

**Beyond Unbelief —
A Response to Elaine Pagels’
Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas
by Matthew Gross**

“But the former, my brethren, are included in the Canon, the latter being [merely] read; or is there in any place a mention of apocryphal writings. But they are an invention of heretics, who write them when they choose, bestowing upon them their approbation, and assigning to them a date, that so, using them as ancient writings, they may find occasion to lead astray the simple.” (from Athanasius 39th Easter Letter AD367)

Beyond Belief by Elaine Pagels, written in 2003, is a small book consisting of only five chapters that seeks to show that what is today considered Christian orthodox belief is not validly derived from the teachings of early Christianity. In this book, the “author”, whom I will refer to as “Pagels”, outlines her notion in five stages. In the first chapter, entitled *From the Feast of Agape to the Nicene Creed*, Pagels seeks to show how Christianity developed from an ethical system to a belief system. In the second chapter, *Gospels in Conflict: John and Thomas*, Pagels seeks to show that by an accident of history, authority, and personality, the Gospel of John was adopted instead of Thomas, transforming Christianity into a system which deified Christ and excluded any view of man as divine. In the third chapter, *God’s Word or Human Words?*, Pagels seeks to show that in order to maintain a closed tradition, the leaders of the early church ignored and revised biblical notions of the image of God in man, and thus rejected any possibility that further “revelation” could alter the closed tradition. In the fourth chapter, *The Canon of Truth and the Triumph of John*, Pagels seeks to show that in introducing the notion of “apostolic tradition” and a confessional “canon of truth” Irenaeus stifled dissent, sought to destroy other traditions, and made his reading of John virtually synonymous with Christianity. In the fifth and final chapter, *Constantine and the Catholic Church*, Pagels seeks to show that this transformation of Christianity from an ethical system to a belief system and from many traditions to one Tradition, was solidified with the conversion of Constantine, the convening of the Council of Nicea, and the triumph of Athanasius over the Arians.

Throughout this book, Pagels is less than careful with the facts and she often resorts to rash generalizations, out-of-context readings, and sometimes even outright fabrications. In her quest to unearth the historical facts surrounding the formation of Christian orthodoxy, Pagels replaces Christian orthodoxy with what I

shall term “Pagelian orthodoxy”, a system of Christianity which asserts that man is divine and thus the quest for God should be focused within oneself. Pagelian orthodoxy rejects the notion that God is the only divine being, that Christ was the unique God-man. Pagelian orthodoxy asserts that adherence to tradition and authority is for those who do not wish to consider the facts or do the hard work of thinking on their own. Pagelian orthodoxy asserts that John and Thomas offer equally valid views of Christianity, but that Thomas was crushed by an arbitrary, expedient, and fabricated “orthodoxy” invented by Irenaeus and instituted through coercion. Finally, Pagelian orthodoxy denies that true Christianity is rooted in history but rather is a collection of stories and teachings that gospel writers “chose to include” to further their agenda. I have chosen the term “Pagelian orthodoxy” to refer to this ideology because I believe that this view of Christianity is every bit as much an system of “straight-thinking” belief in which is necessary to be accepted in Pagel’s academia as belief in Christian orthodoxy is necessary to be accepted in the orthodox Christian church.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of these tenets of Pagelian orthodoxy and to see whether or not they stand up under the weight of logic, history, and truth. In order to keep this work as accessible to concerned Christians as possible, I have sought to treat the whole book in its order of presentation. We will begin with the first chapter and move forward to the end of the book, taking issue with the author’s claims as they arise.

Chapter 1

In the first chapter of her book, Pagels describes her existential struggle with Christianity. For Pagels, this struggle is a result of not being in a position to assent intellectually to the doctrines or the traditions of the church, and yet still being attracted to the ethics and aesthetics of Christianity. When her son was diagnosed with a terminal disease, she unexpectedly found comfort at church, despite her unbelief. This fact led her to begin to question why she should perceive a disparity between what she felt and what she believed, and ultimately she came to ask the question of “when and how being a Christian became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs” (p.5) She writes,

p.5 I knew that Christianity had survived brutal persecution and flourished for generations—even centuries—*before* Christians formulated what they believed into creeds. The origins of this transition from scattered groups to a unified community have left few traces. Although the apostle Paul, about twenty years after Jesus’ death, stated “the gospel,”... (“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day”), it may have been more than a hundred years later that some Christians, perhaps in Rome, attempted to consolidate their group against the demands of a fellow Christian named Marcion, whom they regarded as a false teacher, by introducing formal statements of belief into worship.

Here Pagels begins the outline of here Pagelian orthodoxy by jettisoning the idea that there was any original “gospel” message, belief in which was essential in order to be a Christian. The mention of Paul is significant, for it is an apt reply to her notion that Christianity does not entail certain beliefs. She implicitly denies that Paul believed that his “gospel” was a creed or a distinguishing marker

between those who are Christian and those who were not. However Paul is very clear in Galatians (an actual authentic Pauline letter) that those who preach another Gospel are not of Christ.

Galatians 1:6-9

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- ⁷which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Thus Paul, very early on (as early as AD48) rejected the notion that there could be diversity of belief on critical issues related to the Gospel and derided as “accursed” those who would claim otherwise. As we shall see later, Pagelian orthodoxy wishes to contend that this notion—the notion that Christianity is about beliefs—is a late addition of John and Irenaeus, however, Pagels fails to account for the relatively early Pauline exclusivity.

As Pagels continues, she outlines how the early Christian movement stood against the social cruelty and indifference of paganism. She notes teachings of the Didache, an early Christian liturgical document, and discusses the significance of the Agape meal (which she identifies with the Lord’s supper) for early Christians. At this point she notes what she believes is a disparity between the Didache and the Pauline and Gospel accounts regarding the Agape meal. Pagels notes that, while the Didache emphasizes the unifying nature of the Agape meal, the Gospels and Paul evidence the fact that,

p.18 ...other early followers of Jesus...saw the sacred meal in a much stranger—even macabre—way; as eating human flesh and drinking human blood.

Noting what she sees as a conflict between these views of the Lord’s supper, Pagels writes as if she knows that the Gospel writers were not interested in accurately portraying what actually happened at the institution of the Lord’s supper. Accordingly, details they include do not necessarily correlate to reality. Their agenda to make Jesus the Passover Lamb superceded Paul’s and the gospel writers’ interest in accurately conveying, or conveying at all, what actually happened. Here are some examples that show Pagels assumption in this regard:

- p.20 Mark repeats what some of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem had begun to say.
- p.21 We do not know for sure whether Jesus actually said these words.
- p.22 Jewish tradition suggested a wealth of associations with sacrifice that Paul, Mark, Matthew and Luke incorporated into various versions of the story. In the process, as we have seen, the sacred meal took on not a single meaning but clusters of meanings that became increasingly rich and complex.
- p.22 Mark actually writes the Passover feast into the narrative...
- p.23 Luke and Matthew each expand Mark’s version of the story...
- p.23 The author of the Gospel of John gives a *different* chronology for Jesus’ last days, though John, as much as—or even more than—Paul and Luke, nevertheless intends to connect Jesus’ death with Passover.
- p.24 Because John believed that Jesus *became* the Passover lamb, he says that “about noon, on the day of preparing the Passover”—Friday, the time prescribed for preparing the Passover Lamb—Jesus was sentenced to death, tortured, and crucified.

- p.25 Yet despite the weirdness of such images—and perhaps because of it—every version of this last supper in the New Testament, whether by Paul, Mark, Matthew, or Luke, interprets it as a kind of death-feast, but one that looks forward in hope.
- p.25 Many Christians *preferred* these powerful images...for later generations **chose to include** in the New Testament the versions of the story that tell of eating flesh and drinking blood, dying and coming back to life.
- p.26 Within decades of his death, then, the story of Jesus became for his followers what the Exodus story had become for many generations of Jews: not simply a narrative of past events but a story through which they could interpret their own struggles, their victories, their sufferings and their hopes.

Pagels assumes that the events described in the accounts of the institution of the Lord's supper never really occurred. This is a central tenet of Pagelian orthodoxy—that Christianity, from very early on, was not concerned with the historicity of its message. For Pagelian orthodoxy, it is not so much that these writers are lying about what happened as they are making up fables to prove a point. However, among other things, this view does not take into account the pains that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John go to in order to connect their narratives to historical events and persons. It is true that the writers each had a theological agenda, however their theological meaning was based on the events, not the other way around.

Pagels then brings the Pagelian orthodox concepts that Christianity is not about belief, and that the writers were not concerned with historicity in their Gospel accounts together. In seeking to contrast the later concern for beliefs with what she believes was the earlier practice, Pagels writes,

- p.27 Perhaps most often believers experience the shared meal as “communion” with one another and with God; thus when Paul speaks of the “body of Christ,” he often means the collective “body” of believers—the union of all who, he says, were “baptized into *one body*, Jews or Greeks, slaves and free, and all were made to drink from one spirit.”
Yet, since the fourth century, most churches have required those who would join such communion to profess a complex set of beliefs about God and Jesus—beliefs formulated by fourth-century bishops into the ancient Christian creeds. Some, of course, have no difficulty doing so. Many others, myself included, **have had to reflect on what the creeds mean**, as well as on what we believe...

Apart from the insulting insinuation that those who have no difficulty accepting the ancient Christian creeds have not reflected on “what the creeds mean”, Pagels once again seems to indicate that the apostle Paul did not believe that certain beliefs were critical to participating in communion. She also seems to imply that Paul would disagree with fourth-century creedal formulations such as the Nicene creed. However, we have seen that Paul was very much in agreement with the notion that there could be no communion between those who professed a true gospel and those who do not.

To close out her first chapter, Pagels states a thesis which she elaborates throughout the rest of the book. That is that there was an arbitrary and expedient choice made between two theologies, that of the gospel John and that of the gospel of Thomas. This choice had disastrous limiting consequences for Western Christianity. She writes,

p.29 ...those who later enshrined the Gospel of John within the New Testament and denounced Thomas's gospel as "heresy" decisively shaped—and inevitably limited—what would become Western Christianity.

This quote brings up important issues that will be discussed later in this paper, for now, it is worth noting that Pagels seems to imply that there is evidence that "those who enshrined the Gospel of John" knew about "Thomas's Gospel" (this follows from the fact that they "denounced" it as "heresy"). Pagels does not show here or anywhere in this book evidence that any Christian writer in the first four centuries of the church had direct knowledge of the Gospel of Thomas. Thus, when she indicates that a choice was made between Thomas and the Gospel of John, she fails to alert her readers that there is precious little if any evidence that Thomas was even known by those who chose John. In fact, if Pagels has any proof that anyone denounced "Thomas's gospel" at all, she fails to produce it.

Chapter 2

As Pagels continues her argument in the second chapter of her book, *Gospels In Conflict: John and Thomas*, she seeks to show that John was aware of the teachings of the Gospel of Thomas (a lesser claim than that John was aware of Thomas) and that John sought to directly refute those teachings. Pagels tries to show that Thomas is a much more broad-minded gospel which was suppressed by its opponents in the leadership of the early church, and she seeks to make a case for similarities between John and Thomas that show that both relatively late documents presented alternate political agenda, the former's agenda being chosen because it was more attractive to the political needs of the early church.

She begins the chapter by relating an account of her early time as an evangelical and notes that John has some "disturbing undercurrents" that she did not take note of during those formative years. Pagels begins her outline of these disturbing undercurrents with this,

p.30 Like many people, I regarded John as the most spiritual of the four gospels...At the time, I did not dwell on disturbing undercurrents—That John alternates his assurance of God's gracious love for those who "believe" with warnings that everyone who "does not believe is condemned already" to eternal death. Nor did I reflect on those scenes in which John says that Jesus spoke of his own people ("the Jews") as if they were alien to him and the devil's offspring.

Pagels points to a couple of problems here. The first is a genuine disagreement that Pagels has with Christian soteriology—Pagelian orthodoxy believes that there is no exclusive or external path of salvation, and so Pagels takes issue with the biblical notion that faith in an external Jesus is the only path to salvation. The spin Pagels places on this passage however is unfair to the extent that it seems to indicate that one who is condemned already cannot eventually believe and have the judgment against her lifted. It is fair to say that in John, as in the rest of scripture, anyone who turns from unbelief to belief will be saved. The second undercurrent in John that Pagels points out is that Jesus spoke of his own people as if they were the devil's offspring. This, however, is a blatant misreading of the text and frankly rather dishonest. In the section of John to which Pagels refers, Jesus was calling the Pharisees children of Satan only after they questioned his

parentage. He did not refer to “the Jews” as a whole that way as Pagels indicates. So here her criticism of John’s “anti-Semitic Jesus” falls flat.

Pagels goes on to discuss again her formative years as a young doctoral student at Harvard. It was apparently during this time that she first was exposed to the idea that there were non-orthodox writings during the first four centuries. Pagels writes,

p.31 When I entered the Harvard doctoral program, I was **astonished** to hear from the other students that Professors Helmut Koester and George MacRae, who taught the early history of Christianity, had **file cabinets filled** with “gospels” and “apocrypha” written during the first centuries...

When my fellow students and I investigated these sources we found that they revealed diversity within the Christian movement that later, “official” versions of Christian history had suppressed so effectively that **only now** in the Harvard graduate school, did we hear about them.

These quotes are rather florid, and they bring up a few questions for the discerning reader: Was Pagels, who had been admitted to a PhD program at Harvard, really astonished by the realization that other gospels and apocrypha existed? Hadn’t she familiarized herself with the writings of Irenaeus or Eusebius, both of which contain excerpts from these types of writings, prior to coming to *Harvard*? Is it really true that there were file cabinets filled with this stuff in Koester and MacRae’s offices? This seems like a bit of an exaggeration given the amount of written material that actually exists from the “first centuries”. In reality, could the extant writings from the first centuries even fill one file cabinet? Is she referring to copies of the earliest sources or the earliest sources themselves? If copies, why did the professors need so many copies that they filled file cabinets? If the earliest sources, what were these writings doing being stored in file cabinets? I know it was 40 years ago, but surely they were not so haphazard with such valuable manuscripts? However Pagels would answer these questions, I think it is clear that she exaggerates in order to mislead her audience into believing there were more of these sources than actually exist.

Pagels concludes also that later “official” versions of Christian history had suppressed the diversity of the early church so effectively that she had to go to the Harvard graduate school to even “hear” about them. This notion of effective official suppression of the diversity of writings is so ridiculous that were it not a central tenet of Pagelian orthodoxy, I suspect that Pagels would be embarrassed to even admit her own ignorance at the time. Pagels apparently is unaware of the implications that her knowledge of *Against Heresies* (of which she later acknowledges she was aware) has for this theory. *Against Heresies* is, in Pagels’ own words, a “massive” work dedicated solely to the chronicling and refutation of the diversity of which she was unaware. Much of Pagels’ current knowledge of Gnostic and other “diverse” literature is taken directly from portions of *Against Heresies* where Irenaeus quotes at length from these “diverse” authors. Perhaps Pagels would have her readers believe that *Against Heresies* was discovered first at Nag Hammadi and later investigated by her when she opened Koester and MacRae’s file cabinets? Whether this is the case or not, it is fair to say that *Against Heresies* was widely circulated and its contents, an outline

and refutation of many “competing viewpoints” in the early church, were public knowledge, available even in the hallowed halls of “Harvard graduate school”.

Pagels moves on to describe her experience upon investigating the file cabinets with her other students. Pagels writes,

p.32 I had come to respect the work of “church fathers” such as Irenaeus...who had denounced the secret writings as “an abyss of madness, and blasphemy against Christ.” Therefore I expected these recently discovered texts to be garbled, pretentious, and trivial. Instead I was surprised to find in them **unexpected spiritual power**...”Jesus said: ‘If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.’ The strength of this saying is that it does not tell us what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and, with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self-evidently true.

First, Pagels neglects to mention what we noted earlier; that Irenaeus in addition to merely characterizing the writings he refutes, actually quotes from them at length. He does this, among other reasons, because he is confident that his readers can discern the truth on their own. Thus when he describes them as “an abyss of madness, and blasphemy against Christ”, he does so knowing that his readers can verify this for themselves. The Gospel of Thomas, however, was not one of these from which Irenaeus quotes as heretical, and thus, we cannot even be sure that he knew about it.

Also in this section of the book we see that Pagels bases her notion of humanity as divine on quotes from the gospel of Thomas and others. This is a central tenet of Pagelian orthodoxy, and so it should come as no surprise that “this perspective seemed to [Pagels] self-evidently true”. It should come as no surprise that Pagels, as her own ultimate criterion of truth, is advocating that which is “self-evidently true”.

Pagels goes on to characterize the status of John in the early church. She writes,

p.33 Thanks to research taken since [the 1979 publication of the *Gnostic Gospels*]... what that book attempted to offer as a kind of rough, charcoal sketch of the history of Christianity now can be seen as if under an electron microscope...certain Christian leaders from the second century through the fourth came to reject many other sources of revelation and constructed instead the New Testament gospel canon of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John along with the “canon of truth,” which became the nucleus of the later creeds that have defined Christianity to this day.

Pagels here seems to be overstating her case once again. Pagels contends that the difference between the body of knowledge in 1979 when she wrote her *Gnostic Gospels* book and today can be compared to the difference between a rough charcoal sketch and an electron microscope. It is fair to say that this is a bit of an exaggeration, however, it is encouraging to see that Pagels now realizes that her 1979 book was really only a “rough charcoal sketch”. As for her assertion that we can see what happened in the early church as if under an electron microscope, surely this overstates the level of historical certainty that a historian can have about any past event, much less events that took place around 1900 years ago within the fledgling church. Pagels certainty is further overstated because she is largely deconstructing the official literary sources she

does have (sources which contradict her conclusions) for the purposes of forming a new account of “what really happened”.

Pagels continues her narrative of the research she did on this book with the following,

p.34 To my surprise, having spent many months comparing the Gospel of John with the Gospel of Thomas, which may have been written at about the same time, I have now come to see that John’s gospel was written in the heat of controversy, to defend certain views of Jesus and to oppose others.

While Pagels’ statement regarding “the heat of controversy” is perhaps a bit of an overstatement based not on historical record but on historical conjecture, this really should be no revelation at all. The notion that biblical writers, including John, wrote to “defend certain views of Jesus and to oppose others” no doubt is true. In fact, in his gospel, John is very candid about this agenda. He writes,

John 20:31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So what Pagels confirmed, after “many months” was that John had the very agenda that he stated himself in his gospel. However, this fact seems to be lost on Pagels as she continues with her observation, which she believes undermined the credibility of the gospel of John for its earliest readers. Pagels writes,

p.34 Even its first generation of readers ([AD]90-130) disagreed about whether John was a true gospel or a false one—and whether it should be part of the New Testament.
[footnote 10]

Pagels once again is evincing the fact that she is overconfident in the reliability of the image of history that her “electron microscope” is giving her. Pagels overstates the case here in a couple of ways. First, she neglects to inform the readers that there is no evidence of a debate during the time period she mentions about whether John should be considered scripture. The historical basis for the “disagreement” that she speculates about is purely an argument from silence. That is to say that the argument for such a disagreement is an argument based on what liberal scholars regard as a dearth of specific literary references to John during the time period Pagels references. Thus, the scholars say “because prominent orthodox writers failed to reference uniquely Johannine passages during the period from 90 to 130, they must have doubted its authenticity as apostolic scripture”. However, even if they are right about this dearth of references (and now there is ample evidence to believe they are wrong), it certainly is not enough historical evidence to infer that there was some sort of disagreement about John. At the very most, it would point to lack of a finality in their judgment of the scriptural and apostolic nature of John.

Regarding the evidence that John was used between AD 90 and 130, Oxford University Press has recently published a volume entitled *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*, in which the author, Charles Hill, credibly contends for the probable use of uniquely Johannine gospel material in several works which date from this period. These works and writers include Ignatius in Asia Minor (c.107); Polycarp in Smyrna (c.107); Papias’ elders in Asia Minor (c.110-120); the Longer Ending of Mark (c.110-130); and Papias’ *Exegesis of the Lord’s Oracles* in Hierapolis (c.120-132). In addition there are several other works which quote material that overlaps between John and another gospel or which might be

alluding to Johannine gospel material but are vague enough to preclude a judgment of probable dependence upon John. Thus, while we cannot fault Pagels for failing to consider a book that was published after her own, she still seems to be engaging in a bit of sleight-of-hand when she tells her readers that the first generation of John's readers "disagreed about whether John's gospel was a true gospel or a false one".

Pagels continues with the assertion that John, in addition to being seen by some as a false gospel, also had other things in common with apocryphal works such as Thomas. She writes,

p.39 As we shall see, John probably knew what the Gospel of Thomas taught—if not its actual text. Many of the teaching in the Gospel of John that differ from those in Matthew and Luke sound much like sayings in the Gospel of Thomas: in fact, what first impressed scholars who compared these two gospels is how similar they are. Both John and Thomas, for example, apparently assume that the reader already knows the basic story Mark and the others tell, and each claims to go beyond that story and reveal what Jesus taught his disciples in private. When for example, John tells us what happened on the night that Judas betrayed Jesus, he inserts into his account nearly *five chapters* of teaching unique to his gospel—the so-called farewell discourses of John 13 through 18, which consist of intimate dialogue between the disciples and Jesus...**Similarly**, the Gospel of Thomas, as we noted, claims to offer "secret sayings, which the living Jesus spoke," and adds that "Didymus Judas Thomas wrote them down."

Pagels implies a couple things in this paragraph, however, first I would like to note that Pagels is unwilling to say that John knew the text of Thomas. This is an important admission for Pagels to make given the impact that it has on her Pagelian orthodox assumptions, namely that John cannot be shown to be writing a direct response to the Gospel of Thomas.

The implication of the other statements she is making seems to be that there is some shared sources between John and Thomas. She says that both assume that the reader knows Mark, but she does not mention that Thomas contains very little narrative and none which introduces Jesus. On the other hand, John contains narrative and teaching. John introduces Jesus; Thomas only tells us what "the living Jesus" said. Thus, the assumption here by Thomas that people already know who Jesus is and what he did is much stronger than the assumption of John who tells us who Jesus was and what he did. Because of this, the comparison is only a superficial comparison and as such it really is not helpful to Pagels case.

Another very superficial comparison that Pagels makes between John and Thomas is that each includes "secret sayings". In the case of Thomas, this is true; in the case of John, this is false. John's discourse to which Pagels refers takes place with the twelve, and none of it is "secret". On the other hand, the "secret sayings" in the so-called gospel of Thomas were not revealed to all the disciples, but only to Thomas, who, the book says couldn't reveal them to the other disciples, lest they stone him. In addition, all of the sayings in Thomas are explicitly "hidden sayings". None of John's material is explicitly or implicitly "hidden". Pagels equates Thomas's genuine secret with a discourse that Jesus

had with all twelve disciples. Pagels would have us believe that this public discourse was secret in the same way Thomas was secret because it was first introduced in John. This standard for “secret saying” is repeated once again p.50 when she uses it to refer to what Jesus taught to the disciples as a group. There is no reason to believe that these things constituted a “secret”. Pagels does this again on p53 when she says “Yet the despite similarities between John’s and Thomas’s versions of Jesus’ secret teaching...” The fact of the matter is, John contains no secrets, only teaching that was public knowledge at the time or later made public.

One specific instance in which Pagels reiterates this “secret teaching” error is worth addressing because it illustrates how her Pagelian orthodoxy is getting in the way of a fair description of what John actually writes. Pagels writes,

p.62 [John acknowledges Peter’s leadership] But John adds that Jesus reserved for his “beloved disciple” a special, mysterious role that he refused to explain to Peter. When Peter saw that disciple and asked, “Lord what about this man?” Jesus answered only, “If it is my will that he should remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” Such stories may imply that John’s teaching, including the “farewell discourses” which Jesus addressed to the disciples, entrusting “the beloved disciple” to write them down, is superior to Peter’s.

First of all, Pagels takes Jesus’ quote to Peter out of context. Here is the passage from which Pagels gets her “evidence”,

John 21:18-24

¹⁸Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

²⁰Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") ²¹When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"

²²Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." ²³Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"

²⁴This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.

In the context, Peter is specifically asking about when John will die, not what role he will play. This should be clear from Jesus’ response which regards when “the disciple whom Jesus loved” would die. (On an ancillary note, it is encouraging to see both that Pagel’s believes that John is “the disciple who Jesus loved”.)

Secondly, the farewell discourses were given to all the disciples, not just John, as Pagels implies, and any of the disciples could have chosen to write them down. Nowhere in this passage or in John does it say, as Pagels implies, that Jesus specifically “entrusted” “the disciple whom Jesus loved” to write down the discourse. So we see that, taken in context, nothing that Jesus says to Peter implies that John received any superior or secret teaching.

One of the tenets of Pagelian orthodoxy that Pagels expounds in this chapter is her notion that the image of God in scripture was seen as a threat in the early church because it is a concept that affirms the notion that all of humanity is

divine. In repeatedly making this assertion, Pagels assumes that this could be the only interpretation of the teaching of Genesis one regarding pre-fall Adam and Eve. She does not consider the fact that this polytheistic view of Genesis fails to account for the uniform monotheism of the Jewish scriptures. In addition she seems to want to say that John would have denied God's image in man since he denied divinity subsisting within all of humanity.

p.39 ...the authors of John and Thomas take Jesus' private teaching in sharply different directions...[John] believes that Jesus alone brings divine light to a world otherwise sunk into darkness...But certain passages in Thomas's gospel draw a quite different conclusion: that the divine light Jesus embodied is shared by humanity, since we are all made "in the image of God." Thus Thomas expresses what would become a central theme in Jewish—and later Christian—mysticism a thousand years later: that the "image of God" is hidden within everyone, although most people remain unaware of its presence.

What might have been complementary interpretations of God's presence on earth became, instead, rival ones; for by claiming that Jesus alone embodies the divine light, John challenges Thomas's claim that this light may be present in everyone.

This seems strange. "Thomas" is a polytheist who believes that everyone is divine, taking a traditional Jewish idea about man being created in the image of God and pretending that it means that all men are divine. To say the least, this is a misappropriation of the Jewish notion which by using the traditional terminology for its new idea, seeks to disguise the fact that the idea is not in line with Jewish notions of what it meant to be created in the image of God. If Thomas and Pagels are right, then the author of Genesis, a monotheist writing to support monotheism, actually taught the divinity of all humanity. It should be obvious that this reading of Genesis is, to say the least, implausible, given Jewish monotheism.

Having shown that the early church "disagreed" about the status of John and that John and Thomas are really quite similar, Pagels moves to discredit the notion that John was written by John. Pagels writes,

p.45 We should note that, although I am using here the traditional names, Thomas and John, and the traditional term *author*, no one knows who actually wrote either gospel.

Pagels here identifies another "similarity" between the two gospels—no one knows who actually wrote them. Here Pagels seems to imply that we are equally uncertain about the authorship question as it regards these works. This is an intellectually dishonest assessment, as there is far more evidence regarding the authorship of John by John than there is the authorship of Thomas by Thomas. Indeed, according to Hill, from the external it would be very difficult to prove that Thomas even existed as a literary unit prior to the late second century, as, as far as we know, it is not mentioned or cited in any writings before then. John, on the other hand, as we have noted earlier, has probable citations very early on in the literature. These citations of John are important not only because they are early, but because they presuppose scriptural authority, and thus most likely, apostolic origin. Combining this external evidence with the internal evidence for Johannine authorship, such as the fact that John is the only gospel that both doesn't mention the disciple John and does mention "the disciple whom Jesus loved", it is fair to say that the evidence for Johannine authorship of John is far stronger than the evidence for Thomasine authorship of Thomas.

Writing on this question of the authorship of John, Pagels suggests looking to the text of John to offer some answers. (p. 58-60) Issues she raises: 1. Why does the “beloved disciple’s name never appear? 2. Why aren’t “the apostles” or “the twelve” mentioned? 3. Why doesn’t the author mention he was an apostle or a disciple? 4. Why is Peter’s leadership denigrated in favor of the “beloved disciple”? 5. Why does he say that the anonymous disciple’s greater authority ensures the truth of the gospel? 6. Could a fisherman from Galilee have written a book of this literary magnitude?

Pagels points out that “two generations of scholars” have devoted much energy to the task of answering these questions and have come up with the following non-answers: 1) The author was another John called “the Elder”. 2) The disciple John was the witness to the book but not its “actual author”. 3) The author was “an anonymous leader of a lesser known circle of disciples, distinct from the twelve.” Apparently in Pagelian orthodoxy, there is plenty of room for speculation, but no room for a fourth alternative, namely that John the disciple and apostle was the author, a claim that is made in John 21. Many liberal scholars would dispute the authenticity of this chapter of John in order to undermine Johannine authorship, however Pagels apparently accepts John 21, because it is the passage that Pagels used earlier to “prove” John’s secret knowledge. Thus, she is trapped, either she jettisons her proof for secret knowledge, or she jettisons here view that John didn’t write the gospel himself. Of course, there is another way out of this dilemma—assuming that your readership will not notice the inconsistency—which Pagels chooses to take here.

Moving on in this chapter, Pagels tries to make the case that John attempts to discredit Thomas. This is important to Pagelian orthodoxy because it shows that John was aware of the teachings of the Thomas gospel and wished to undermine them by undermining the authority of Thomas as an apostle. Pagels writes:

p.70 John tells how the risen Jesus personally appeared to Thomas in order to rebuke him, and brought him to his knees...Thomas, having missed [the meeting where Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on the disciples], is not an apostle, has not received the holy spirit, and lacks the power to forgive sins, which the others received directly from the risen Christ...A week later, the risen Jesus reappears and, in this climactic scene, John’s Jesus rebukes Thomas for lacking faith and tells him to believe “Do not be faithless, but believe.” Finally Thomas, overwhelmed, capitulates and stammers out the confession, “My Lord and my God!” For John, this scene is the coup de grâce: finally Thomas understands, and Jesus warns the rest of the chastened disciples: “Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.” Thus John warns all his readers that they must believe what they cannot verify for themselves—namely, the Gospel message to which he declares himself a witness—or face God’s wrath. John may have felt some satisfaction writing this scene; for here he shows Thomas giving up his search for experiential truth—his “unbelief”—to confess what John sees as the truth of his gospel...

There are a number of errors in this passage. The most glaring one is that Jesus “brought Thomas to his knees”. The text in question, John 20, does not indicate that Thomas was brought to his knees, or that Jesus was stern with Thomas at all. All Jesus did was allow Thomas the evidence, *experiential evidence*, that he

needed in order to believe. It is Thomas who put his fingers in Jesus' hands and his fist in Jesus' side. It is Thomas who, far from capitulating under a stern rebuke, simply confesses what his senses of sight and touch have told him. Pagelian orthodoxy wants so badly to see in John a stern, intolerant Christ that it interprets a blessing, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe," as a curse on and a threat to those who seek experiential verification for their beliefs. Pagels thinks that this marks the end of Thomas' search for experiential truth, but what Pagels misses is that the end of his quest has only come because Christ gave him the experience that he needed in order to believe.

Chapter 3

Pagels begins the third of five chapters in her book by telling a story of certain Christians she knows and has heard about who have recognized the very human need of everyone to search for God on their own. She notes that prominent Christian mystics are deficient in their quest, according to the standards of Pagelian orthodoxy, because they are always careful not to identify themselves with God. She writes:

p.75 Orthodox Jews and Christians, of course, have never wholly denied affinity between God and ourselves. But their leaders have tended to discourage or, at least, to circumscribe the process through which people may seek God on their own.

Pagelian orthodoxy sees the Church as discouraging and circumscribing believers who want to claim divinity for themselves. This is because Pagels sees the realization that humanity is divine as critical to any individual process of seeking God. However, Pagelian orthodoxy would seem to be short sighted here, as Pagels and the Gospel of Thomas are subject as well to the similar charge of discouraging, and circumscribing any search that is not focused on finding God within one's self, which is the only true path according to Pagelian orthodoxy.

Pagels points to the evidence of a Trappist monk (p.76) who has found that "certain elements" of Buddhist meditation complementary to Christian tradition as proof that "even some devoted Christians have found that the impulse to seek God overflows the banks of a single tradition". In response to this I would agree that some Christians have indeed noticed this. Indeed Pagels seems to have overlooked the fact that many years ago, one prominent Christian noticed this "impulse to seek God" in the philosophers living in Athens during his time:

Acts 17:22-23 – ²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: |sc TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

Notice here that Paul shows that the tenet of Pagelian orthodoxy which claims that Christians do not affirm the "impulse to seek God" is false when Paul himself affirms the impulse to seek God in the "Men of Athens". Far from stifling this impulse, Paul simply wishes to redirect this impulse so that it may result in actually finding the God who is actually there.

Continuing in chapter 3, Pagels delivers a litany of accounts of persecution of early Christians. She does this in order to examine “how and why early church leaders laid down the fundamental principles of Christian teaching.” In making this point, Pagels embraces a flawed methodology. She writes:

p.77 To understand what happened we need to look at the specific challenges—and dangers—that confronted believers during the critical years around 100 to 200 [AD], and how the architects of Christian tradition dealt with these challenges.

It is important to note that this methodology is flawed at the outset because it fails to acknowledge the contributions of Paul and John as well as the other first-century writers of what later became the New Testament towards viewing Christianity as a particular system of beliefs. One of the central claims of Pagelian orthodoxy is that there was no one set of beliefs in early Christianity, however Pagels in defending this notion should at least contend with first-century leaders in the Church, namely Paul, Peter, James, and John who, Pagels accepts, believe otherwise. Instead of doing this, she skips right to the second century, and thus forces the leaders of first-century Christianity to stand mute for her audience.

Pagels examines the charges that had been brought against the Christians that they are atheistic, incest-practicing cannibals. She notes that in Smyrna mobs “killed Germanicus, and demanded—successfully—that the authorities arrest and immediately kill Polycarp, a prominent bishop.” She notes that Pliny executed certain Christians despite finding that they were not incest-practicing cannibals because “their stubbornness and unshakable obstinacy should not go unpunished.” Pagels notes that Rusticus, a roman prefect, ordered the death of Justin Martyr and his followers because they would not sacrifice to the roman Gods. After noting these things, Pagels appeals to a roman anti-Christian apologist, Celsus, who, according to Pagels, “exposed” the Christians and accused them of sinister and strange practices.

p.79 ...acting like wild-eyed devotees of foreign gods such as Attis and Cybele, possessed by spirits...[practicing] incantations and spells, like magicians ... [and following the] barbaric, Oriental customs of the Jews.

However, what is strange about Pagels use of Celsus here is that she accepts his charges against the Christians as perfectly credible evidence for diversity in early Christianity. She writes (p.79), “Despite the diverse forms of early Christianity—and perhaps because of them—the movement spread rapidly...” This seems outlandish to say the least. Would Pagels accept that part of the “diversity” in the early church was the practice of incest, cannibalism, and atheism as well? If not, why does she reject some charges but retain the others? Perhaps because her Pagelian orthodox beliefs have overshadowed good judgment in this case. Pagels writes,

p.80 Tertullian boasted to outsiders that “the more we are mown down by you, the more we multiply; the blood of Christians is seed!” Defiant Rhetoric, however, could not solve the problem that he and other Christian leaders faced: How could they strengthen and unify this enormously diverse and widespread movement, so it could survive its enemies?

Pagels makes the point later on that Christianity is not primarily about orthodoxy, or the right ideas. She advocates the beauty and the ethic of Christianity, but without narrow ideas about what constitutes Christian Theology. This notion

however, seems to be at odds with the reality of first, second, and third century Christian martyrs. After all, if Christian martyrs were not dying for narrowly construed beliefs, why were they dying? If early Christianity really did not have an established “orthodoxy”, why did martyrs like Polycarp go to their deaths offering to teach their executioners “Christian doctrine”? If heterodox ideas were really acceptable in a religion really more about ethics and beauty than belief, why didn’t the Christians save themselves by recanting their narrow exclusivism and embracing the Roman pantheon? Pagelian orthodoxy cannot answer these questions satisfactorily.

The truth of the matter is that from the earliest days of the church there have been true Christians and false Christians, and these groups have been distinguished by their beliefs as well as by their ethics and aesthetics. Pagelian orthodoxy seeks to establish that the canon of the New Testament only exists as a political construct of those who wanted to suppress dissent and enhance their own power. These people spoke of a “true” faith only because they thought it would be an effective way of crushing their competition. However, as a comprehensive construct this fails because it does not account for why martyrs continued to hold on to their supposed cynical, politically expedient beliefs when faced with being literally crushed (and torn apart and burnt alive) at the hands of those who advocated the more tolerant, less exclusivistic Roman pantheon. The reason they didn’t is because beliefs that we would call orthodox, and which Pagelian orthodoxy would deride as “narrow” were at the core of who they were as Christians. Thus, when so called “gospels” such as the Gospel of Thomas were excluded by the Great Church it was because they failed to meet the standards of orthodoxy which were at the center of what it meant to be a Christian from the earliest stages of the Christian movement’s development.

Continuing in this chapter, Pagels makes several statements which she hopes will bolster her case that orthodoxy is an authoritarian construct that resulted from an need by the leaders of the early church to preclude the possibility of continuing revelation.

p.97 Irenaeus decided that stemming this flood of “secret writings” would be an essential first step toward limiting the proliferation of “revelations” that he suspected of being only delusional, or, worse, demonically inspired. Yet the discoveries at Nag Hammadi show how widespread was the attempt “to seek God”—not only among those who wrote such “secret writings” but among the many more who read, copied, and revered them, including the Egyptian monks who treasured them in their monastery library even two hundred years after Irenaeus had denounced them.

But in 367 [AD] Athanasius, the zealous bishop of Alexandria—an admirer of Irenaeus—issued an Easter letter in which he demanded that Egyptian monks destroy all writings, except for those he specifically listed as “acceptable,” even “canonical” ...But someone—perhaps monks at the monastery of St. Pachomius—gather dozens of the books Athanasius wanted to burn, removed them from the monastery library, sealed them in a heavy, six-foot jar, and intending to hide them, buried them on a nearby hillside near Nag Hammadi.

In this section of the chapter, Pagels continues her claim that Irenaeus and later Athanasius acted in an authoritarian manner, demanding that certain writings be destroyed. Pagels evidence for this is Athanasius’ Easter letter of 367. However,

Athanasius letter of AD 367 does not contain any demands that any writings be destroyed. It does not address Egyptian monks at all. It does not name any specific writings other than ones that are acceptable or canonical. At this critical point it appears that Pagelian orthodoxy has slipped into the realm of falsehood, of myth, and of speculation in an attempt to bolster its plausibility. This is an error that is repeated, and we will examine it further later on in this essay.

Pagels continues the chapter by expounding upon her notion that Irenaeus sought to prevent the individual from seeking God on her own. Earlier we discussed how this was not the case with Paul, and Irenaeus, following in Paul's footsteps seeks only to redirect the individual Christian's "quest for God" in productive directions. Far from being coercive, *Against Heresies*, gives argument and reason to accomplish these ends. Pagels comes close to acknowledging this when she writes,

p.112 **Irenaeus could not, of course, stop people from seeking revelation of divine truth—nor, as we have seen, did he intend to do so...**But, from his own time to the present, Irenaeus and his successors among church leaders did strive to compel all believers to subject themselves to the "fourfold gospel" and to what he called apostolic tradition.

So Pagels acknowledges that Irenaeus did not want to stop people from seeking, however, she quickly notes that they did strive to "compel" certain guidelines, namely adherence to the four fold gospel witness. Pagels explains why they did this,

p.112 Few New Testament scholars today would agree with Irenaeus; **we** do not know who actually wrote these gospels, any more than we know who wrote the gospels of Thomas or Mary; all we know is that all of these "gospels" are attributed to disciples of Jesus...[Irenaeus] believed that John alone understood who Jesus really is—God in human form. What God revealed in the extraordinary moment when he "became flesh" trumped any revelations received by mere human beings—even prophets and apostles, let alone the rest of us...

p.113 Yet Irenaeus recognized that even banishing all "secret writings" and creating a canon of four gospel accounts could not, by itself, safeguard the Christian movement...he responded by working to construct what he called orthodox (literally, "straight-thinking") Christianity.

Even though Pagels notes that Irenaeus believed in apostolic authorship of the Gospels, she takes pains to criticize him for doing so. Once again here Pagels is being less than forthcoming with her audience. When she says that scholars (with whom she humbly identifies herself four times) do not know who wrote the four Gospels "any more" than they know who wrote Thomas or Mary, she is engaging in a bit of historical sleight-of-hand. While it is true that scholars do not have a videotape record of the composition of any of the four Gospels, the level of historical certainty is much higher for their authorship than for the authorship of Thomas or Mary. In addition, Pagels assumes that the scholars level of certainty today can be compared to the level of certainty that Irenaeus had in his day. This, of course, fails to account for eyewitness testimony and verbal apostolic tradition as well as writings which Irenaeus could have referenced in his day that are no longer available to us today. In addition, Pagels skepticism about apostolic tradition is unwarranted—"what he called" apostolic tradition very probably was apostolic tradition. To reject reliable historical evidence in favor of historical skepticism is not good scholarship. It may make it easier to make the

case for the indeterminacy of early church doctrine when, as a skeptic, you accept and embrace all sources as equally unreliable, but this is not scholarship.

So we see that that Pagelian orthodoxy holds a two-fold view of what Irenaeus did to consolidate his power in the early church. First, he introduced the Gospel of John, a gospel of unknown origin, to the church, and arbitrarily insisted that legions of other gospels and secret-writings were in fact from the devil. Second, Irenaeus constructed an overly exclusive orthodoxy where none existed before. Thus, according to Pagels, Irenaeus was able to ensure both the straight-thinking primary sources and the straight-thinking interpretation of these primary sources. In doing this, he consolidated his own power and position in the church.

Chapter 4

In chapter four, Pagels continues along the theme of Irenaeus' two fold approach to creating a belief-based Christianity among a certain group in the early church. However, there are a number of problems that are evident in the Pagelian orthodox view of these events. First, this view falsely assumes, on the basis of the existence of diversity, that Christians had no set beliefs, no common orthodoxy among them. Pagelian orthodoxy clearly believes that Irenaeus had no real apostolic tradition on which to base his acceptance and rejection of the secret gospels. In asserting this belief, Pagelian orthodoxy ignores the canonical writings of Paul, Peter, James, and John, which clearly indicate an early pedigree for the notion that Christianity, among other things, is a set of ideas. Second, it assumes that there was nothing but base Machiavellian motives—such as the desire to stifle a free search for the divine, a desire to consolidate power, and a desire to crush the opposition—in the heart of Irenaeus. Pagels often tells us what Irenaeus felt; she refers to Irenaeus as hostile and tells us what he detested. However, she never sees in him a genuine desire to protect the truth, or a desire to protect his flock from danger. Third, Pagelian orthodoxy assumes that there could have been no legitimacy to the quest of continuity between the Old Testament and what would later become the New Testament. Thus, it supposes that when Irenaeus rejects the falsely so-called Gnostic gospels because they ascribe divinity to all humanity, he is not doing so out of a desire to maintain Old Testament orthodoxy, but rather out of a desire to stifle true spirituality.

One of the reasons that Irenaeus rejected the teaching of the false teachers during his time was that he believed that they engaged in “evil exegesis”. Pagels believes that the false teachers were merely engaging in “alternate readings” and that Irenaeus was too narrow in his interpretation. Continuing along in this chapter, Pagels seeks to show that what Irenaeus overreacted when he castigated the false teachers for their interpretations.

p.115 Now, largely because of the Nag Hammadi discoveries, we can see that, nearly two thousand years ago, many of John's earliest readers also responded to this gospel in surprising and imaginative ways...

- Irenaeus says that the Christian poet and teacher Valentinus, his disciple Ptolemy, and others like them have invented all kinds of myths about what happened “in the beginning,” and even *before* the beginning of the world...
- p.116 ...Valentinus and his disciples were among the first...to place these newer “apostolic” writings along with Genesis and the prophets, and to revere the authority of Jesus’ sayings as equal to or even above that of Israel’s Scriptures...
When Irenaeus decided to arm himself against these teachers by reading their commentaries and confronting their authors, he may have known that Heacleon, whom he calls Valentinus’s “most respected” disciple, had written a famous *Commentary on John*
- p.117 For what [Irenaeus] did, with remarkable success, was convince Christians that his reading of John’s gospel...was the only correct reading...[Irenaeus] declares that wherever possible, one must discern the obvious meaning; and whenever a certain passage seems ambiguous or difficult, one’s understanding should be guided by those passages whose meaning seems clear.
Heretics, Irenaeus warns...read incoherently, or in conflict with the obvious meaning of the text.
- p.127 Of all the instances Irenaeus offers of “evil exegesis,” however, his prime example is part of a commentary on John that asks questions similar to those asked in the Secret Book—what John’s gospel reveals about “the origin of all things.” The author of this commentary, traditionally identified as Ptolemy, says that “John, the disciple of the Lord, wanting to set forth the origin of all things, how the Father brought forth all things,” reveals in his opening lines—although in a way hidden from the casual reader—the original structure of divine being.

After pointing to different interpretations of various texts that Irenaeus may or may not have been aware of (Pagels doesn’t indicate); Pagels here finally offers an example of “evil exegesis” that Irenaeus actually addresses—Ptolemy.

However, instead of being as forthcoming as Irenaeus was and quoting Ptolemy’s commentary, she chooses to offer a rather florid summary of Ptolemy.

- p. 128 ...when Valentinus and his disciples read the opening of John’s gospel, they envisioned God, the divine *word*, and Jesus Christ as, so to speak, waves of divine energy flowing down from above, from the great waterfall to the local creek...

Pagels fails to alert the reader that Ptolemy believed that John, who he calls “the disciple of the Lord”, actually believed and taught the Ptolemaic and Valentinian interpretation of John 1. Thus, narrow Ptolemy following Irenaeus’ narrow view of “alternate readings” believed that his was the only correct interpretation.

Pagels also fails to alert the reader that Ptolemy took the text of John 1 to refer not just to “waves of energy” but to personal demigods in the Gnostic pantheon. Thus, for Ptolemy, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God; the same was in the beginning with God.” actually refers to three Gnostic gods named “God”, “Beginning”, and “Word”. Starting this way Ptolemy continues what Pagels calls his “exegesis” finding several other Gnostic gods, namely “Anthropos”, “Ecclesia”, “Zoe”, “Charis”, “Monogenes”, and “Alethia”, each taken from certain Greek words (man, church, life, grace, only-begotten, and truth) John used in the first chapter of his gospel. Irenaeus takes issue with the claim that John is teaching this in his chapter by saying, according to Pagels’ paraphrase,

- p.128 Had John meant to set forth the primordial structure of divine being, Irenaeus says, he would have made his meaning clear, thus “the fallacy of their interpretation is obvious”...

Pagels, however, believes that Irenaeus is off-base in his criticisms here and sees Ptolemy's "exegesis" as merely a different, equally valid, interpretation of what John actually was saying in the first chapter of his gospel. She writes,

p.128 Yet Irenaeus undertook his massive, five-volume [Against Heresies] precisely because he knew that many people might find his conclusions far from obvious. Worse, they might well see him and his opponents as rival theologians squabbling about interpretation, rather than as orthodox Christians against heretics...[For Irenaeus] innovation proved that one had abandoned the true gospel.

I would have to disagree with Pagels' psychoanalysis of Irenaeus here. His *Against Heresies* was not written because many people would find his conclusions far from obvious, but because he believed that some had been deceived by false teachers who disguised their true nature. The passage on Ptolemy is not one in which Irenaeus argues over rival interpretations of John 1. Rather, he simply quotes unedited pages of Ptolemy's commentary (something Pagels herself is hesitant to do). Thus, Irenaeus evinces extreme confidence that once Ptolemy is exposed, he will be rejected. From this perspective, *Against Heresies* is not so much an "squabble" among "rival theologians" but an exposé of what it is that the Valentinians actually believed. Irenaeus expects his readers to be able to discern the truth of the situation if they can only get a unobstructed view of what Ptolemy believes. Ptolemy and the Valentinians were polytheists who went to great effort to synchronize their preexisting view of the Gnostic deities with John's gospel, all the while claiming that John meant to teach their view. Irenaeus exposes their commentary to the light of day, and, in this case, leaves the readers to discern the truth themselves—that Ptolemy's unorthodox and polytheistic view of John 1 does not do justice to the meaning and intent of John 1.

This last point is particularly germane to our discussion because the idea that Irenaeus constructed Christian orthodoxy is critical to Pagels' argument. However, this assertion is refuted by the approach of Irenaeus here and elsewhere. Much of Irenaeus' effort in the "massive" *Against Heresies* is spent on merely describing the views of his opponents and quoting and expounding upon scripture that contradicts those views. Pagels seems to believe that Irenaeus is narrow in his objection to these beliefs, and that he simply asserts the orthodox view and expects the church to submit and comply. However, Irenaeus actually argues his point, and he also argues the incoherence of the contrary view. Thus, he trusts his readers to decide what is orthodox on the basis of evidence, argument, and their own judgment to determine what is truly orthodox. Pagels views this as crushing the opposition, but this view neglects the true purpose of the argument, which is to win the opposition and to protect the sheep from false teaching.

Pagels shifts her argument at this point to show that there were issues on which Irenaeus was willing to show toleration among the brotherhood, and she asks the question:

p.134 Given, then, that Irenaeus acknowledged a wide range of views and practices, at what point did he find "heterodoxy"—which literally means "different opinions"—problematic, and for what reasons?...

- p.135 To answer these questions we should recall that Irenaeus was not a theoretically minded Philosopher engaging in theological debate so much as a young man thrust into leadership of the survivors of a group of Christians in Gaul after a violent and bloody persecution... [Remembering the martyrs, Irenaeus] determined to consolidate these scattered believers and provide them the shelter of a community by joining them into the worldwide network Polycarp had envisioned as a “catholic” church...What then did prove divisive?...*heresy*—and because of the way he characterized it, historians traditionally have identified *orthodoxy*...with a certain set of beliefs...and heterodoxy...as an opposite set of ideas...
- p.136 Yet I now realize that we greatly oversimplify when we accept the traditional identification of *orthodoxy* and *heresy* solely in terms of the philosophical and theological content of certain ideas. What especially concerned Irenaeus was the way the activities of these “spiritual teachers” threatened Christian solidarity by offering *second baptism* to initiate believers into two distinct groups *within* congregations...

Pagels points out that these Gnostic teachers believed that there must be a second baptism for Christians. As evidence for this, they pointed to Jesus’ statement that there would be a baptism with the holy spirit and with fire (Pagels fails to inform her readers that this prophecy was explicitly fulfilled at Pentacost in the book of Acts). Pagels believes that this “second baptism” was a divisive force in the early church, and that the resulting division was Irenaeus’ primary grounds for opposing the theology of those groups who advocated the second baptism. Thus, according to Pagelian orthodoxy, it was a desire for power and unity, not truth, that caused Irenaeus to choose what would be considered “orthodox” diversity and what would be considered “heterodox” false-teaching.

This Pagelian orthodox argument, however, fails for a number of reasons. First, it fails to distinguish between doctrines that were more central to the Christian faith and doctrines that were more ancillary, even prior to their articulation by Irenaeus. Pagels mentions that Irenaeus urged toleration in the quartodeciman controversy, while attacking those who denied the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection. However, Pagels fails to acknowledge the difference between Christians who argued when Easter should be celebrated and those who argued that the historical events surrounding Resurrection Sunday never took place. This is a major oversight on Pagels part, such a major oversight, in fact, that it is hard to imagine that Pagels was not aware of it when she was writing.

In addition to this, Pagelian orthodoxy fails in its analysis of Irenaeus here because it does not seriously account for real-life apostolic and scriptural tradition. Pagels is always sure to put the phrase “apostolic tradition” in quotes when she uses it, but she never takes the time to explain away the writings that constituted this tradition. Irenaeus was closely linked to real-life apostles who authorized real successors to themselves. In addition, he had apostolic writings as well as the Hebrew scriptures, all of which he considered the word of God. Thus, when he heard or read “new prophecy” that contradicted what he considered scripture, he would be very likely to react strongly against it. Thus polytheism, resurrection-denial, and denial of the virgin birth would all be attacked, while a question about whether or not to celebrate Easter on the actual day Christ was resurrected or on the Sunday after that day would not seem as central.

Third, Pagelian orthodoxy offers its adherents a false choice between Irenaeus' concern for the consolidation of power through a unified catholic church and an honest concern for historically true, apostolic Christian orthodoxy. The fact is that these two ideals did coexist. However, what Pagels equates to a power grab by force and manipulation, Irenaeus would have called protecting the sheep from the wolves by dialog and exposure of the false teachers true beliefs. Irenaeus was no despot, and he was no Machiavellian opportunist. His *Against Heresies* is a fine early example of someone in power using words and reason instead of force and fraud to accomplish his goals. The truth is, in this case, Pagelian orthodoxy is simply too cynical to see clearly.

Chapter 5

Pagels begins the final chapter in her exposition of Pagelian orthodoxy by describing her experience of being drawn to church despite knowing that the historical claims of Christianity are false. Pagels asserts that people like Irenaeus who believe that Christianity must be based on historical fact fail to realize that Christianity is about more than just a specific set of beliefs. She writes, "besides *belief*, Christianity involves *practice*—and paths toward transformation." Pagels proceeds to exposit her notion that despite her skepticism about the origins of Christianity and its basic tenets of the faith, despite the fact that she was "no longer clinging to particular moments in the past", she could still appreciate the beauty of Christmastide celebrations and of the sense of community brought about by a common myth which brings together "both the dead and the living". Pagels, "shocked" at her brilliant insight writes,

p.144 We could have made all this up out of what had happened in our own lives; but, of course, we did not *have* to do that, for, as I realized at once, countless *other* people have already done that...

p.145 If spiritual understanding may arise from human experience, doesn't this mean that it is nothing but human invention—and therefore false? According to Irenaeus, it is heresy to assume that human experience is analogous to divine reality, and to infer that each one of us, by exploring our own experience, may discover intimations of truth about God. So, he says, when Valentinus and his disciples opened John's gospel and wanted to understand what *word* means, they reflected on how *word* functions in human experience.

The fact of the matter is that the historicity of the gospel story has been a central tenet of Christianity from its beginnings to this day. This followed from the Jewish concern for the historicity of their scriptures, which are also part of the Christian scriptures. It is almost laughable to say that whether or not one's beliefs are tied to actual events in history is unimportant and ancillary to the Christian message, and it ignores a basic fact regarding the nature of 1st century Christianity. The Apostle Paul writes in 1Cor. 15:14 "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." Pagels at least acknowledges that Irenaeus believed that the historicity of the Gospel was an essential aspect of the Gospel message. She writes,

p.147 How, then, could Irenaeus safeguard this essential gospel message—upon which he believed salvation depends? As we have seen, when Irenaeus confronted the challenge of the many spiritual teachers, he acted decisively, by demanding that

believers destroy all those “innumerable secret and illegitimate writings” [here **Pagels footnotes AH 1.20.1**] that his opponents were always invoking, and by declaring that, of all versions of the “gospel” circulating among Christians, only four are genuine. In taking these two momentous—and, as it turned out, hugely influential—steps, Irenaeus became a chief architect of what Christians in later generations called the New Testament *canon*...

Pagels has repeatedly footnoted sections of Irenaeus *Against Heresies* that make only oblique reference to what she is talking about, but in this case, it is fair to say that she crosses the line and actively misleads her audience. In AH 1.20.1 Irenaeus does not demand that believers destroy anything. Here is AH 1.20.1, in its entirety:

Besides the above [misrepresentations], they adduce an unspeakable number of apocryphal and spurious writings, which they themselves have forged, to bewilder the minds of foolish men, and of such as are ignorant of the Scriptures of truth. Among other things, they bring forward that false and wicked story which relates that our Lord, when He was a boy learning His letters, on the teacher saying to Him, as is usual, "Pronounce Alpha," replied [as He was bid], "Alpha." But when, again, the teacher bade Him say, "Beta," the Lord replied, "Do thou first tell me what Alpha is, and then I will tell thee what Beta is." This they expound as meaning that He alone knew the Unknown, which He revealed under its type Alpha.

Notice that the misleading statement that Pagels makes about Irenaeus here is similar to the misleading statement she made about Athanasius earlier. There she said that

p.97 in 367 [AD] Athanasius, the zealous bishop of Alexandria—an admirer of Irenaeus—issued an Easter letter in which he demanded that Egyptian monks destroy all writings, except for those he specifically listed as “acceptable,” even “canonical”...

However, as I said above, the letter that Pagels refers to contains no mention or request that any writings be destroyed, and it does not mention any writings by name other than those listed as “canonical” and “acceptable”. A key tenet of Pagelian orthodoxy is that leaders in the church used authoritarian tactics to achieve their orthodoxy. However, twice now, Pagels has faltered in her attempt to prove this tenet, and fallen into misrepresentation and myth. She seems, at this point, to want to base her faith in Pagelian orthodoxy on something other than historical fact. In this she is, at least, consistent, since another tenet of Pagelian orthodoxy is that historicity does not matter.

Pagels goes forward with her theory by saying that in addition to demanding the destruction of all the gospels but the four, Irenaeus, knowing that just having the “right” texts was not enough, also fabricated the “right” interpretation of these texts, especially John. But what is intriguing to Pagels is the question of how John’s teaching that Jesus is God’s word in human form became the “touchstone of orthodoxy” that it was very shortly thereafter. First, Irenaeus rescued the Gospel from the Valentinians (p149). Second, he made sure that his “reading” of Johannine Christology was seen as the only plausible interpretation of John. In this, according to Pagels, he was immensely successful. Pagels writes,

p.151 And because Irenaeus’s bold interpretation came virtually to define orthodoxy, those who read John’s gospel today in any language except the Greek original will find that the translations make his conclusion seem obvious—namely, that the man “who dwelt among us” was God incarnate...

In making this point, that Irenaeus’ high view of Johannine Christology is obvious in every translation (!) except Greek, she is conceding that if those translations

are accurate, than Irenaeus' reading is probably correct. According to Pagels, Irenaeus decided to make his reading a mark of orthodoxy and closed his "massive" five-volume *Against Heresies* with a warning evocative of the last chapters of Revelation. Pagels writes,

p.158 We do not know how his contemporaries responded; I would guess that the majority, moved by his concern, rallied around Irenaeus and, rather than risk expulsion, chose the safer shelter of the church community and what Irenaeus insisted was the stable authority of the "catholic" consensus of churches and their clergy.

This Pagelian orthodox analysis overestimates the power of Irenaeus of Lyons power and influence in the church. Irenaeus was not the bishop of Rome, but of a city in Gaul. Even if he was the bishop of Rome, the church structure during the time of Irenaeus was not such that he could exclude anyone in another part of Christendom through unilateral action such as excommunication. In fact, this is probably part of the reason that his *Against Heresies* is so "massive". If he could have excluded the wolves and protected the sheep through unilateral action, he probably would not have spent the time writing an 800 page work. As it was, he had to be content to write his objections down and convince the other bishops through debate and argument that he was right.

Pagels continues her account of how Irenaeus' Johannine Christology gained ascendancy in the early church. Fast-forwarding 130 years, Pagels arrives at the conversion of Constantine and the Council of Nicea. Pagels writes,

p.170 From that meeting and its aftermath...emerged the Nicene Creed that would effectively clarify and elaborate "the canon of truth," along with what we call the canon...Together these would help establish what Irenaeus had envisioned—a worldwide communion of "orthodox" Christians joined into one "catholic and apostolic" church...

A central tenet of Pagelian orthodoxy is that the powerful in the church exerted their influence over the weak until finally they were able to win Constantine over to their position, at which point he outlawed heresy. The story of Athanasius, however stands as a stark example of how Pagelian orthodoxy is flawed at this point. Athanasius was a young man at the council of Nicea in AD325, where orthodoxy gained a tenuous victory. Pagels relates how for the next 40 years Athanasius first gained his successors seat as the bishop of Alexandria, and then was exiled when the Arians, those who denied Johannine Christology, used the power of the state to exile him and take his seat as bishop. Pagels minimizes this reality and seems to think that the military enforced exiles of the bishop Athanasius were steps in the right direction that were finally reversed when in 361,

p.176 After his third successful rival, having presided as bishop of Alexandria for five years, was lynched in 361, Athanasius succeeded in regaining his position, which he held tenaciously until his death in 373.

Despite such opposition—and perhaps because of it—Athanasius resolved to bring all Egyptian Christians, however diverse, under the supervision of his office.

Once again, a central tenet of Pagelian orthodoxy is that the bishops used authoritarian means by which to suppress dissenters and their writings. However we have seen how Pagels herself seems to have had some difficulty finding actual instances in Irenaeus' and Athanasius' writings that reflect the accuracy of this tenet. In the following section of her book, this failure apparently resulted,

not in Pagels rejection of this tenet of her orthodoxy, but in Pagels fabrication of facts to suit her Pagelian orthodox assumptions. Pagels writes about Athanasius' Easter Letter once again,

p.176 In the spring of 367, when Athanasius was in his sixties and more securely established as bishop, he wrote what became his most famous letter. In a world much different than that of Irenaeus, Athanasius included in his annual Easter Letter **detailed instructions** that would extend and implement the **guidelines** his predecessor had sketched out nearly two hundred years before... Praising [the canonical books] as "springs of salvation," he calls upon Christians during this Lenten season to "**cleanse the church** from every defilement" and to reject "the apocryphal books,"... It is likely that one or more of the monks who heard his letter read at their monastery near the town of Nag Hammadi decided to defy **Athanasius's order** and removed more than fifty books from the monastery library, hid them in a jar to preserve them and buried them near the cliff where Muhammad Ali would find them sixteen hundred years later.

Nowhere in Athanasius' Easter Letter is there a reference to "cleanse the church" from anything. In fact, this phrase, or any phrase that conveys a similar idea, never occurs in any of Athanasius' 63 other letters. It is therefore a mystery where Pagels obtained this "quote", a key quote in bolstering her notion that Athanasius "ordered" the monks at Nag Hammadi to do anything. Apparently Pagels thought this aspect of her belief system was too weak to stand on its own merits, as she was forced to fabricate a quote to support it.

Pagels concludes her book by characterizing Christian tradition as something that allows for freedom only for those who wish to stay in its guidelines. Thus according to Pagels, despite a rich cultural legacy, Christianity is actually poorer because it "often had difficulty acknowledging—much less welcoming—diverse viewpoints". Pagels goes on,

p.183 Furthermore, since Christian tradition teaches that Jesus fully revealed God two thousand years ago, innovators from Francis of Assisi to Martin Luther, from George Fox and John Wesley to contemporary feminist and liberation theologians, often have disguised innovation—sometimes even from themselves—by claiming that they are not introducing anything new but only clarifying what Jesus actually meant all along.

This is an insightful observation by Pagels, although I have a feeling that she exempts herself from the force of it. When feminist and liberation theologians appeal to primary sources to show "that they are not introducing anything new but only clarifying" how are they doing anything different that what Pagels is doing in her work here? She apparently thinks that she has transcended this tendency because she claims that Irenaeus got it wrong with his "gospel of truth" and the invention of orthodoxy. However, she is really just doing the same thing claiming that hers is the real tradition, the tradition of polytheism, toleration, and openness. Thus hers is the true teaching of Jesus, "what Jesus actually meant", according to Pagelian orthodoxy.

Pagels outlines here her belief that what Christian orthodoxy prohibits is the ability for the individual to choose to seek within themselves the answers to life's ultimate questions. For her, this is why Pagelian orthodoxy is superior. She writes,

p. 184 This act of choice—which the term *heresy* originally meant—leads us back to the problem that orthodoxy was invented to solve: How can we tell truth from lies?... Anyone who has seen foolishness, sentimentality, delusion, and murderous rage disguised as God's truth knows that there is no easy answer to the problem that the ancients called discernment of spirits. Orthodoxy tends to distrust our capacity to make such discriminations and insists on making them for us. Given the notorious human capacity for self-deception, we can, to an extent, thank the church for this. Many of us, **wishing to be spared hard work**, gladly accept what tradition teaches... Most of us, sooner or later, find that, at critical points in our lives, we must strike out on our own to make a path where none exists. What I have come to love in the wealth and diversity of our religious traditions...is that they offer the testimony of innumerable people to spiritual discovery. Thus they encourage those who endeavor, in Jesus' words, to "seek, and you shall find."

This is an exemplary summary of blind Pagelian orthodoxy. First, Christian orthodoxy was invented and forced. Second, Christian orthodoxy distrusts and undermines the individuals ability to discern the truth. Third, Christian orthodoxy is for those are too lazy to think and reflect on their own. Fourth, the truth is within the individual, who is divine. And fifth, spiritual discovery must make its own path and eschew narrow tradition.

The purpose of this paper has been to counter some of the false claims that Pagels made in her book *Beyond Belief*. In this paper we have seen how Pagels attacks the notion of Christian orthodoxy on a number of fronts. In her first chapter she claimed that Christianity started as an ethical system and that the uniformity of belief was a late-first century addition by the writer of the Gospel of John. We countered that notion by appealing to Paul specifically but also to all the first-century writers of the New Testament. In her second chapter, she claimed that the choice of John over Thomas was not based on pre-existing orthodoxy, but on political realities that made John a more advantageous choice to those in power. We countered this main assertion by showing it to be conjecture since there is no proof that the early church was even aware of the gospel of Thomas, while there is ample evidence for the authoritative use of John practically from its date of composition. In her third chapter, Pagels claimed that the early church rejected the biblical conception of the image of God in man in order to preclude the possibility that men were divine and thus able to speak for God. We countered this assertion by pointing out that the Biblical conception of the image of God is not one that ever ascribed divinity to man. In her fourth chapter, Pagels claimed that Irenaeus introduced a coercive foreign orthodoxy into the church in order to unify the church and stifle diversity. We countered this claim by showing that orthodoxy was not introduced by Irenaeus but was an idea present early on and that Irenaeus was not coercive but rather used reason and scripture to convince his opponents. Finally, in the fifth chapter, Pagels sought to show that Irenaeus' successors such as Athanasius solidified through coercive means what Irenaeus had begun, demanding that writings of their opponents be destroyed. We countered this final assertion by noting that Pagels was forced to mischaracterize the writings of Athanasius and actually resorted at one point to fabricating a quote in order to make her point. As I conclude, it is my hope that

this essay has been helpful to the reader as a defense of belief and an exhortation to move beyond the constraints of unbelief.