

# Rediscovering Ancient Christianity

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*This Distinguished Faculty Lecture at BYU argues that diverse strands in early Christianity were excised by emerging orthodox leaders and that only a new paradigm based in revelation can recapture the original gospel of Jesus Christ.*

The title of this article might seem paradoxical or inexplicable to people other than Latter-day Saints. Many Christians do not recognize a difference between the ancient and modern forms of their religion. They would not expect to find much in the identity of their faith that differs from ancient to modern times. We who accept the prophetic mission of Joseph Smith, however, believe that some aspects of ancient Christianity were lost and had to be restored in a later time. When materials purporting to be Christian in authorship or content are recovered from the past, one is faced with the difficulty of determining whether they formed an authentic part of early Christianity or were deviations from it. The resulting judgments concerning the value of such discoveries may be quite different to traditional Christians and members of the restored Church.

Before evaluating the impact that recent discoveries have had on modern Christianity, one must understand how the traditional model of Christianity came about. For many who have thought that the early Church Fathers were the protectors of the faith against outside influences and external persecutions, it may come as a surprise to learn that the earliest manifestations of Christianity were in fact much broader in doctrine and richer in ordinance activity than was the case in later centuries, when the Fathers had trimmed away all that was unacceptable to them. Only within the last century and a half has much of the material from the early period of Christian history become available, permitting us to see what existed before the Fathers made their censorious decisions.<sup>1</sup>

The post-apostolic period of Christianity was comprised of many attempts to define the parameters of the faith, primarily focusing on the questions of who had the authority to speak on behalf of the church and what writings were to be accepted as normative for the religion. Nevertheless, one notes that the boundaries prescribing the limits of orthodoxy and heresy were not so well established by the end of the second century as Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, writing around 185, would have his readers believe.<sup>2</sup>

Irenaeus makes sharp distinctions between orthodoxy and heresy in his writings, but many who were later designated heretics actually enjoyed fellowship and prestige in so-called orthodox circles during their lifetime. Two brief examples of the many which could be given will illustrate how rich in doctrine and practice the Christian religion was in the second and third centuries. Many characteristics of Christianity were then widely accepted by church *members* but were later rejected by the church *leaders* in the continuing process of defining theological orthodoxy and ecclesiastical authority.

### The Valentinian Crisis in the Second Century

Valentinus was born in Egypt early in the second century and was educated in Alexandria. He preached the Christian faith throughout the length of the Nile valley by the middle of the century.<sup>3</sup> He then journeyed to Rome and enjoyed considerable popularity among church members there<sup>4</sup> and was very nearly appointed bishop in Rome due to his “intellectual force and eloquence.” Tertullian states that because another was appointed in his place, Valentinus “broke with the church of the true faith.”<sup>5</sup> Epiphanius agreed that Valentinus separated himself from the church, but only toward the end of his life, at Cyprus, where he went from Rome to live.<sup>6</sup>

By all accounts, it is obvious that Valentinus was not considered heretical during his life in Egypt or his early years in Rome. Even the later Church Fathers who attack him express grudging admiration for his intellect, his doctrinal understanding, and his forceful personality.<sup>7</sup> Lack of information makes it impossible to state precisely what made Valentinus become so unpopular among church authorities and authors after he arrived in the West, although Hippolytus may provide the key when he states that Valentinus claimed to have received his doctrine through revelatory experience.<sup>8</sup> A certain Marcus, a disciple of Valentinus, is also described by Hippolytus as one “imitating his teacher” by his claims to have had visions.<sup>9</sup> Records of visions or revelations of the kind often associated with Valentinus and his followers have been recovered in recent decades, and they purport to give secret and sacred insights on such subjects as the origin and nature of the universe, premortal existence, the creation of the earth, and the eternal destinies of mankind.

This literature is part of a large body of writings designated as *apocalyptic*, which means *revelatory*. The unpopularity in the Western church of a growing body of esoteric apocalypses in non-Catholic Christianity during the first two centuries may well account for the spawning of heresiologists in the latter half of the second century and later. The primary targets of these heresy-hunters were the so-called Gnostics, who claimed to receive their doctrine through revelation from heaven rather than by reasoning through the scriptures. The word *gnostic* means *one who knows*, usually



used to refer to spiritual knowing, but “Gnostic,” “Valentinian,” and so forth are terms that the heresiologists applied in an uncomplimentary way to those against whom they wrote. One notes in passing that Tertullian says that, though he calls the followers of Valentinus “Valentinians,” those so designated disavow that name.<sup>10</sup> They simply considered themselves to be Christians. Similarly, we know of no ancient group that called *itself* Gnostic.

Far from being a local sect with limited appeal, Valentinian adherents appear to have permeated Christianity. The Marcosians, who followed in the traditions of Valentinianism and were named after Marcus, were thriving near the Rhone during the time of Irenaeus,<sup>11</sup> and other aspects of Valentinian Christianity appear to have survived for centuries in Gaul. One modern commentator notes that disciples of Valentinus began schools in the West even more so than in the eastern parts of the Roman world, all of which indicates the wide acceptance this type of Christianity enjoyed among the lay members, if not always with the leaders.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the revelatory claims of Valentinus and his followers, certain doctrines associated with them were declared anathema in the developing orthodoxy of the early Church Fathers. Professor W. H. C. Frend describes some of the beliefs of Gnostics of this time in general but quotes specifically from texts thought to be Valentinian:

Upon initiation the Gnostic received an entirely new relation to spiritual authority. Each sect had its own baptismal ceremony, its passwords, its sacred meal, its “ceremonies of the Bride Chamber,” even its final instructions to the dying. . . . “The Lord has [done] everything in a mystery,” they said, “a baptism and an anointing and a eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber” (*Gospel of Philip* 68). The sacraments dispensed by orthodox clergy were limited in value . . . ; “anointing is superior to baptism,” they claimed. Theirs were rites fit for the spiritual elite. These rites, moreover, must be kept guarded from the uninitiated. . . . As the *Apocalypse of the Great Seth* asserted, “These revelations are not to be disclosed to anyone in the flesh and are only to be communicated to the brethren who belong to the generation of life.”<sup>13</sup>

Irenaeus and Epiphanius both comment on the marriage beliefs of the Valentinians, claiming that some of them prepare a bridal chamber, celebrate a mystery with invocations on those being initiated, and declare that what they are performing is a spiritual marriage based on the pattern of the marriages in heaven.<sup>14</sup> Clement also states that for Valentinians the sacred marriages among the Gods are a pattern for earthly marriages.<sup>15</sup> Tertullian says that Valentinus not only espoused monogamous marriage but also considered that those who were unmarried would not achieve as great a salvation as those who were.<sup>16</sup>

The feature of Valentinian Christianity that most invoked the wrath of the Fathers of the emerging Catholic Church was the claim that their

doctrines were embodied within a tradition of secret rituals given only to those deemed worthy of them. Tertullian observes that although the Valentinians were “a very numerous society among the heretics,” not every adherent received all the revelations or rituals: “Not even to their own disciples do they commit a secret before they have made sure of them.”<sup>17</sup> A study of any system based on secret and esoteric teachings is subject to the caveat that what was divulged to the early Church Fathers by apostates or excommunicants from Valentinianism was liable to be distorted. One has to be cautious in placing confidence in the observations of the critics and enemies of the so-called Valentinian heresy.

The death of the Apostles by the end of the first century resulted in the passing of the Church, so the Valentinians should not be understood as the continuation of the ancient Church.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth examining all those who claimed to perpetuate the teachings and practices of the Apostles. The expanding body of evidence concerning early Christianity makes it increasingly unnecessary to depend solely upon the opinions of those who later defined orthodoxy concerning the nature of the apostolic and early post-apostolic church.

### **Origen: Teacher, Scholar, and (300 Years Later) Heretic**

The second example to illustrate the breadth and scope of Christian beliefs as late as the third century is provided by one often considered to be the foremost Christian scholar and theologian in the early church. Origen was born about 185 at Alexandria, Egypt, and from his youth exhibited a zeal that often outstripped his judgment.<sup>19</sup> During the persecution of the Christians by the Emperor Septimius Severus in 202—if Eusebius can be trusted in the matter—Origen avoided fulfilling his desire to follow his father, Leonides, into martyrdom only because his mother kept him inside by hiding his clothes.<sup>20</sup> Despite his youth, Origen’s precociousness, probably coupled with the lack of other qualified teachers following Clement’s departure during the persecution, caused him to succeed as head of the Christian catechetical school at age seventeen.<sup>21</sup> Not long afterward, the usually allegorical Origen took Matthew 19:12 literally in the statement that some men had made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom, and he emasculated himself. Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, was shocked by the act but approved of the young man’s zeal and urged him to continue in the task of instructing students in the faith.<sup>22</sup>

Origen was both a popular teacher and a prolific author, with Eusebius estimating the number of his literary productions at six thousand.<sup>23</sup> He was invited to lecture in many locations, including Greece, Arabia, and Palestine, and his popularity abroad caused the envious Demetrius to repudiate him for teaching without being ordained to the priesthood.



Demetrius at that time was trying to consolidate his power by gaining control over the Christian school as well as over the other bishops in Egypt, and when the Palestinian bishops ordained Origen to the presbyterate during a visit of Origen to Caesarea, Demetrius complained that the ordination was inappropriate.<sup>24</sup> Because the Alexandrian bishop up to that time served without being consecrated,<sup>25</sup> an ordained and nearly consecrated Origen (the Palestinian bishops were on the verge of ordaining him a bishop<sup>26</sup>), who was more popular in Egypt than Demetrius and who enjoyed a growing international reputation besides, could have been a significant threat to Demetrius, his episcopally unconsecrated presbyter-bishop in Alexandria.<sup>27</sup> Christians, heretics, and non-Christians attended Origen's lectures, and the non-Christians mentioned him in their writings, dedicated books to him, and even submitted literary works to him to seek his evaluation and approval.<sup>28</sup>

Evaluating Origen's teachings or beliefs is more difficult than one might expect, despite the great number of his published works, since many of his writings have perished during the controversies surrounding his name in the following centuries. He gave a rather negative assessment regarding the earthly church organization in his day, believing that it had become corrupted through prosperity, and he stated that only a few of those who professed godliness would attain to the election of God and blessedness.<sup>29</sup> Origen maintained that there are two congregations present for worship, one of men and another of the angels.<sup>30</sup> The church is compared to parts of the temple, the earthly church corresponding to the Holy Place, and the heavenly church to the Holy of Holies.<sup>31</sup> The priesthood was spiritualized, for in the heavenly church every true Christian is a priest.<sup>32</sup> Origen accused men of conspiring to be bishops, deacons, and priests simply out of ambitious desire to hold offices.<sup>33</sup> Origen further argued that anyone can celebrate solemn liturgical functions before the people, but not many lead holy lives and know much about Christian doctrine.<sup>34</sup> Thus, he argued, only a pattern or form of the true church had been left to the priests.<sup>35</sup> The true church of God had been taken to heaven. Origen also claimed that only traces of prophets and miracles remained in the Christian church,<sup>36</sup> and he asserted that the spiritual gospel was then to be found in the heavenly church, not the earthly one.<sup>37</sup> It is small wonder that he had so much difficulty in getting along with such an increasingly autocratic bishop as Demetrius.

While commentators do not agree on whether Origen was more at home with Platonism, Gnosticism, or Christian orthodoxy, some believe that recently found texts make him appear to be more in harmony with the Valentinian version of Christianity than was previously thought.<sup>38</sup> Origen wrote of mysteries that he did not even entrust to paper, including the



secrets of the eternal gospel, doctrines of angels and demons, and the history of the soul after death.<sup>39</sup> These subjects happen to be foci of recently found texts that claim to contain or refer to secret doctrines or mysteries and that have often been considered Valentinian in content.

Origen left Alexandria permanently in 231–32 and traveled to Caesarea, making his home there by 240. He continued to work on his scriptural commentaries, especially on the Gospel of John, a favorite text of early writers when commenting on the mysteries of the gospel.<sup>40</sup> He was imprisoned and tortured during the Decian persecution but survived for some years, dying in about 255 in broken health.<sup>41</sup> Many of his doctrines, such as the pre-earthly existence of souls and the expectation of a future restoration of truth, were fought over in the so-called Origenist controversies during the next three centuries, and it is a tribute to the popularity of the Christian doctrines which he knew and taught that he was not anathematized, or excommunicated, until 543, nearly three hundred years after he died.<sup>42</sup>

### **Eusebius of Caesarea and the Shaping of Church History**

As the early Church Fathers endeavored to define the faith theologically in the centuries following such controversial figures as Valentinus and Origen, internal disputes and power struggles resulted in the loss of many writings, doctrines, and traditions of rituals or ordinances. Fragments of some of these older traditions are still preserved in patristic literature, however, and they are as tantalizing as they are frustrating, for they remind the reader what a wealth of materials once existed. Only a brief sampling of these numerous traditions found in a well-known fourth-century author will be given to illustrate this point.

The oldest extant history of early Christianity was written by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea from 314 to his death in ca. 340. A survivor of severe persecutions against Christianity by Roman authorities, a defender of Origen and his doctrines, and a biographer of the Emperor Constantine, Eusebius was a painstaking researcher who, for all of his perceived weaknesses and errors, presented a remarkable picture of the growth of the faith in many localities. He occasionally quotes earlier writings that reflect such matters as apostasy in the post-apostolic church, a tradition of secret and sacred mysteries transmitted only sparingly in the Church, and he also writes on the current status of apostolic writings in a famous passage relating to the closing of the canon. Quoting Hegesippus, a second century historian, Eusebius gives a concise description of Christianity at the end of the first century:

In describing the situation at that time Hegesippus goes on to say that until then the Church had remained a virgin, pure and uncorrupted, since those who were trying to corrupt the wholesome standard of the saving message, if such there were, lurked somewhere under cover of darkness. But when the

sacred band of the apostles had in various ways reached the end of their life, and the generation of those privileged to listen with their own ears to the divine wisdom had passed on, then godless error began to take shape, through the deceit of false teachers, who now that none of the apostles was left threw off the mask and attempted to counter the preaching of the truth by preaching the knowledge falsely so called.<sup>43</sup>

Elsewhere he quotes Clement of Alexandria concerning the mysteries:

James the Righteous, John, and Peter were entrusted by the Lord after his resurrection with the higher knowledge. They imparted it to the other apostles, and the other apostles to the Seventy, one of whom was Barnabas.<sup>44</sup>

Although the final selection of writings to be included in the New Testament would not appear until 367, Eusebius describes many of the writings in his day as being in one of three categories: recognized books, disputed books, and spurious books.<sup>45</sup> While the list reflects Eusebius's adherence to the developing ecclesiastical and theological orthodoxy of Catholicism, one notes with interest that the Revelation of John is included in both the recognized and spurious categories. Apocalyptic had indeed fallen on hard times.

Even in later patristic sources, surprising traces of ancient Christianity are often found. Photius, patriarch of Constantinople in the ninth century, preserves some beliefs of Clement of Alexandria in the second century that were utterly rejected in the orthodoxy of Christianity established during the fourth and fifth centuries. Summarizing the now-lost *Hypotyposeis* (*Outlines*) of Clement, Photius has this to say:

The *Hypotyposeis* give clear discussions concerning some of the passages of the Old and New Testaments, in which he really makes an explanation and interpretation in a summary fashion. In some of his discussions he appears to speak correctly, but in others he is carried away entirely into impieties and legendary stories. For he thinks that matter is eternal, and that forms (or ideas) are brought forth from some scriptural words, and he reduces the son to a created being. He further relates strange accounts regarding the transmigration of souls and concerning many worlds existing before Adam. And as to Eve coming from Adam, not as the ecclesiastical doctrine wishes it to be taught, he gives a disgraceful and unholy account.<sup>46</sup>

It would be more fun to read Clement and see what he really says in these passages than to get such a vitriolic summary by an unsympathetic critic of some potentially interesting ideas.

## The Rediscovery of the Past

And so Christianity was defined in the centuries following the passing of the Apostles, with the early Church Fathers arbitrating what theology would be accepted as orthodox and choosing texts to match. Proscriptions



were imposed against doctrines and texts that had been rejected in many of the numerous councils held from the fourth century onwards, with the result that many writings and artifacts relating to early Christianity were destroyed or buried, seemingly lost forever. One particularly notes the loss of apocalypticism, doctrines such as those relating to the eternality of the soul and innumerable worlds comprised of eternal matter, and a tradition of sacred mysteries or ordinances, especially those relating to heavenly marriage and a successful passage through the afterlife. The rather limited or defective paradigm of Christianity, to use language made popular by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, had thus been determined by the Fathers, and until the nineteenth century there was little nontraditional literary evidence known with which an alternate model could be established.

The number of ancient Christian documents discovered during the past two centuries would require more than this article merely to list, let alone discuss and consider in any detail. The range of subjects in these writings is so diverse that it is impossible to speak of them as coming from a single source or having the same value. The very briefest selection of examples will have to stand for a large and expanding body of literature. Among those writings that deserve little serious consideration as authentic apostolic writings are the so-called infancy gospels. Attempts to describe the youth of Jesus often succeed in portraying him more as a divine delinquent than as one who “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52). In the infancy story attributed to Thomas, for example, the child Jesus cursed another boy with sudden death because the boy accidentally ran into him.<sup>47</sup> On another occasion Jesus helped his carpenter father, Joseph, by miraculously stretching a board which was originally too short for its intended use.<sup>48</sup>

Other texts may not be so easily dismissed, however. In 1875, a work entitled the *Didache*, or the teachings of the Twelve Apostles, was discovered in Constantinople and is a late first- or early second-century manual of church instruction. Beginning with the distinction between the Two Ways, the way of life and the way of death, the *Didache* presents a concise summary of how a Christian should live, followed by a summary of thoughts and deeds to be avoided. Readers are warned to avoid those who “merchandize Christ” rather than worship and serve him.<sup>49</sup> The order of worship on the Lord’s Day (Sunday) and a short concluding apocalyptic section concerning the last days are also part of this apostolic proclamation to the Gentiles.<sup>50</sup>

Fragments of a previously unknown Gospel were found in 1933 and published in 1935 by two British scholars.<sup>51</sup> Enough of the text remains to show that it has elements in common with each of the four New Testament Gospels but is obviously not dependent on any of them.



(1)? [And Jesus said] unto the lawyers, [?Punish] every wrongdoer and transgressor, and not me; . . . (2) And turning to the rulers of the people he spake this saying, Ye search the scriptures, in which ye think that ye have life; these are they which bear witness of me. (3) Think not that I came to accuse you to my Father; there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, on whom ye have set your hope. (4) And when they said, We know well that God spake unto Moses, but as for thee, we know not whence thou art, Jesus answered and said unto them, Now is your unbelief accused . . .

. . . (5)? [they gave counsel to] the multitude to [? carry the] stones together and stone him. (6) And the rulers sought to lay their hands on him that they might take him and [? hand him over] to the multitude; and they could not take him, because the hour of his betrayal was not yet come. (7) But he himself, even the Lord, going out through the midst of them, departed from them. (8) And behold, there cometh unto him a leper and saith, Master Jesus, journeying with lepers and eating with them in the inn I myself also became a leper. If therefore thou wilt, I am made clean. (9) The Lord then said unto him, I will; be thou made clean. And straightway the leprosy departed from him. (10) [And the Lord said unto him], Go [and shew thyself] unto the [priests].<sup>52</sup>

Other sayings of Jesus<sup>53</sup> written on papyrus were also found near Oxyrhynchos in 1897, and those sayings are closely related to the Coptic Gospel of Thomas found near Nag Hammadi in ca. 1945. It was not known until the Gospel of Thomas was discovered that the Oxyrhynchos sayings are to be placed within the post-Resurrection ministry of Jesus. In fact, a large body of literature that claims to report the forty-day ministry after the resurrection of Christ has been found within the last two hundred years.<sup>54</sup> The post-Resurrection ministry, rarely commented on by ecclesiastical authorities, was obviously a popular topic in the early literature of Christianity.<sup>55</sup>

There are also numerous accounts of apostolic missions and activities that must still be studied and evaluated to determine their historical accuracy. Embedded in one of these, the Acts of Thomas, is an early writing entitled "The Hymn of the Pearl," which has been described as one of the earliest Christian writings.<sup>56</sup> The hymn recounts the eternal journey of a child of heavenly parents who comes to the earth from his premortal existence, leaving behind a glorious garment and robe that he will again be given if he succeeds in saving his pearl, or his soul. The hymn also tells of a heavenly council at which all agree to the plan of salvation and of heavenly messengers who awaken the child from the sleep of sin and forgetfulness in his mortal state. After he rescues his soul from the evil serpent, the child makes his way back to the gate of his Father's kingdom, where he is greeted with an embrace and is welcomed into the realm of the Gods to be one of them through the eternities.

Any complete and accurate assessment of early Christianity must take this large and growing collection of recently discovered written materials

into consideration. Even with only the sources transmitted through the Fathers and available to modern readers, however, at least one notable attempt was made to produce an alternate model of Christian history. In 1934, Walter Bauer published a work entitled *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, and it became a controversial work in Europe for decades before it was translated into English in 1971. As the English title, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, suggests, Bauer attempts a reassessment of how Christians defined themselves in the first two centuries. He argues not only that what was designated by the early Church Fathers to be heretical had often existed as early as what they defined as orthodoxy, but also that the so-called heresies may have even constituted the earliest orthodoxy in Christianity. By restricting his consideration of sources almost entirely to canonical and patristic writings, Bauer also limits the discussion of such issues as authority and doctrine to those defined and transmitted by the Church Fathers. The two major weaknesses of Bauer's work are his oversimplification of earliest Christianity into the two well-defined and opposing camps of orthodoxy and heresy as defined much later and his omission of the nontraditional and recently discovered documents that were available to him by the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Most modern scholars have not tried to construct a new paradigm of Christianity as Bauer did, though a more recent scholar suggests the possibility to do so now exists. W. H. C. Frend reminds his readers that "the beginnings of an alternative approach to the study of Christianity, less beholden to orthodox interpretations, may be traced back to the Renaissance."<sup>57</sup> He later adds, "There was a limit, however, to what historians could learn about the early church so long as they were confined to existing literary sources. It was the discovery of quantities of material remains and their study that has made an historical and sociological approach to the study possible."<sup>58</sup> In a similar way, one of the foremost modern commentators on the New Testament, Professor Werner Georg Kümmel, writes that everything before the nineteenth century "can only be referred to as the prehistory of New Testament (or Christian historical) scholarship."<sup>59</sup> For Kümmel and others, the beginning of the scientific study of the New Testament, and thus the establishment of the modern paradigm of Christian history, can be dated to 1835, the publication date of David Friedrich Strauss's *Leben Jesu*.<sup>60</sup>

But the so-called scientific paradigm of Christianity that was established in the nineteenth century and continues to the present time is still based upon and limited to the materials that were preserved and transmitted within the theological religion of the Church Fathers. The use of this paradigm continues despite the discovery of numerous materials relating



to early Christianity, both documentary and archaeological, which began to occur toward the middle of the nineteenth century and has also continued to the present time. The documentary evidence, some of which was discussed above, is impressive both in its quantity and diversity. Among the best-known writings are isolated sayings of Jesus; gospels and gospel fragments with synoptic, Johannine, and previously unknown characteristics; apostolic acts and apocalypses; and new sources of some of the early Christian leaders in the post-apostolic era. Since there has been no attempt to place these writings into the structure of orthodox Christianity, and since they cannot be completely ignored, one may wonder what scholars do with them. The following examples will show various efforts to answer this question.

### **The Jesus Seminar, a Slight Variation on an Authoritarian Theme**

A large group of well-known scholars from many universities, calling themselves the Jesus Seminar, published *The Five Gospels* in 1993, a declared attempt to determine what Jesus actually said. The editor states that “foremost among the reasons for a fresh translation is the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas. The scholars responsible for the Scholars Version determined that Thomas had to be included in any primary collection of gospels.”<sup>61</sup> The Gospel of Thomas is one of fifty-three writings discovered in ca. 1945 in upper Egypt, as mentioned above. Many of those writings purport to be Christian, and some of them contain sayings of Jesus with his disciples. The collection, known as the Nag Hammadi Library, is labeled Gnostic, primarily because of the arcane and often strange doctrines in many of the tractates. Most of the writings are also apocalyptic, further rendering them suspect and unacceptable to so-called orthodox Christianity. This library is part of a larger number of similar writings that have come to light during the past two centuries.

Apart from including the Gospel of Thomas in a new evaluation of Jesus in earliest Christianity, there is no apparent awareness or acknowledgment by the two hundred or more scholars in the group that numerous other gospels or sayings-of-Jesus sources had been discovered or were worthy of their consideration. Even the inclusion of the Gospel of Thomas does not represent much of a paradigm revolution, for only three of the 114 sayings of Jesus in that work are said by the Jesus Seminar to have been spoken by him. Nevertheless, the editor claims that “*The Five Gospels* represents a dramatic exit from windowless studies and the beginning of a new venture for gospel scholarship. Leading scholars—Fellows of the Jesus Seminar—have decided to update and then make the legacy of two hundred years of research and debate a matter of public record.”<sup>62</sup> The reader is thus promised a new paradigm, or at least a paradigm shift in early Christian



history. If this paradigm change is not based on new information or recent discoveries of texts and materials relating to earliest Christianity apart from one writing, namely, the Gospel of Thomas, one might well ask what justifies its claim to be so new. The editor gives a clear answer:

The Scholars Version is free of ecclesiastical and religious control, unlike other major translations into English, including the King James Version and its descendants (Protestant), the Douay-Rheims Version and its progeny (Catholic), and the New International Version (Evangelical). Since SV is not bound by the dictates of church councils, its contents and organization vary from traditional bibles. *The Five Gospels* contains the Gospel of Thomas in addition to the four canonical gospels. Because scholars believe the Gospel of Mark was written first they have placed it first among the five. The Scholars Version is authorized by scholars.<sup>63</sup>

The declared basis for the paradigm of the Jesus Seminar is thus emancipation from the theological and ecclesiastical control of Christian churches, but, contrary to Kuhn's declaration that rejection of an old paradigm must be accompanied by replacement with a new one,<sup>64</sup> the scholars really do not provide readers with a new model of Christianity. The work of the Jesus Seminar shows that there is no new model proposed beyond criticism and rejection of the old. The result of their work is the rejection of 82 percent of the words of Jesus in the gospels as actually being spoken by him.<sup>65</sup> The criteria used to arrive at such a decision are all theological and literary, rather than historical or archaeological, despite the claim of the editor that the Jesus Seminar has "disengaged the Jesus of history from the Christ of the church's faith."<sup>66</sup> By working almost exclusively with the theological and literary heritage passed on through the centuries, there is little likelihood of producing anything other than a slight modification of the old Christian structure. If this work represents the best effort of modern scholars, one is especially grateful that the words of the hymn are "We thank thee, O God, for a prophet," and not "We thank thee, O God, for theologians."

### **Trying to Bring Revelation and the Mysteries Back into Early Christianity through Apocalypticism**

Others have noticed and commented on the modern tendency to attack the existing model of Christianity without offering a replacement. In an address delivered to divinity students at Cambridge University in 1959, C. S. Lewis commented on the tendency of biblical scholars to whittle away at the texts in the paradigm of early Christianity. He concluded his address with the concern that such a process might well result in the rejection of Christian history and its accompanying faith.<sup>67</sup> It was not a replacement of the old model with a new one that Lewis was attacking, but simply an increasing skepticism regarding the old.



A clarion call to take the new discoveries into the consideration of ancient Christian history was made in 1970 by Professor Klaus Koch of the University of Hamburg. Working within what he calls “a relatively small area,”<sup>68</sup> that of apocalyptic (revelation) literature, Koch argues that no paradigm of Christian history can be satisfactory or complete without such consideration. He comments on the type of scholarship that would later produce such works as *The Five Gospels*, saying that “the historical and critical investigation of the biblical writings is viewed at the present time with growing dissatisfaction. . . . At the end of the nineteenth century theological liberalism felt historical exegesis to be glorious liberation from hide-bound dogmatism.”<sup>69</sup> Koch argues that theology must rest on “reliable historical foundations,”<sup>70</sup> even if establishing those foundations results in a radical change in the model of Christian history.

Professor Koch states in two sentences what was reviewed more lengthily above, that the Church Fathers

already viewed the apocalyptic books with considerable reserve and hence excluded the apocalypses of Peter and Paul from the canon, as well as Christian apocalypses which were attributed to Old Testament figures.

Many early Christian apocalypses have as a result disappeared forever, or have only recently been rediscovered.<sup>71</sup>

In view of the discoveries of many apocalyptic texts during the past two centuries, one naturally wonders why so little attention has been paid to them. Koch observes that “the great chorus of New Testament scholars view apocalyptic of every kind with mistrust and discomfort, even when it appears in Christian guise, within the canon, in the book of Revelation.”<sup>72</sup> With such an indictment, it is easy to see how unlikely it is that biblical or Christian scholars would produce a new paradigm of Christian history, regardless of the new information or sources made available to them. Koch further states that even though some people, such as Ulrich Wilckens and Gerhard Ebeling, defend the role of apocalyptic in early Christianity, most continue to relegate apocalypticism to a marginal role in the mainstream church.<sup>73</sup>

In the larger category of so-called apocryphal New Testament writings discovered during the last 150 years or so, Wilhelm Schneemelcher shows that the same attitude prevails as with the subcategory of apocalyptic writings discussed by Klaus Koch. After reviewing the process of defining the theology and limiting the scriptural canon of Christianity as outlined above, Schneemelcher focuses on the writings which were not included in the canon. He notes the very diverse nature of the contents of these documents<sup>74</sup> and explains how the term *apocrypha* was given a pejorative connotation by the Church Fathers as they applied it to virtually all writings that they rejected.<sup>75</sup> The term originally meant *hidden* or *secret* and was

earlier applied to writings considered too sacred for general circulation. The Fathers cast doubt on both the authority and sacredness of these writings, however, as well as upon the mystery tradition such documents represented, giving the sense of untrustworthiness and doubtful authenticity to the term, which persists to the present time. The problem of what to do with the so-called apocryphal writings was settled historically by the Church Fathers who rejected them in their defining of Christianity, but the discovery of such great numbers of these writings in recent decades has raised the issue again for modern scholars. It is difficult to imagine any other discipline having such an influx of new materials and sources without having to modify or change fundamental paradigms as has been the case with early Christian history. In fairness to Christian scholars, however, it seems evident from their writings that they have no obvious alternative to propose to the model received through the centuries.

### **The Restoration of All Things**

In his celebrated work on scientific revolutions, Thomas Kuhn states that paradigm shifts most often come about through men and women who are either very young or who are not trained in the field in which the changes occur.<sup>76</sup> Being trained in the ministry of Christianity would not likely lead to a change in the historical model of the religion. Modern scholarly authority is no better for changing the model than was patristic authority in defining it centuries ago. It would take a prophet or an apostle to produce a model of Christianity that could add to the scriptural canon, produce apocalyptic writings, teach doctrines not clearly transmitted through the Fathers, and introduce a pattern of sacred teachings and ordinances necessary to ensure a successful journey back to God in the next life.

At the same time that biblical scholars began to develop and apply a scientific structure and analysis to the received model of Christianity, a young and untrained boy became the instrument through whom God gave the key elements of such an alternate paradigm of Christianity. Through the numerous revelations that he received, Joseph Smith gained a firsthand knowledge of the fundamental role of apocalyptic in Christianity. Through the additional scriptural writings that came to the Prophet, he learned that the scriptural canon was again opened. As Joseph was given heavenly authority and its associated ordinance activity, he knew that there was much to be received and learned beyond baptism as one prepares to return to God. As the temple and all that it represents was revealed to Joseph Smith, he understood the relationship of this realm to the divine cosmos and also the real meaning and value of the mysteries of God mentioned in the Bible. The concept of restoration adds a dimension to the Christian paradigm that implies a defect in the received or traditional model, caused



by a loss from the ancient one. Joseph was taught that apostasy caused the loss and created the need for a later restoration.

In all of the elements of the correct paradigm given to Joseph Smith, there is room for further study and understanding of its details in the New Testament dispensation. Not all revelations from the past were given to Joseph Smith, not all prophetic or Christian records were restored through him, and not all details relating to the manner or time of the apostasy were spelled out by the Prophet. Within the markers and signposts of such matters as given to Joseph Smith, one can examine the huge and growing mass of materials claiming to represent ancient Christianity that began to reappear out of the past during the last two hundred years. Certainly one should try to understand these materials in the context of the revealed model of Christianity given to the Prophet. Ongoing study of these writings and artifacts within this alternate paradigm should especially be taken seriously at BYU, and our concerted efforts should lead to many opportunities to see new discoveries of old sources in a proper context. That is not to say that the paradigm of ancient Christianity is now fully understood, for it surely is not, nor that all new discoveries are remnants or elements of the ancient apostolic church, for they are not. It is to say that great challenges and opportunities are available to all students of ancient Christianity, and there is a great responsibility to meet and study these discoveries within the prophetic guidelines revealed since 1820.

### **The BYU Egypt Excavation Project and Early Christianity**

It is a privilege to be associated with many colleagues who are responding to these opportunities, and I wish to acknowledge in particular the work done by many in the BYU Egypt Excavation Project. For twenty years, BYU has had the opportunity to sponsor a major excavation project in the Egyptian Fayum, focusing on a large (three hundred acres) necropolis dating from the third century B.C. through the fifth century A.D. The project is made possible by the assistance of members of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization. These include our inspectors, the area directors, and members of the Supreme Council of Egyptian Antiquities. To them we extend our deepest and heartfelt gratitude for permitting and facilitating BYU to undertake this project. As archeologists, geologists, chemists, textile experts, pathologists, radiologists, dentists, molecular biologists, and students have participated in the recovery and analysis of ancient artifacts, we have encountered numerous evidences of early Christianity in that region.<sup>77</sup> Many of those evidences, such as symbols and designs in multiple layers of clothing found on each burial, relate well to complex ritual and symbolic meanings in clothing found in early Christian sources, as well as to the model of Christianity revealed to Joseph Smith. Other artifacts, such

as trephined skulls and similar evidences of violent death dating to the third and fourth centuries, substantiate the persecutions of Christians during that time, which were recorded in contemporary historical sources. The work of all of the team members demonstrates how many different people in a university are necessary for and capable of making a project meaningful and successful. The BYU Egyptian Excavation Project is significant and interesting, but it is only a small part of the great work which must be done to understand better and fill out more completely the paradigm of ancient Christianity revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith.

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1. A general overview of many difficulties encountered in reconstructing early Christian history is Hugh W. Nibley, "The Way of the Church," *Improvement Era* 58 (1955). The articles were republished as a long essay in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1987), 4:209–322.

2. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 195.

3. Epiphanius, *Panarion (Medicine Chest)*, 31.2–7. The medicine chest image suggests a source for antidotes against the poison of heresies. The work is often cited as *Haereses (Heresies)*. References to classical works may be found in *Patrologiae Graecae*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 161 vols. (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857–1900), and *Patrologiae Latinae*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1841–1903).

4. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses (Against the Heresies)*, 3.4, also quoted in Eusebius of Caesaria, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae (Ecclesiastical History)*, 4.11.1.

5. Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos (Against the Valentinians)*, 4.

6. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 31.7.

7. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 1.10–11; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 31; Jerome, *Commentariorum in Naum liber (Commentary on the book of Nahum)*, 1.11.

8. Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium (Refutation of All Heresies)*, 6.37.

9. Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, 6.37.

10. Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos*, 4.

11. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 1.13.4–7.

12. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1423.

13. Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 200.

14. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 1.21.3; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 34.20.

15. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis (Miscellanies)*, 3.29.

16. Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos*, 30.

17. Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos*, 1.

18. On the subject of whether the Christian Church continued to possess the authority and doctrines of Jesus and the Apostles after the apostolic age, see Hugh W. Nibley, "The Passing of the Primitive Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 168–208, first published in *Church History* 30 (June 1961): 131–54. The question under consideration in the article at hand is which of the competing Christian groups carried on doctrines and practices in at least the form, if not the authority, of the faith established by Jesus and the Apostles.



19. Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 6.2.6.
20. Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 6.2.1–5.
21. Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 6.3.3.
22. Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 6.8.1–3.
23. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 63.7.
24. Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 6.8.5; compare 6.23.4. See also Rufinus, *Translation of Eusebius of Caesarea, Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 6.8.4.
25. Jerome, *Epistle*, 146.2.
26. Rufinus, *Translation of Eusebius*, 6.8.4.
27. Manfred Hornschuh, “Das Leben des Origenes und die Entstehung der Alexandrinischen Schule,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 71 (1960): 1–25, 193–214.
28. Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 6.19.1.
29. Origen, *In Jeremiam Homilia* (Homily on Jeremiah), 4.3.
30. Origen, *In Lucam Homilia* (Homily on Luke), 23.
31. Origen, *In Leviticum Homilia* (Homily on Leviticus), 9.9.
32. Origen, *In Leviticum Homilia*, 4.6; 6.5; 9.1.8; 13.5. In *In Numeros Homilia* (Homily on Numbers), 2.1, priests of the earthly church are said to be *in professione religionis*.
33. Origen, *In Evangelium Matthaeum Commentarii* (Commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew), 12.
34. Origen, *In Leviticum Homilia*, 6.6.
35. Origen, *In Numeros Homilia*, 9.1.
36. Origen, *Contra Celsus* (Against Celsus), 2.8.
37. Origen, *De Principiis* (On First Principles), 4.25; Origen, *Commentarii in Evangelium Joannis* (Commentaries on the Gospel of John), 1.9.10; Origen, *Commentarii in Epistolam ad Romanos* (Commentary of the Epistle to the Romans), 1.4; 2.5; Origen, *In Leviticum Homilia*, 13.2.
38. See also Gilles Quispel, “Origen and the Valentinian Gnosis,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 28 (1974): 29–42.
39. Origen, *Commentarii in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 2.4.
40. See C. Wilfred Griggs, “A Prolegomenon to the Study of John,” an article on early commentators on the Gospel of John, in the *Festschrift* for Richard L. Anderson, forthcoming.
41. Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 6.39.5; 7.1.
42. See also A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (New York: Dover, 1961), 4:346, for a list of the doctrines that were formally rejected at the council held at Constantinople in 543.
43. *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated with an introduction by G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin, 1981), 3.32.
44. Williamson, *Eusebius, History of the Church*, 2.1, quoting Clement, *Hypotyposeis* (Outlines), 8.
45. Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 3.25.
46. Photius, *Bibliotheca*, Codex 109.
47. *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, 4.1–2.
48. *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, 13.1–2.
49. *Didache dōdeka Apostolōn* (Teachings of the Twelve Apostles), 12.
50. *Didache*, 14–16.
51. H. Idris Bell and T. C. Skeat, eds., *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and Other Early Christian Papyri* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1935).
52. Bell and Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel*. For an illustration of one of these fragments, see *BYU Studies* 36:2 (1996–97): 74.

53. See Stephen E. Robinson, "The Noncanonical Sayings of Jesus," *BYU Studies* 36:2 (1996–97): 75–91.

54. The best article on this subject for our readers is Hugh W. Nibley, "Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum—The Forty-Day Mission of Christ: The Forgotten Heritage," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 10–44. The article was first published in *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966): 1–24.

55. For one such reference in Eusebius, see *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 3.25. For a Latter-day Saint view of writings about Jesus' forty-day ministry, see John Gee, "Jesus Christ: Forty-Day Ministry and Other Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus Christ," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:734–36.

56. For more on the Hymn of the Pearl, see John W. Welch and James V. Garrison, "The 'Hymn of the Pearl': An Ancient Counterpart to 'O My Father,'" *BYU Studies* 36:1 (1996–97): 127–38.

57. W. H. C. Frend, "'And I Have Other Sheep'—John 10:16," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 26.

58. Frend, "'And I Have Other Sheep,'" 27.

59. W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (New York: Abingdon, 1972), 90.

60. Kümmel, *The New Testament*, 13, 121; see also Robert Funk, ed., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 3.

61. Funk, *Five Gospels*, xiii.

62. Funk, *Five Gospels*, 1.

63. Funk, *Five Gospels*, xviii.

64. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 92–110.

65. Funk, *Five Gospels*, 5.

66. Funk, *Five Gospels*, 7.

67. C. S. Lewis, *Fern-Seed and Elephants, and Other Essays on Christianity*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1975), 119–25.

68. Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (London: SCM, 1972), 11.

69. Koch, *Rediscovery*, 9.

70. Koch, *Rediscovery*, 12.

71. Koch, *Rediscovery*, 19.

72. Koch, *Rediscovery*, 63.

73. Koch, *Rediscovery*, 73–93.

74. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed. (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991), 1:15.

75. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:11–14.

76. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 90.

77. See also C. Wilfred Griggs and others, "Evidences of a Christian Population in the Egyptian Fayum and Genetic and Textile Studies of the Akhmim Noble Mummies," *BYU Studies* 33 (1993): 214–43.