
-----	--------

*Interpretation of Knowledge*

12.22-31	89n42
----------	-------

## Irenaeus of Lyons

*Against Heresies*

1.pref.	124n2
1.pref.1	148n1, 152n12, 153n19, 153n21, 153n23, 164n104
1.pref.2	174n162, 175n166, 305

1.1.3	157n49, 157n51	1.15.6	174n157
1.1-3	98, 102, 103	1.16.3	152n15, 153n18, 174n157, 176n174
1.1-8	80, 107	1.19.1-2	153n21, 156n47
1.1-9	120, 121	1.20.1	157n54, 305
1.2.4	95n4	1.20.2	156n47, 157n49
1.2.5	100n14	1.20.3	153n22, 161n81
1.3.1	142n69	1.21.1-2	160n76, 160n77, 199n39
1.3.1-6	143	1.21.3	160n78
1.3.6	144n74, 144n75, 156n47, 157n49, 157n50, 158n58	1.21.3-4	153n20, 159n70
1.4.3	153n20, 159n70, 159n71	1.21.5	79, 80, 83, 88, 160n75
1.5.3	55n111	1.22.1	128, 130n28
1.6.1	156n48, 157n52, 164n102	1.24.1-2	49n87
1.6.3	155n37, 155n39, 155n40, 155n41, 155n42	1.25.3	174n157, 174n160, 177n179, 177n181
1.6.4	62, 178n184	1.25.4	174n156
1.8.1	139, 157n50, 164n106, 174n163	1.25.4-5	155n37
1.9.1	157n53	1.25.5	305
1.9.4	131n29, 131n32, 139, 157n55, 158n58, 158n59, 158n60, 162n90	1.26.2	386n12, 420n39
1.9.5	179n192	1.28.1	174n163
1.10.1	128, 131n29, 174n158, 179n192	1.28.1-2	155n41
1.10.2-3	179n190, 180n193	1.28.2	155n39
1.10.3	153n24	1.29	100n15
1.11.1	120, 123	1.29.1-4	217
1.11.2	120	1.31.3	155n43
1.11.3	120	1.31.4	175n167
1.11.4	99	2.pref.	23n8, 120n84, 121n85, 121n86
1.11.5	175n164	2.pref.1	183n207
1.12.1	14, 93-120, 123	2.1.1	161n83
1.12.2	116n72, 118	2.2.5	183n207
1.12.3	120	2.9.1	179n192
1.12.4	120	2.9.2	152n14, 152n16, 161n84, 164n103
1.13.1	174n157, 177n175	2.10.1	146n83
1.13.2-3	117n78	2.13.3	152n13, 161n82
1.13.3	155n41, 174n157, 177n178	2.14.2	165n112, 175n165
1.13.5	117n76, 155n41, 180n196	2.14.4	154n31
1.13.6	155n36, 155n37	2.14.5	155n38
1.13-16	88	2.17.9	305
1.13.7	117n76	2.17.9-10	175n164
		2.19.2	153n27
		2.19.3	153n26
		2.19.4	153n27
		2.20-26.3	144
		2.22-28	183n208
		2.25.1	130n25
		2.25.4	161n87

- |             |   |   |                              |
|-------------|---|---|------------------------------|
| 2.26.1      | 152n14, 152n16,<br>153n22, 183n208                      | 4.18.4  | 168n126, 168n127             |
| 2.26.3      | 154n33, 155n44,<br>161n86, 163n101,<br>164n108, 164n110 | 4.18.6  | 169n132                      |
| 2.27.1      | 166n116–19  | 4.19.1  | 154n35                       |
| 2.27.1–3    | 144   | 4.20.5  | 153n22                       |
| 2.27.1–2    | 145n82  | 4.22.1  | 168n128                      |
| 2.27.2      | 145n81, 166n115,<br>166n118                             | 4.26.1  | 138, 139n56, 145n80          |
| 2.27.3      | 144n77  | 4.26.2  | 164n105, 184n213             |
| 2.28.1      | 130   | 4.27.3  | 180n194                      |
| 2.28.2      | 153n25  | 4.33.2  | 279n25                       |
| 2.28.7      | 152n16, 174n158   | 4.33.3  | 160n79                       |
| 2.28.2      | 164n109   | 4.33.8  | 165n113, 180n193,<br>183n212 |
| 2.28.3      | 144n76  | 4.34.5  | 167n121                      |
| 2.29.1      | 161n89, 183n209   | 4.35.1  | 167n121                      |
| 2.29.2      | 183n210   | 4.38.1  | 183n208                      |
| 2.30.1      | 155n43, 155n45  | 4.38.3  | 183n208                      |
| 2.30.2      | 154n34, 183n208   | 4.38.4  | 156n46, 161n88               |
| 3.1.1       | 164n107, 183n211  | 4.39.2  | 161n88                       |
| 3.2.1       | 163n100   | 4.41.1–3  | 156n47                       |
| 3.2.2       | 163n99  | 4.41.4  | 143n72                       |
| 3.3.1       | 179n192   | 5.18.2  | 166n119                      |
| 3.3.1–3     | 179n191   | 5.19.2  | 154n29                       |
| 3.4.1       | 1.3.1n30  | 5.20.1  | 179n188                      |
| 3.4.2       | 128, 131n29   | 5.20.2  | 175n164                      |
| 3.6.5       | 156n47  | 5.26.2  | 125n3, 174n157               |
| 3.7.1–2     | 156n47  | 5.32.1  | 73n60                        |
| 3.9.2–3     | 96n6  | <i>Demonstration of the Apostolic<br/>Preaching</i> |                              |
| 3.11.1      | 156n47  | 1   | 129n19                       |
| 3.11.9      | 157n54, 305   | 3   | 129n19                       |
| 3.12.7      | 164n107   | 6   | 129n19                       |
| 3.12.12     | 167n122   | <i>Jerome</i>                                       |                              |
| 3.15.2      | 159n69, 176n174,<br>178n186                             | <i>Commentariorum in Isaiam</i>                     |                              |
| 3.16.8      | 174n162   | 7   | 32n41                        |
| 4. pref.2   | 125n3   | <i>Letters</i>                                      |                              |
| 4. pref.3–4 | 152n16  | 84  | 258n113                      |
| 4. pref.4   | 152n14, 154n30,<br>164n111, 183n210                     | <i>Justin</i>                                       |                              |
| 4.1.2       | 153n22  | <i>I Apology</i>                                    |                              |
| 4.14.1      | 169n130   | 61  | 195n23                       |
| 4.14.3      | 168n124   | 62  | 192                          |
| 4.15.1      | 168n125   | <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>                         |                              |
| 4.16.5      | 169n129   | 35.6  | 124n1                        |
| 4.17.1–2    | 169n131   | 36.2  | 142n66                       |
| 4.17.4      | 169n131   | 52.1  | 142n66                       |
| 4.17.5      | 169n133   | 58.1–2  | 134n39                       |
| 4.18.1      | 169n134   | 63.2  | 142n66                       |

- |       |        |              |             |
|-------|--------|--------------|-------------|
| 68.6  | 142n66 | 110.18–23    | 39n56       |
| 77.4  | 142n66 | 111.2–8      | 39n56       |
| 78.10 | 142n66 | 111.8–14     | 39n56       |
|       |        | 111.15–18    | 39n56       |
|       |        | 111.20–27    | 39n56       |
|       |        | 112.1–9      | 39n56       |
|       |        | 112.3–9      | 44n73       |
|       |        | 113.5–10     | 31n37       |
|       |        | 114.24–34    | 310         |
|       |        | 114.29–33    | 25n17       |
|       |        | 116.19–117.1 | 311n45      |
|       |        | 116–117      | 226         |
|       |        | 117.24–28    | 31n37       |
|       |        | 122.16–123.1 | 20n3        |
|       |        | 122.34–123.1 | 20n3, 25n17 |
|       |        | 123.28–31    | 25n17       |
|       |        | 125.16–19    | 284n45      |
- Letter of Peter to Philip*  
NHC VIII  
134.8–9          68n38  
134.26–27        69n40  
137.4–138.3     69n39  
137.6–9          69n41  
138.24–26       69n39  
140.9–13         61n7
- CT  
6.2–3            69n39  
7.7–9            69n39
- Martyrdom of Matthew*  
12                200n40
- Origen  
*Commentary on John*  
13.50            55n111
- Contra Celsum*  
2.1.7            200n40  
3.11              200n40  
4.92              41n68  
6.31              88n39  
8.31              35n48
- On First Principles*  
2.9.1            116n75  
4.4.1            109n44, 116n75
- On the Origin of the World*  
99.2–14         311n44  
103.29–30       44n74  
108.2–19        39n56  
108.10–109.1   44n74  
108.20–109.1   39n56  
108.32           304n21  
108.33–109.1   44n74  
109.14–15       39n56  
109.20–25       39n56  
109.30–111.20  25n17  
109.33–110.1   39n56  
109.33–112.9   39n56  
110.2–111.8    43n72  
110.7            39n56  
110.13–17      39n56
- Pachomiana*  
Arabic Life (Am)  
304               331n24  
344               330n24  
352               331n24  
358               325  
567               325, 326  
568               325  
569               325, 327n20  
573               325  
574               325  
591               327n21
- Coptic Life (SBo)  
8                  330n24, 331n27  
17                324n16, 325  
22                331n28  
25                322n8, 331n27  
28                322n11, 331n27  
34                331n24  
49                324n16, 325, 326  
50                325  
51                325  
52                324n16, 325  
54                323n12, 325, 327n20  
56                316n60, 325  
57                324n16, 325  
58                323n13, 324n16, 325  
73                331n25  
82–83            331n25  
83                263n135  
89                316n60

93	331n25	12.15, 27	29n30
103	317n66	13.5, 33	29n30
First Greek Life (G <sup>1</sup> )		14.16	52n101
5	317n65, 330n24	16.3	29n30
12	317n65, 325, 325n19, 330n24	17.2	29n30
23	331n28	18.2, 8, 27	29n30
27	331n27	19.13–17	40n61
29	322n8	19.26	52n101
30	322n11	20.2–12	41n63
30–31	331n27	20.10–20	44n74
43	331n25	21.17–22	41n64
48	331n26	21.21	29n30
54	325, 326	22.33–23.1	41n62
56–57	319n69	23.23–24	52n101
70	319n70	25.5, 24	29n30
80	316n60, 325	26.8, 26, 33	29n30
81	323n12, 325, 327n20, 331n25	27.6	52n101
83	325	29.18, 20	29n30
88	331n25	30.13–18	36n49
93	331n25	33.17–23	44n73
99	317n68, 319n72	34.21	52n101
102	317n66	35.6	52n101
112	321n3	35.11	29n30
135	331n25	36.4–11	57n116
135–136	331n25	35.16–17	52n101
Second Sahidic Life (S <sup>2</sup> )		37.20–26	192
3	331n28	37.22–34	41n67
Paralipomena		38.9	52n101
12	319n71	41.1	29n30
17	317	45.20–26	44n74
Palladius		43.28–44.17	36n49
<i>Lausiaca History</i>		47.20–32	45n77
32	317n67	48.19–21	41n62
<i>Paraphrase of Shem</i>		<i>Pistis Sophia</i>	
1.5	29n30	71:18–72	359n51
2.29	29n30	75:1–6	359n51
4.15	29n30	112	88n39
6.2, 30	29n30	Rufinus	
8.15	29n30	<i>Apologia adversus Hieronymum</i>	
9.3, 8	29n30	3–4	258n114
10.16	29n30	<i>Apologia Origenis</i>	
10.25–29	29n30	1.9	258n115
10.37–11.4	29n30	<i>Historia monachorum in Aegypto</i>	
11.7, 24	29n30	8.1–8	342n14

*Second Treatise of the Great Seth*

57.26–58.4 55n112  
 60.31–32 55n112  
 61.28–29 55n112  
 62.10–26 54n108  
 62.14–18 54n107  
 65.25–30 54n107  
 66.23–67.18 54n108  
 67.15–16 54n107  
 67.32–68.12 54n108

## Shenoute

*I Am Amazed*

329 250n65  
 411 269n169

*The Lord Thundered*

DU 18 250n65

*Who Speaks through the Prophet*

DD 80 259n121  
 ZM 59–60 259n121  
 ZM 63–66 259n121

*Shepherd of Hermas**Vision*

2.4.1 54n109  
 11.2 141n63  
 20.2 141n63

*Mandate*

40.3–4 141n63  
 43.18 141n63

*Similitude*

9.16 193.15

*Sophia of Jesus Christ*

## NHC III

90.3–5 31n38  
 90.8–9 31n38  
 93.1 29n31  
 97.8–10 44n76  
 98.13–19 25n16  
 111.1–7 54n110  
 113.10–19 25n15  
 114.15 32n39  
 114.19 32n39  
 114.18–24 32n39  
 119.10–16 57n117

## Berlin Codex 8502

78.3–5 31n38  
 78.9–10 31n38  
 90.4–12 25n16  
 111.1–14 54n110  
 115.15–10 25n15  
 118.4–11 32n39

## P. Oxy. 1081

1081.27–34 25n.16

## Sozomen

*Ecclesiastical History*

3.14.9 317n67  
 5.21.8–11 324n15

## Tatian

*Address to the Greeks*

5.5 116n72

*Teachings of Silvanus* (NHC VII)

108.3–22 422

## Tertullian

*Against Marcion*

1.14 42n70  
 1.17 42n70  
 1.24 42n70  
 3.5 421n42

*Against the Valentines*

1.2 159n73  
 1.1–4 153n20  
 2.1 164n106  
 3.1–2 152n14, 153n22  
 3.3 161n85  
 4.1–4 178n183  
 4.4 153n28, 179n189  
 11 100n14  
 13 100n16  
 33 120n82

*Apology*

40 417

*Baptism*

5 192, 193n14

*Flight in Persecution*

1–5 5n21

*Prescription against Heretics*

3.1–2 56n115  
 12–13 129n18  
 26–27 129n18

*Scorpiace*

1.5 56n22  
 5 66n23  
 12 66n24

*Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX)

29.20 49n87  
 29.22–30.17 49n87  
 30.16 49n87  
 30.28–30 67n32  
 31.2 192  
 31.22–32.21 66n27  
 32.19–22 67n29  
 32.22–34.1 67n34  
 34.1–8 66n27, 67n28  
 38.26–11 67n31  
 38.27–40.7 49n87  
 40.4–9 67n30  
 41.30 49n87  
 43.1–20 67n35  
 44.2–19 68n36  
 44.30–45.6 67n33  
 47.14–48.15 49n87  
 65.5–8 67n31  
 67.1–68.11 49n87

## Theophilus of Alexandria

*Festal Letter*

17.1 262n134

*On the Crucifixion and the Good Thief*

M595, 146 252n77

*On Repentance and Self-Control*

103b 262n134

## Theophilus of Antioch

*To Autolycus*

2.17 41n68  
 2.22 115n69

*Treatise on the Resurrection*

45.24 422  
 45.31–34 43n73

*Trimorphic Protennoia*

35.11–18 45n81  
 36.5–7 44n74, 45n82  
 39.21–32 24n12  
 39.28–32 24n12  
 40.4–7 24n.12  
 45.12–20 205n4, 206n4  
 47.21–22 45n81  
 46.16–19 44n74  
 48.6–14 44n74  
 48.7–33 205n4  
 48.15–35 206n4  
 49.28–32 206n4

*Tripartite Tractate*

51.17–19 37n50  
 54.34–35 106n35  
 57.24–29 37n50  
 60.1 106n36, 106n37, 107  
 62.8–11 37n50  
 62.27 106n37  
 66.21–22 29n31  
 67.37–69.14 108n42  
 69.18 37n50  
 74.6–13 37n50  
 75.27 106n37  
 76.2–77.11 29n31  
 79.9 43n73  
 82.32–35 43n73  
 90.35 43n73  
 91.7 43n73  
 96.18 43n73  
 99.6 43n73  
 96.35–38 54n105  
 100.18–36 23n9  
 100.32 43n73  
 101.6–25 23n9  
 102.12–31 43n73  
 104.12–30 37n50  
 107.19–108.4 29n31  
 108.10–12 29n31  
 109.8–9 29n31  
 109.21–24 29n31  
 118.14–119.17 50n91  
 118.37–119.8 51n95  
 124.32–125.9 89n42

*A Valentinian Exposition*

22.18–27 102n20, 102n21  
 22.22–23 102n21



22.25–27	102n21	15.1–18	212
22.28–31	102n22	22.4–12	212
22.32–36	10324	23.17–24.1	213
22.34–36	103n23	24.28–25.22	212
22.36–38	107	27.14–17	52n100
22.36–38	103n26	31.12–32.10	210n10
23.21–23	102n21	48.12–16	24n11
24.23–26	108n38, 108n39	53.15–24	210
24.24–25	103n24	61.14	210, 213
24.26–28	103n25	81.6–20	209n9
<i>Zostrianos</i>		113.1–24	24n11
6.7–21	210	130.5–9	216n19
7.1–22	210	131.2	192

## Other Ancient Writings

Albinus		Diogenes Laertius	
<i>Didaskalikos</i>		<i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i>	
10.4	111n48	1.84	371
Aristotle		<i>Ginza</i>	
<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>		L 509:18–19	83n22
3.4.4–5	130n21	R 21:17–18	83n22
<i>Rhetoric</i>		Hesiod	
2.20	140n60	<i>Catalogue of Women</i>	
Atticus		Fr. 3	227n19
<i>Fragment 9</i>		<i>Theogony</i>	
815D	113n57	899–900	223n12
Cicero		924–26	223
<i>De amicitia</i>		927–29	224
24	376n30	Homer	
<i>De inventione rhetorica</i>		<i>Iliad</i>	
1.7.9	136n46, 137n47	2.1	118n79
2.40–51	137	<i>Homeric Hymns</i>	
2.40.116	137n50	349–55	224–25
2.48.142	137n52, 144n79	Isaeus	
<i>De legibus</i>		<i>Estate of Philoctemon</i>	
1.27	114n60	21	370
<i>De oratore</i>		<i>Estate of Pyrrus</i>	
1.57.244	138n54	13–14	370

- Isocrates  
*Ad Nicoclem* 338n6  
  
*Kephalalaia*  
 163.26–29 284n47  
  
 Martial  
*Epigrams*  
 7.6 415n23  
  
 Ovid  
*Metamorphoses*  
 1.452–562 226  
 3.402–510 222  
 3.499–510 223n11  
  
 Pausanias  
*Description of Greece*  
 1.32.5 292n73  
  
*Perfect Discourse (Asclepius)*  
 NHC VI  
 73.23–36 36n49  
  
 Plato  
*Parmenides*  
 129e–130a 112n51  
  
*Protagoras*  
 320c–d 228  
 321c–d 228  
 322a 229  
 361d 229  
  
*Republic*  
 365 88  
  
*Symposium*  
 222e–223a 371  
 217–218 371  
  
*Timaeus*  
 28a 114n59  
 29b–c 114n59  
 41b 114
- Plotinus  
*Enneads*  
 2.9.5 56n115  
 2.9.9 56n115  
 2.9.13 57n119  
 2.9.18 56n115  
 3.8.9 214n16  
 5.8.10 214n15  
 6.7.15 214n16  
 6.9.7 216n19  
  
 Plutarch  
*Amatorius*  
 21 374n29  
 23 374n29  
 754c–d 375  
 766 375  
 767e 375  
 769b–d 375  
  
*Conjugalia Praecepta*  
 9 374n29  
 17 374n29  
  
 Ps.-Plutarch  
*On Fate*  
 573B 115n67  
  
 Porphyry  
*On Abstinence*  
 3.20 42n68  
  
 Quintilian  
*Institutio oratoria*  
 2.15.38 135n43  
  
 Seneca  
*Letter 56.2* 20n2  
  
 Vettius Valens  
*Anthology*  
 5.9 114n60

## Papyri

<i>Bodmer</i>		LXIV 4405	281n34
VI	313	LXIV 4403	281n34
XVIII	313	LXIV 4401	281n34
XXI	313	LXIV 4402	281n34
XXII	313	LXV 4445	281n34
XXIII	313	LXV 4446	281n34
		LXV 4447	281n34
		LXV 4448	281n34
<i>Oxyrhynchus (P. Oxy.)</i>		LXXI 4805	281n34
I 2	281n34	LXXVI 5073	281n35
II 208	281n34		
III 405	96n6		
IV 654	274, 281, 287, 275n9,	<i>Nag Hammadi (P.Nag.Hamm.)</i>	
	274	63-65	312
VI 847	281n34	67-70	312
VIII 1081	25n16	72	312
X 1228	281n34		
XIII 1596	281n34	<i>John Rylands (P.Ryl.Gr)</i>	
XV 1780	281n34	III 457	281n34
XV 1781	281n34	III 463	281n34
XXIV 2384	281n34		
XXXIV 2683	281n34	<i>Würtzberg (P.Würtzb.)</i>	
XLI 2949	281n34	16	316
L 3525	281n34		

## Subject Index

- Abel 220  
Abraham 418  
Achamoth 80, 82–85  
*Acts of Andrew* 200  
*Acts of the Apostles* 127  
*Acts of John* 194, 200  
*Acts and Martyrdom of Matthew* 200  
*Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* 141  
Adam 23n10, 31, 38n53, 39n54, 44n73, 61–62, 168, 219–21, 225–26, 228, 248–49, 254, 310–11  
Adam-Christ typology 248–50, 254, 268, 270n172  
Addon (Adoniaos) 84  
Adoptionism 250  
Afterlife 86–89  
*Agape* 372  
Albinus 110, 115n67  
Alexandria 53, 314  
Allegory 141–43, 157, 342  
*Allogenes* (NHC XI) 213–15, 309n40  
Ammonas 269n169  
Angelification 204, 209–13  
Angels 9, 31n35, 39n56, 49n87, 55n111, 83, 89, 128, 174, 210–11, 260–62, 308, 316–17, 327, 404  
Anointing: see Chrism  
Anomoians 267  
Anti-Semitism 166–68, 245, 412  
Antioch 54  
Antiochus of Ascalon 112  
Antony 12, 269n169, 315  
– Letters of 315  
Apocalypse of John: see Revelation, Book of  
Apocalypticism 427–43  
*Apocryphon of James* 141  
*Apocryphon of John* of 15, 23, 61, 77, 84, 127n7, 217–31, 310  
Apollinarius 266–67  
Apollo 226  
*Apolytrois* 79, 81, 85–86, 88, 160, 198  
Apostles 131  
Apostolic succession 184, 244  
Arians 121, 246–47, 266, 270  
Arius 241  
Asia Minor 133, 313, 427–43  
*Ascension of Isaiah* 211  
Ascent to heaven 205, 209, 215, 327, 331  
Asceticism 15, 48–49, 58, 68, 155, 205, 298–300, 308, 316, 420  
*Asclepius (Perfect Discourse)* 36n49  
Asia Minor 16, 135  
Astrology 157  
Athanasius 12, 121–22, 241, 248, 252, 266–67, 315, 321–22, 342  
– *Contra Arianos* 262n135  
Athena 223–24, 228  
Atonement 71  
Atticus 113–14  
Atum 223  
Augustine 128, 144, 146, 286n51  
Autogenes 26, 30n34, 207n6, 208–10, 212–13, 219  
Babylon 433  
Bacchic mysteries 88  
Baptism 15, 41, 53, 62, 85, 117n78, 162, 187–203, 204–16, 243–44, 247–48, 250–55, 261, 264–66, 268  
– of Five Seals 204–5, 215, 221  
– sealing 202  
Baptisteries 193  
Barbelo 30, 205–9, 213, 215, 218–19, 222  
*Barnabas, Epistle of* 142, 201  
*Baruch, Second* 211  
Basil the Great 198

- Bedford Masters 340n10  
 Beloved Disciple, the 350–51, 355,  
     359–62, 371, 373  
 Berlin Codex 8502 217, 238n11  
 Bibles, medieval 340  
 BM Or. 5001 262n133  
 Bodmer Papyri 313  
 Book of the Death 87  
 Bridal chamber 62, 89, 198–99, 250–51,  
     253, 298–99  
  
 Cain 220  
 Calendars 132  
 Canon 5, 14, 64, 76–77, 127, 299, 365  
 Carthage 54  
 Catechism 243, 254  
 Cathars 50n90  
 Celibacy 298  
 Celsus 178, 292  
 Cento 139  
 Cerinthus 157  
*Chaldean Oracles* 110n45  
 Chrism 62, 117n78, 197–98, 204, 244,  
     247, 249n62, 251–53, 261, 264–66,  
     268  
 Christology 106–7, 241, 243, 247–48,  
     250, 256, 265–70  
 Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus  
     335  
 Cicero 134, 136–38, 144  
 Circumcision 408–9, 414–16, 437  
 Civic religion 165, 171  
 Clement of Alexandria 2, 66, 78,  
     129n19, 200  
*Clementine Recognitions* 201  
 Codex Tchacos 25, 60  
 Colorbasus 120  
 Colossians, Letter to 69  
 Constantine 77, 432  
 Coptic iconography 335–44  
*Corpus Hermeticum* 31n36  
   – *Perfect Discourse*: see *Asclepius*  
 Cosmogony 28, 96, 102–3, 113–14, 222,  
     228–29, 309–11, 319  
   – Memphite 223  
 Counter-culture 170–72  
 Creed 64, 76–77, 258  
 Cyprian 191  
 Cyril of Alexandria 235, 241, 243, 248–  
     49, 252, 255, 258–59, 261, 263–70  
     *Damascus Document* 395–97, 400,  
     401n36  
 Daphne 226  
 David, King 397–98  
 Day of Atonement 401  
 Dead Sea Scrolls 115, 420  
   – 4QMMT 382n7  
   – *Community Rule* 391, 402  
   – *Temple Scroll* 396n29  
 Decalogue 160, 169, 183, 394  
 Decius, Emperor 64  
 Deification 247, 253, 261, 263, 265–70  
 Demons 42, 61–62, 65, 67, 74, 187–203,  
     309–11, 314  
 Determinism 2  
 Deucalion 226–27  
 Devil, the (see also Satan) 31n35, 35,  
     191, 198, 330  
 Dietary laws: see Kosher laws  
 Diocletian 314  
 Diodore of Tarsus 266  
 Diogenes Laertius 71  
 Diospolis Parva 312  
 Diotima 373–75  
 Docetism 12, 71, 250  
  
 Easter 81, 131–2, 202, 268, 276  
 Ebionites 420, 441  
 Eden, Garden of 225–26  
 Education  
   – Greco-Roman 126–127, 315  
   – monastic 303–9, 317–18  
 Egypt 15, 20, 45n77, 223  
   – flight to 335–44  
 Eleleth 26, 45n77, 210, 307–8  
 Eleusinian mysteries 159  
 Elkasaites 421  
 Emmaus 288  
 Enoch 210–11  
 Epicurus 32n31  
 Epimetheus 15, 221n7, 226–29  
 Epinoia 217–31  
 Epiphanius 95, 119, 243, 245–46, 259,  
     266, 267n158, 386  
*Eros* 372–74  
*Erotapokriseis* 299, 301–3, 306  
 Esna 262  
 Esotericism 165  
 Essenes 390n18, 391, 392n23, 395–96,  
     401nn35–36

- Eucharist 62, 64, 117n78, 162, 167, 169,  
 198, 253, 256–57, 260–65, 268, 276  
 Eudorus of Alexandria 110  
 Euripides 291  
 Eusebius 129, 140, 342  
 Eve 31n37, 45, 62, 168, 220–21, 226,  
 311  
*Exegesis on the Soul* 249n62  
 Exorcism 187, 191, 194, 196, 202  
 Ezrik of Kolb 53  
 Ezra 428, 435  
*Ezra, Fourth Book of* 427–31, 434, 441–  
 42  
*Ezra, Fifth Book of* 429–31  
*Ezra, Sixth Book of* 427–45  
  
 Fasting 189, 278, 304  
 Fate 43  
 Free will 2  
  
 Gaul 133  
 Genesis, Book of 9, 15, 39, 217, 227,  
 230, 297–99, 304, 307, 312  
 Gentiles 2n8, 13, 386n14, 408–10, 412–  
 13, 419  
 Gilgamesh Epic 227  
 Giotto 335  
 Gladiator shows 155  
 Gomorrah 36n49  
 Gospels, canonical 10, 53n102, 127, 165,  
 276, 281, 289, 347–66  
 Gospels, non-canonical 365  
  
 Hades 86  
 Halakhah 382n7, 384, 389, 408  
 Hekhalot 211  
 Hell 69  
 Hephaestus 224, 228  
 Hera 224–25  
 Heracleon 1, 55n111, 190  
 Heresiologists 2–3, 7, 10–11, 50, 61,  
 94–95, 117, 124, 153, 165, 169  
 Hermeticism 36n49  
 Hermogenes of Tarsus 136  
 Herod the Great 335, 338  
 Hesiod 86, 223  
 Hillel 383n8  
 Hippolytus 36n49, 93, 95, 98, 119, 152,  
 159, 174, 202  
 – *Apostolic Tradition* 202  
  
*Historia Monachorum* 342  
 Holy Spirit 29n32, 30n32, 61, 142, 196,  
 200, 206, 244–45, 247, 249–54, 257,  
 260, 264, 266, 324  
 Holy Week 202  
 Homer 118, 139, 157–8, 307  
*Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo* 224  
 Homosexuality 371–72  
  
 Iamblichus 109n45  
 Iconoclasm, Byzantine 403  
 Idolatry 67, 155, 201, 419–20, 435, 442  
 Idols 342  
 Ignatius of Antioch 13, 116, 191, 321n5  
 Initiation ritual 159, 192, 244, 247–48  
 Invisible Spirit 30, 44n74, 44n74, 204,  
 208, 209n9, 218, 224  
 Irenaeus 2, 11, 14, 23, 61, 72–75, 77,  
 80–82, 85, 89, 93–109, 117–23, 124–  
 47, 148–186, 190, 196, 217, 221,  
 279n25, 305, 386  
 – *Demonstration of the Apostolic*  
   *Preaching* 128  
 – *grande notice* of 94, 142  
 – rule of Truth 125–32, 139, 145, 179  
 Isis 192  
 Israel 9  
  
*James, (First) Apocalypse of* 14, 79–90  
*James, Apocryphon of* 70–72  
*James, Epistle of* 418–19  
 Jena Papyrus 97n6  
 Jerome 257, 329n22, 344  
 Jerusalem 352–53, 395, 413  
 Jesus  
 – anointing of 355  
 – ascension of 70  
 – baptism of 191, 206, 248, 250–55, 266  
 – birth of 241, 251n68  
 – childhood of 335  
 – death of 267, 276  
 – descent of 84  
 – historical 347–66  
 – incarnation of 69, 72, 128, 248, 250,  
   254, 267, 318, 342  
 – miracles of 354–55  
 – passion of 4, 64, 66–69, 72–77, 80,  
   191, 276, 353, 360, 376, 405  
 – resurrection of 4, 64, 70–75, 141, 267,  
   272, 276, 360, 376, 414

- soul of 265
- tomb of 360
- and Torah observance 379–403
- transfiguration of 261, 264
- Jesus Seminar 358–59
- Johannine community 361, 367
- John, Gospel of 2, 10, 16, 153, 157, 190, 251, 281, 347–66, 367–78
  - authorship 350, 356, 362
  - prologue of 104n28, 251n70, 362n62
  - redaction of 367–68
- John the Baptist 196, 357, 409
- John of Patmos 13, 419, 433, 442
- John, son of Zebedee 51, 218, 300, 304, 307, 363–64
- Joseph, father of Jesus 250, 335–44
- Josephus 364, 370, 381–85, 388–89, 391, 393, 402, 407–8, 414
- Judas, Gospel of* 12, 25, 34n46, 360n52
- Justin Gnostic 36n49
- Justin Martyr 124, 133, 142, 192, 292
  
- Kalyptos 207n6, 208, 212–13
- Karaism 403
- Kashrut: see Kosher laws
- Kellis 52n101
- Kingdom of God 277
- Kingship 338
- Kosher laws 200, 383, 386, 388–93, 402, 408, 414, 437
  
- Last rites 160
- Last Supper 16, 360, 367–78
- Law: see Torah
- Lazarus 354–56, 365
- Leprosy 365n37
- Letter of Aristeas* 141, 369
- Letter of Peter to Philip* 68–70
- Libertinism 48–49, 62, 155
- Life of Adam and Eve* 438
- Literacy, ancient 363
- Liturgy, 205
  - heavenly 204, 209–13, 215
- Logos 23, 29, 30n34, 32, 94, 115, 246, 248, 249n62, 250, 254, 257, 262, 264–66, 270n172
- Love (see also *Eros*; *Agape*) 372–78, 401
  - Platonic 373–74
- Luke, Gospel of 282–84
  
- Mani 179, 285nn49–50
- Manichaeans 50n89, 52, 284–86
- Manuscript transmission 239, 277–78
- Marcion 22n6, 34n45, 42n70, 46n83, 48n85, 55, 56n114, 412, 421
- Marcionites 53, 125n3, 435
- Marcosians 160
- Marcus Magus 79, 88, 117n76, 120, 148, 177, 180
- Mark, Gospel of 281, 391n21
- Marriage 36n49, 49n87, 53, 62–63, 155, 177, 297, 374–75, 420n37
- Martyrdom 12, 14, 60–78, 82, 89, 294
- Martyrdom of Isaiah* 438
- Mary, Gospel of* 281
- Mary Magdalene 6, 359
- Mary, mother of Jesus 250, 251n68, 253, 266, 335–44
- Matthew, Gospel of 16, 138, 153, 281, 336–40, 384–403, 419
  - genealogy 337, 398
- Melito of Sardis 438
- Metatron 211
- Methodius of Olympus 369
- Mishnah, the 319, 392n22
- Mithras 192
- Mithras liturgy 87
- Monasteries 12
- Monasticism 68, 286, 311–19, 320–34, 342–43
- Monks 63, 243, 252, 258–59, 300
- Montanism 321, 439–41
- Moses 45, 304, 381, 392, 413
- Mystery religions 165, 189, 192
  
- Naassenes 45n80, 53n102
- Nag Hammadi Codices 1, 5, 7, 11–12, 14, 19–21, 35–36, 40, 50, 54, 60–61, 73, 123, 124, 192, 207, 222, 236–42, 270, 273, 280, 286, 295, 313–14, 422
  - cartonnage from 238–39, 312
  - Codex II 238–42, 286, 297–314
  - Codex VII 238–39, 312–13
- Negative theology 110, 207
- Neopythagoreanism 109n45, 110
- Nestorius 241, 255, 266–67
- Nicene Creed 242, 245–46
- Noah 30n33, 38, 39n54, 220, 227
- Norea 45n77, 302, 307–8
- Numenius of Apamea 208n6, 305

- On the Origin of the World* 28n28,  
 127n7, 284  
 Ophites 160, 178  
 Ordination 322  
 Origen 2, 28n29, 41, 71, 116, 178,  
 207n5, 241, 248, 259, 316n62,  
 329n22, 421  
 – *On First Principles* 109n44  
 Origenist controversy 257, 260, 270,  
 329n22  
 Origenists 243, 259, 267n158  
 Orpheus 88  
 Orphism 86–88  
 Ovid 222, 226  
 Oxyrhynchus papyri 273, 281, 292, 295,  
 429–30  
  
 Pachomians 238n12  
 Pachomius 15, 313, 315–17, 320–34  
 – rule of 317  
 Palladius 317  
 Pandora 227  
 Papias 140  
 Parables 140–45, 157, 261  
 Paradise  
 – rivers of 36n49  
*Paraphrase of Shem* 202  
 Passover 370  
 Paul 3, 5, 55, 62, 77, 114, 133n39, 155,  
 157, 165, 260, 268, 280, 295, 298–  
 300, 307, 404–26, 435  
 – conversion of 404, 408–11  
 – Corinthians, First Letter to 272, 287–  
 95, 310  
 – and eschatology 409  
 – mission to Gentiles 408–10  
 – and rhetoric 405  
 – Romans, Letter to 2  
*Paul, Acts of* 53n102  
 Pausanias 291  
 Pederasty 371–75  
 Peratae 45  
 Persecution 4, 35n49, 60–78, 82, 404,  
 406, 410, 434  
 Peter 155  
*Peter, (Coptic) Apocalypse of* 72–75  
*Peter, Gospel of* 281  
*Peter, Second Epistle of* 418  
 Petronius 369  
 Pharisees 354, 381–403, 406–8, 413  
  
 Phibionites 55n111  
*Philip, Gospel of* 10, 15, 189, 196, 198–  
 200, 231, 235–71  
 Philo of Alexandria 26, 111–14, 141,  
 302, 415, 420  
 Philosophy, Greek 157  
 Phylacteries 392  
 Pilgrimage 341–44  
*Pistis Sophia* 359  
 Plato 27, 88, 113, 227, 229, 369, 371  
 – *Protagoras* 227, 229  
 – *Symposium* 371–74  
 – *Timaeus* 27  
 Platonism 23n10, 26–27, 96, 109–15,  
 207, 222, 305, 307, 314–15  
 Plotinus 46n83, 56n115, 110n45, 207,  
 214nn15–16  
 Plutarch 369–70  
 – *Amatorius* 374–75  
 Pneumatics 2, 48n85, 50–51, 154  
 Polycarp of Smyrna 292  
 Polykrates of Ephesus 129  
 Pontius Pilate 352  
 Porphyry 110n45  
 Priests, Jewish 354, 364, 391, 393, 398  
 Prometheus 15, 221n7, 226–29  
 Pronoia 15, 206, 217–31  
 Protophanes 207n6, 208, 210, 212–13  
 Pseudo-Clementines 423–24  
*Pseudo-Matthew, Gospel of* 336–40  
 Psychics 2, 50–51, 154  
 Ptolemy 94, 97  
 – *Epistle to Flora* 122  
 – followers of 102, 118–22  
  
 Quartodeciman controversy 129, 131  
 Quintilian 134n40, 135–36  
 Quirinius 407  
 Qumran 382n7, 384, 389, 396n29, 401  
 Qur'an 403  
  
 Rabbis 364, 372, 383n8, 389–90, 393,  
 395, 397, 399, 402, 415  
 Reading aids 281  
 Rebirth 187, 206, 216, 269  
 Reformation 380, 403  
 Religion, Roman 170  
 Religious experience 300  
 Renaissance 403



- Resurrection 12, 15, 183, 241, 243–44,  
 249, 255–61, 269, 272–96, 298, 318,  
 355, 384–85  
 – of spiritual flesh 259  
 Revelation 13, 38n53, 47, 214, 217, 305,  
 307, 316, 320–34, 343, 406, 410  
 Revelation, Book of 10, 12–13, 77, 127,  
 298, 419, 427, 432–33, 435–38, 440,  
 442  
 Revolt, of Jews against Rome 407  
 Rhetoric  
 – Greco–Roman 126, 132–47, 405  
 – handbooks of 136  
 Rome 20n3, 53, 123, 433  
 Rufinus of Aquileia 109n44, 257–58  
  
 Sabbath 383, 386, 393–402, 408, 414,  
 437  
 Sacrifice 12, 64, 67, 88, 155, 167–70,  
 205, 394, 401  
 – human 68  
 Sadducees 381–82, 384–85  
 Saklas 30n34, 31n35  
 Sansnos (monk) 312  
 Satan (see also Devil, the) 9–10, 13, 71,  
 73, 125n3, 174, 194, 197n33, 267  
 Satornil 49n87  
 Satorninus: see Satornil  
 Scetis 258–59  
 Secundus 120  
 Secrecy 159, 165, 173, 286, 297–319  
 Septimius Severus 314  
 Septuagint 140, 387, 394  
 Serapeum 343  
 Seth 44n73, 62, 206  
 Sethians 15, 24, 30, 32n42, 35, 44n74,  
 48n85, 51, 84, 88n39, 204–16, 217–  
 18, 221, 225–26, 229–30, 309n40  
 Sexual intercourse 192  
 Shenoute of Atripe 259, 266, 269  
*Shepherd of Hermas* 141  
 Sibyl 439  
*Sibylline Oracles* 437–38  
 Simon Magus 131  
 Smyrna 135  
 Socrates 133, 227–29, 371, 373–74  
 Sodom 36n49  
 Soldas 36n49  
 Solomon, king 397  
*Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* 211  
 Sophia 23n10, 24, 28n29, 32, 39n56,  
 44n73, 80–84, 93, 98, 159, 219, 224–  
 25, 230, 304, 308  
 Sozomen 342  
 Stoicism 310  
 Superstition 171  
 Symposia 367–78  
 Synoptic Gospels 140, 283, 295  
 Syria 20n3, 407  
 Syzygies 97–105, 119, 123, 199  
  
 Talmud  
 – Babylonian 383, 392n22, 415  
 – Jerusalem 383, 392n22  
 Tantra 306  
 Tatian 116  
*Tefilin* 393n26  
 Temple, in Jerusalem 168, 205, 353, 384,  
 391, 394–95, 397–99, 441  
 – destruction of 352n17  
 Ten commandments: see Decalogue  
 Tertullian 61, 65, 68, 71, 95, 129, 159,  
 178–79, 191–93, 417, 421  
*Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* 428  
*Testimony of Truth* 62, 66–68, 202  
 Theodore of Mopsuestia 266  
 Theodotus 104, 187–89, 191–93, 196–  
 99, 202–3, 421  
 Theon of Alexandria 136  
 Theon of Smyrna 109n45  
 Theophilus of Alexandria 241, 252, 259,  
 262–63, 266–67, 269, 343  
 Theophilus of Antioch 115–16, 122  
 Therapeutae 420  
 Theudas 421  
*Thomas, Book of* (NHC II, 7) 62, 359  
*Thomas, Gospel of* 10, 272–96, 358–59  
 – manuscripts of 273–75  
 Thucydides 291  
*Toledot Yeshu* 424–26  
 Torah (Law) 157, 165, 167–68, 363, 376,  
 379–403, 406, 410, 412–13, 419,  
 422–23  
 Tree of knowledge 225  
*Trimorphic Protennoia* 221n5  
 Trinity, the 194, 247–48  
*Tripartite Tractate* 23, 105–8, 127n7  
*Truth, Gospel of* 105  
*Tsitsit* 393n26  
 Turfan 285n51

- Utnapishitim 227
- Valentinians 1–3, 5–6, 11, 14–15, 23, 27, 37, 50–51, 52n100, 62, 79–90, 93–123, 124–47, 157, 160, 189, 190–91, 195–200, 236–37, 262, 271, 422  
– sources for 94n3  
*Valentinian Exposition* 95n4, 102–5, 123, 127n7, 196  
Valentinus 178, 201, 421  
Vedic religion 205  
Victor, bishop of Rome 129, 132  
Visions: see Revelation  
*Vision of Theophilus* 336n3  
Vulcan 224
- White Monastery 246
- Xenocrates 112  
Xenophon 369
- Yaldabaoth 23, 24n10, 27, 31, 37, 39n56, 44n74, 219–20, 224, 228  
Yavneh, Council of 370  
Yeznik: see Eznik
- Zealots 407  
Zeus 223–24, 226  
Zoe 94, 220–21  
*Zostrianos* 209–13