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## The Illusive Primitive Church

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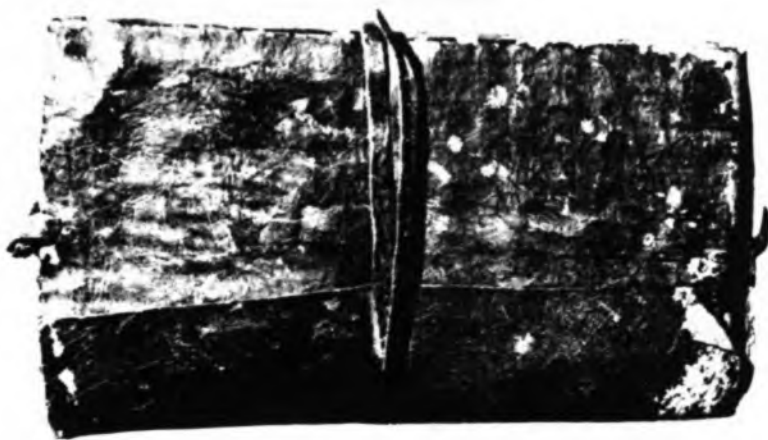
## The Illusive Primitive Church

### Qumran's Egyptian Twin

Twenty years ago a knowledge of the Coptic languages was limited to a forlorn handful of hopeless specialists. Today any serious study of the Early Church and its teachings is virtually impossible without Coptic. This is largely the result of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, a find whose importance is rivaled only by that of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>1</sup> It is a most remarkable coincidence that in the same year in which the Arabs of Palestine started bringing to the markets mysterious writings from what turned out to be the oldest *Jewish* library yet known, the Arabs of Egypt, far up the Nile, started bringing in equally mysterious writings from what proved to be the oldest *Christian* library yet known. They were found on the site of an ancient religious community between sixty and seventy miles north of Luxor, and consisted of thirteen leather-bound volumes (books, not scrolls) representing forty-four different writings comprising "about a thousand large leaves, . . . nearly eight hundred [of them] in . . . sound condition."<sup>2</sup> Although the library itself dates from the fourth century, a number of these texts are from the second century, one important writing, for example, coming "from a small village-church not yet affected by gnosticism [i.e., by the Apostasy] between 125 and 150 A.D."<sup>3</sup> As in Palestine also, the coming forth of the wonderful treasures was accompanied by all sorts of mystery and intrigue, with knotty problems of ownership presenting a formidable obstacle to publication.<sup>4</sup>

In 1956 an Egyptian scholar, Pahor Labib, himself a Copt, published a volume of photographs of the newly found texts, including complete photos of the Gospels of Philip and Thomas, the Apocryphon of John, a work called *The Hypostasis of the Aeons* (on the nature of authority), and a work on the creation.<sup>5</sup> Then nothing happened for several years, but recently the Germans have made a number of very valuable documents available.<sup>6</sup> A collection of 100 pages was secretly bought by a rich Belgian and taken to Zurich in 1952; it was named the Jung Codex after the famous psychologist C.J. Jung and contained the Gospel of Truth, the Apocryphon of James, a second-century Apocryphon of John, a treatise on the Three Natures ("a mythical and theological exposition of vast dimensions and great detail"), and a work on the resurrection called the Letter to Rheginos.<sup>7</sup> So far, the Gospels of Thomas and Philip and the Gospel of Truth have been made available in English. To a Latter-day Saint some of the other writings should prove far more interesting.<sup>8</sup>

Along with these Coptic finds should be mentioned some very old and valuable Christian texts in Greek, the Bodmer Papyri. These third-century papyri are the oldest copies extant (the original dates from 175–200 A.D.) and the only exemplars in the original language of an apocryphal correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians, of which later texts in other languages have been known. They were found in Egypt and first published in 1958 and 1959.<sup>9</sup> Together with them was discovered the first *Greek* text of the famous Odes of Solomon, which deserves our attention as a notable link between our *Coptic* Nag Hammadi text and the *Hebrew* Dead Sea Scrolls. The Odes and Psalms of Solomon were first discovered in 1906 on the site of an ancient Christian community on the Tigris. They were written in Syriac, and now in Bodmer Papyrus No. XI we have the eleventh of these Odes in Greek on paper at least three centuries older than our Syriac texts. The Psalms of Solo-



Nag Hammadi books

mon, written between 80 and 40 B.C., are, of course, Jewish, while the usual debate has taken place over the Odes (100–150 A.D.), which Harris believed were written by one who “while not a Jew, was a member of a community of Christians, who were for the most part of Jewish extraction” and probably lived originally at Pella as Judaeo-Christian refugees from the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> This, before the Dead Sea Scrolls were known, brought the Odes and Psalms right into their orbit, and the discussions of the Odes of Solomon of fifty years ago with their talk of the Roman invaders, Jewish sectaries, and flight into the desert read just like the Scrolls discussions of the past decade.

Some scholars long insisted that the Odes and the Psalms were a single composition, while others claimed the former Christian and the latter Jewish, and Harnack insisted that they were both Jewish, though with interpolations that were very close to the Johannine writings.<sup>11</sup> This is interesting, because one of the first things noted about the Dead Sea Scrolls was how close they were to John. Battifol saw a particularly close tie-in between the Odes and a Coptic work called the *Pistis Sophia*, the first part of which “tells how Jesus spent twelve years after the Resurrection teaching his disciples the mysteries of the Heavenly ‘places.’”<sup>12</sup> This in turn is equally close to the newly found Psalms of Thomas (a Syriac work not to be confused with the Gospel of Thomas), which contains a very old didactic hymn on the pre-existence known as The Pearl.<sup>13</sup> The discovery came with a distinct jolt, that one of the Psalms of Solomon, which had been completely brushed aside in preference for the Odes because of their small literary worth, contained what seemed to be a direct reference to the Qumran community that produced the Scrolls.<sup>14</sup> And so, far to the east, in an old Christian community on the Tigris, were discovered a collection of Syriac writings which actually belong in the same cover with the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Judaeian desert and the Nag Hammadi Library of Egypt.

## The Sayings of Jesus

The most sensational aspect of the newly found Coptic papyri is the presence in them of the many statements attributed to Jesus himself and not found in the Bible. Just as the detection of dimly recalled and vaguely familiar themes and phrases in the new Jewish and Christian texts sent students back to search through long-neglected apocryphal writings, so the present findings of many sayings of Jesus come as a reminder that many such sayings have been lying around for many years now, almost completely ignored.<sup>15</sup> Now we must recognize the distinct possibility that some if not many of these sayings may be genuine, and in that case of the greatest importance. These have long been known as the *Logia* (Sayings) or *Agrapha* (Unwritten Things) of Jesus. They are found (a) "in the New Testament itself," (b) in variant readings of the New Testament, (c) in many of the church writers down to St. Augustine, and (d) today in "the sands of Egypt."<sup>16</sup> As an example of the second type, M.R. James gives the following additions to Mark 16:3, found in some early texts: "At the third hour of the day . . . there came darkness throughout all the globe of the earth; and angels came down from the heavens."<sup>17</sup> Here is an interesting commentary on the great darkness of the Book of Mormon, as well as significant evidence (whether we accept it as scripture or not) that the early Christians were quite aware that the earth is round. It will be recalled that Origen's argument for the roundness of the earth was that the first Christians taught that God had covenant people on the other side of the world—the Antichthonians.<sup>18</sup>

The *Logia* or Sayings of Jesus as found in the early Fathers have suffered unmerited neglect through the years, the result of the thesis that our present Bible contains all there is to know. ("A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible," 2 Nephi 29:3.) It is unmerited because all the words of Jesus in the Bible can be

read *in half an hour*, though Jesus' actual sermons often lasted for many hours: What good Christian would be such a fool as to walk out on the Lord while he was speaking? It is also unwarranted because the purported words of Jesus are found in the church writers of the early period. If such men insist on quoting sayings which they actually believe were uttered by the Master, what greater folly can there be than refusing to give them serious attention? Yet it was not until another great papyrus find in Egypt at the turn of the century that serious attention was given to the Agrapha.

The collection was the Oxyrhynchus, found in 1885, 125 miles south of Cairo and eighteen miles west of the Nile, and includes among eighteen published volumes of papyri the Behnesa Papyrus known as the "Sayings of Our Lord."<sup>19</sup> Ten of these sayings have been treated with particular respect because they are also quoted by Clement.<sup>20</sup> And now from the sands of Nag Hammadi, still farther up the Nile, comes another library with more Sayings of Jesus, most but not all of them, being found in the Gospel of Thomas, among the 114 *Logia* of which are found one-fifth of the Oxyrhynchus sayings.<sup>21</sup> In 1896 Alfred Resch regarded thirty-six of the almost three hundred Sayings of Jesus which he had collected as genuine.<sup>22</sup> Today, viewing the recently enlarged collection, scholars are prone to accept at least ten of the Sayings as authentic, and another ten as very probably so.<sup>23</sup> On what grounds do they judge? On external grounds, answering the question, Is the saying quoted in an early and reliable source? and on internal grounds, asking, Is it "broadly consonant, in style and content, with the mind of Jesus as we know it from the canonical Gospels?"<sup>24</sup>

It is the second point, of course, which has been the franchise of theologians and scholars from the beginning since it amounts to asking simply, "Is this what *I* think Jesus would have said?" The question has become rather a hollow one, however, since the whole message of the

new discoveries is that there are many things that no scholar left to himself would have thought possible. We must be prepared for surprises and guard against the natural tendency to make every new text say what we think it should. If external evidence shows that a saying like Logion No. 2 in the Gospel of Thomas, attributed to Jesus in the ancient papyri from Oxyrhynchus and Nag Hammadi, also turns up in the writings of Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and the lost Gospel of the Hebrews, the scholar who will put it aside because it does not represent *his* idea of what Jesus would say is being very bold indeed.<sup>25</sup>

### The Gnostic Merry-go-round

The hitherto despised and outcast sectaries of the deserts now stand at the door and knock for admission into the company of the orthodox. At the same time the back-door by which fastidious scholars have in the past been able to avoid associating with such disreputable people is being effectively blocked as a way of escape. That door was the easy dodge of designating as *Gnostic* anything Jewish or Christian that one didn't happen to like.

Of the Jewish Apocrypha, Gaster writes: "Almost every sect which did not conform strictly to the tenets of the orthodox Church of the first centuries, which used mystical or allegorical terms and evolved an independent system of cosmology, eschatology and soteriology was indiscriminately described as Gnostic."<sup>26</sup> "Nothing is easier," writes R.M. Wilson, "than to draw up a schematic outline of belief, be it orthodox, Gnostic or Jewish-Christian, and apply it to the texts."<sup>27</sup> The trouble is that there is no agreement on what is meant by the term "Gnostic," as F.C. Baur noted over a hundred years ago.<sup>28</sup> Discussions of Gnosticism still remain futile "as long as 'gnosticism' is not a clearly defined concept, having certain definite sources. . . . Without a critical historical method it is impossible to advance further."<sup>29</sup>

We are now told that "to the Jew . . . Christianity must



have appeared as an eccentrically Gentile *gnosis*, to the Gentile it must have seemed an eccentrically Jewish one."<sup>30</sup> Whatever we find eccentric, we simply call Gnostic. This is a modern practice, however: "This term describes not an ancient but a modern historical category and its fluctuating use has often confused issues."<sup>31</sup> It was not in fact until the eighteenth century that "Gnostic" became a term of censure.<sup>32</sup> The present discussions of Gnosticism are simply a "sham battle," Schoeps notes, "since everyone obviously understands something different by 'Gnosis.'"<sup>33</sup>

To the Patristic writers and to the church historians of a century ago, the Gnosis was simply the invasion of Christian theology by Greek philosophy.<sup>34</sup> However, long ago Mosheim noted the strongly Oriental flavor of the Gnostic teachings, and accordingly it was viewed by many as an Oriental intrusion.<sup>35</sup> But since both Greek and Oriental elements were apparent, and since both had notably fused in the Hellenistic world, a general consensus soon considered Gnosticism as a syncretism or synthesis of the two elements, usually thought to have taken place in Egypt.<sup>36</sup> Today the theory is being put forth that the Gnosis came from the bosom of heterodox Judaism, where it arose independently though, of course, subject to some influence of Hellenistic and Oriental religious thought. Some even see in the Dead Sea Scrolls the first Gnostic writings!<sup>37</sup> So here we go again with our usual overlapping and confusion: "Gnosticism," writes Van Unnik, is "a many-headed hydra; . . . the sheer number of speculations and the bizarre patterns which they usually assume are enough to make anyone feel dizzy!"<sup>38</sup> There was much talk recently of a pre-Christian Gnosis which "goes back to heterodox Jewish conceptions . . . and to the pre-Asiatic syncretism in general. In its origins Gnosis [this theory held] is Jewish-Near Eastern occultism, Oriental mysticism."<sup>39</sup> That covers a lot of ground, but it is only the beginning. For Cullmann the Clementine writings to which we have so often referred "attach themselves" to a "par-

ticular current of *gnostic* Judaism," best illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls, "a sort of Jewish gnosticism which one can consider as the cradle of Christianity."<sup>40</sup>

So here we have early Christianity and the Jewish sectaries all mixed up in a common Gnostic milieu. For H.J. Schoeps this is sheer nonsense: "Gnosis was never anything but pagan Gnosis," he insists, the pseudo-Clementine writings being actually a vigorous assault *against* Gnosticism.<sup>41</sup> Some find the Odes of Solomon a Gnostic work closely related to the Pistis Sophia and to an "unofficial Judaism" which Batiffol designates as Gnostic, though noting that the Christology of the Odes is "entirely independent of any Gnostic speculation";<sup>42</sup> others say they are Gnostic in a peculiarly Christian sense,<sup>43</sup> and Klijn now concludes that they are "a genuine Christian work."<sup>44</sup> If they are Gnostic, R. Harris decided, "we can only say, 'Would God all the Lord's people were Gnostics.'"<sup>45</sup>

From the moment they became known, the Nag Hammadi texts were advertised as Gnostic writings, but right away the usual questions arose. Puech and Quispel, for example, after careful study conclude that the new Apocryphon of James "is perhaps Gnostic and probably Valentinian,"<sup>46</sup> while Van Unnik declares that it originated "from a small village-church not yet affected by gnosticism, between 125–150."<sup>47</sup> Most scholars believe the Epistle of the Apostles is orthodox, but G. Bardy believes it is Gnostic.<sup>48</sup> The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas "exhibits much that deviates from Gnosticism, much that comes closer to the doctrines of the great Church";<sup>49</sup> how shall we classify it?

If we attempt to classify a document by its teachings we run into a hopeless situation, for half the gnostic teachings—the pre-existent plan, this world as a place of probation, eternal progression, the spiritual creation, the withholding of certain teachings from the world, the divine parentage of man, the pre-existent glory of Adam, etc.—were held by the Primitive Church,<sup>50</sup> and the other

half—the unknowable and ineffable nature of God, the free use of allegory in interpreting scripture, the appeal of philosophy as a theological foundation, the antithesis of matter (which is evil) and spirit (which is good), the search for God in the mystic way, etc.<sup>51</sup>—were adopted by the later church, so that there are no strictly peculiar Gnostic doctrines to set Gnosticism apart from orthodox Christian views. For some, the very essence of Gnosticism was belief in direct revelation; for others, it was denial of direct revelation.<sup>52</sup>

How can one talk about a Gnostic religion? Irenaeus says that no two or three Gnostics believed the same.<sup>53</sup> “Gnosis,” Bultmann concluded, is the expression of various mythological and philosophical traditions and therefore may be characterized as a “syncretistic phenomenon.”<sup>54</sup> With their doctrines and practices coming from a dozen different sources, was there anything that all the Gnostics had in common? Some scholars have insisted that Gnosticism was actually a single religion, “a world-religion *sui generis*, which not only influenced Neoplatonism and Christianity, but actually competed with them for supremacy.”<sup>55</sup> It was, we are told, “a vast independent movement, an authentic mystery-religion whose roots reach back into the religious soil of the Hellenized Orient, its main doctrinal sources being the Greek Pseudo-Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus.”<sup>56</sup> But others ask, Who were the founders and leaders, the saints of this Pre-Christian Gnostic church? Who were its members aside from Christian and Jewish eccentrics? Where were its headquarters? Why do no contemporary writers seem aware of it? Why do we have “no clear documentary evidence for anything resembling a Gnostic *system* prior to the Christian era?”<sup>57</sup>

The oldest use of the word “Gnosis” would seem to be by the Mandaeans, for *Manda* means Gnosis. These people were also called Dositheans, a Samaritan word that goes back possibly to the exile of 721 B.C.<sup>58</sup> Theirs is hailed as

the purest and oldest system of Gnosticism, yet the Dositheans were the first and strongest *anti-Gnostics*, according to some, and they took their rise "on the soil of Palestine" and were intimately connected with the movement whose outstanding protagonist was John the Baptist.<sup>59</sup> We have noted elsewhere that these people are also thought to have been the descendants of that Jonadab ben Rechab who fled from Jerusalem in the days of Lehi, and for the same reason Lehi did – to escape the machinations of the wicked "Jews at Jerusalem" and to live the law in its purity in the desert.<sup>60</sup>

Amidst all this confusion the reader may begin to suspect that we have run into something akin to the peculiar fusion of Christian and Jewish elements in the Book of Mormon.

### The Real Gnosis

Every scholar has his own solution of the Gnostic equations, but not one of them has succeeded in the eyes of his fellows in balancing his equation. One factor in particular is consistently ignored, and that is the clear and repeated pronouncement of all the earliest church writers on the subject, that *there was a true Gnosis*. The word "Gnosis" occurs twenty-seven times in the New Testament and always refers to knowledge that comes by revelation.<sup>61</sup> The oldest Christian definition of the Gnosis (and one consistently ignored by students of Gnosticism) is that it was that knowledge the Lord imparted secretly to Peter, James, and John after the Resurrection, and which they in turn transmitted to the others of the Twelve and to the Seventy.<sup>62</sup> There is no record of its having gone any farther. Irenaeus, who calls this "the true Gnosis," insists that it was handed down by the apostles to the bishops and hence to the churchmen of his own day.<sup>63</sup>

But earlier and better informed writers tell another story: "When the holy chorus of the apostles had ended their lives in various ways, and that generation passed away of those

who had heard the divine wisdom with their own ears, at that moment the conspiracy of godless error took its rise through the deception of false teachers, who, as soon as the last apostle had departed, first came out openly and henceforward undertook to match the teaching of the truth with what they *falsely* styled *Gnosis*.”<sup>64</sup> Overnight the church swarmed with the pretenders who claimed to have the knowledge that the Lord had given the apostles in private; they sprang up like mushrooms, and before long most of the people were following them.<sup>65</sup> The early writers are always careful to specify that they were the “false Gnostics,” “Gnostics-so-called,” “self-styled Gnostics,” and thereby preserve a careful distinction between the false and the true *Gnosis*.<sup>66</sup> Each of the swarming impostors did everything he could to make the world believe that his and his alone was the true, ancient, and sole surviving heir of the original church and that he alone possessed the secret knowledge imparted to the apostles after the resurrection; and the smashing success that greeted many of them is a plain indication of how hungry the Christian world was for that very knowledge.

Some today suggest that Gnosticism was really a state of mind and accept W. Köhler’s definition of it as “an impersonal religious mass movement.”<sup>67</sup> It was a general groping for something everybody felt the church *should* have but obviously no longer did have; Gnosticism was before all else a vacuum phenomenon. The *Gnosis* rushed in to fill an empty space which did not exist as long as the apostles were still alive; it recognized a lack of conceptualization and knowledge in Christianity, a real mental want.<sup>68</sup> The Christian Gnostics felt that the acceptance of the central Christian doctrines like the redemption wrought in Christ “supplied that which was lacking to complete the great synthesis to which religious thought was tending.”<sup>69</sup> Hadn’t Christ and the apostles supplied that? Exactly, *after* the resurrection, and that was the knowledge that people were missing—

the Gnosis, "something extra which remained a secret from the uninitiated."<sup>70</sup>

The trouble with the Gnostics-so-called is not that they claimed to possess the wonderful post-resurrection revelations but that they did *not* possess them – they were only faking or wishfully thinking; they didn't have the Gnosis at all, and when the time came to deliver the goods, as it soon did, since they all challenged each other's exclusive claims, they were caught empty-handed – they *had* to come up with something: hence the feverish and irresponsible borrowing of any odds and ends of Oriental lore they could lay their hands on; hence the solemn and impressive appeal to philosophy – especially the recondite and mysterious gospel of Neo-Platonism – hence the willingness to make full use of genuine or spurious holy writings or even to forge new ones outright. What has made the study of Gnosticism so infinitely complex and hopelessly confusing is the willingness of the Gnostics in their need to throw anything into the hopper.

It was easy to demonstrate the folly of the Gnostic claims, but what had anybody else to put in their place? Nothing. Gnosticism was "defeated only at the price of substantial concessions still plainly visible in the structure of Christian theology."<sup>71</sup> "The main church had no choice," wrote C. Schmidt, "but to follow along the same path."<sup>72</sup> "In Catholicism," says Harnack, in effect, "Gnosticism won half a victory."<sup>73</sup> In fact Harnack believed that the Gnostics were simply "the Christian theologians of the first centuries of the church," the only real difference between them and the later doctors being that they thrust on the church abruptly a theology which the latter accepted only gradually.<sup>74</sup> In the early period, "It is dangerous," we are warned, "to treat the Gnostics, the Apologists and others as distinct and separate groups," and since "the Gnostics remained fairly close to the 'orthodox' Church down to about 180 . . . it is

indeed an open question how far we can really make use of such terms as 'orthodox' and 'heretical' at this stage."<sup>75</sup>

Quispel has shown how the great Neo-Platonic, Gnostic, and "Orthodox" teachers were all "educated in the same intellectual milieu, were all born in Egypt, all attended the same university at Alexandria where all became imbued with the same eclectic Platonism," and he asks us, "What could the term 'heretic' have meant at so early a time?"<sup>76</sup> We must bear in mind that hitherto, the history of Christian Gnosticism has been written by its enemies, and in view of the new findings it would now appear that Valentinianism (the most representative form of Gnosticism) was more "Christian" than most of its adversaries would like us to think.<sup>77</sup> A common charge against the Gnostics is that they claimed to know the answers to the great questions of life, but what religion does not? After all, these are the questions "which perpetually excite mankind."<sup>78</sup> There is not a Gnostic teaching that some Gnostic did not reject or some orthodox Christian did not accept.

But what do we mean by "orthodox" Christians? If we knew that, we would have no trouble identifying heretics and Gnostics simply as those who disagreed with the "Main Church." But "Main Church" is strictly a modern term, invented to describe something for which the ancients had no word and of which accordingly they had no concept. The distinction was made only after the business had been settled – not by a formal council or decree, but imperceptibly in a long series of compromises. Until then the Christian church during the great crisis was like the Jewish church, a swarm of sects, each claiming to be the one original but none able to prove its case.<sup>79</sup> But when a winner emerged – that party which got the sympathy and armed might of the emperor on its side – the winning party got to work and completely obliterated almost every trace of its former rivals: "The beaten ones were not only covered with green sod," as Schoeps puts it, "but with a great silence

as well," so that their rediscovery in our time has come as the greatest surprise.<sup>80</sup>

But why are well-known orthodox Christian works, including the writings of John and Paul, the Odes of Solomon, and the Clementine Recognitions, so full of Gnostic expressions? Not because they are Gnostic, as has been commonly assumed, Schoeps points out, but precisely because they are fighting the Gnostics, to do which most effectively they must employ the familiar jargon of the Gnostics themselves.<sup>81</sup> And just as the anti-Gnostic writers are thus an authentic guide to Gnosticism, so the teachings and practices of the false Gnostics are a reliable guide to the nature of the *true* Gnosis which they were counterfeiting. If Simon Magus (the arch-Gnostic) promised a baptism to eternal life,<sup>82</sup> it does not follow that there was no genuine ancient Christian baptism or that the Gnostics invented the idea of baptism which is thus a later interpolation in the source; if the Marcosians faked a sacrament with chemicals that made water seem to turn to blood, it does not follow that there was no early Christian sacrament but only a borrowing from the Gnostics; if the Valentinians had a parody of prophetic inspiration stimulated by the taking of drugs and potions or if they staged their own quaint version of celestial marriage, it does not follow that prophecy and marriage ordinances did not exist in the early church.<sup>83</sup> The peculiarly pernicious thing about the pretenders, as Irenaeus pointed out, was that they mixed everything up, "making convincing noises, . . . taking liberties with the logia of the Lord, having become bad interpreters of the good and correct word, . . . persuading many that they have the Gnosis. . . . They argue very convincingly, . . . making truth and falsehood indistinguishable, . . . making whatever they say seem truer than truth itself."<sup>84</sup> It is no wonder that men have remained hopelessly confused about the Gnostic ever since — confusion was their business.

To return to our newly found texts, Christian and Jew-



ish, one of the odd things about them was that while they were often labeled Gnostic because of the Gnostic ideas and expressions in them, their teachings were overwhelmingly *anti*-Gnostic—indeed, the most important of them were manifestly written as anti-Gnostic tracts.<sup>85</sup> We have seen the way in which that fact actually explains the presence in them of many Gnostic expressions. The Dositheans, often called the first Gnostics, taught extreme millennialism, resurrection of the flesh, baptism, and scriptural literalism—all teachings detested by the real Gnostics! We are told that the Gnostics “threw the whole eschatological complex of ideas overboard,”<sup>86</sup> yet all the writings we have been talking about were thoroughly eschatological; how can one call them Gnostic? The Odes of Solomon are “as Gnostic as the New Testament, no more and no less,” writes Harris.<sup>87</sup> Again, “the Gnostic heretics . . . used the Gospel of Thomas,” but that does not mean that they wrote it, R.E. Taylor observes.<sup>88</sup> If Paul and John seem to talk like later Gnostics it is not because they adopted Gnostic ideas but the other way around; their words were twisted to Gnostic ends because “some ideas . . . in second-century Gnosticism are . . . the product of a defective exegesis of the New Testament.”<sup>89</sup> The Apocryphon of James can easily be given a Gnostic interpretation, Van Unnik reminds us, but then so can the Bible.<sup>90</sup>

It is H.J. Schoeps’ final explanation of the Gnostic anomalies that brings this reader back to the Book of Mormon almost with a jolt. When the false Gnostics started making their claims, the only people who stood up to them, according to Schoeps, were the Ebionites, “the descendants of the original Church of Jesus,” whose counterblast is still preserved in the pages of the Clementine Recognitions.<sup>91</sup> This work is full of Gnostic jargon, but it is employed strictly to discredit the Gnostic so-called. Actually, all the main points of Ebionite theology correspond to the teachings of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>92</sup> Why should Christians appeal to

such a source? They didn't; it just happened that those teachings were the same as theirs, though of course that was no accident. Now, the doctrines embraced loosely under the general title of Essene go right back, according to Schoeps, to the Rechabites, of the time of Lehi. "Again and again new groups had gone out into the desert to realize the chassidut" – the true way of life of the covenant people, their ideas meeting us in the Enoch literature, Jubilees, and the Twelve Patriarchs.<sup>93</sup> It was by the "immigration of dissenting Jewish groups" from time to time that the societies which went back to the days of the nomadic Rechabites "were constantly renewed and regenerated."<sup>94</sup> Lehi's party was just such a group of dissenters, about the time of Jonadab ben Rechab, seeking a permanent settlement away from Jerusalem – at that time they never dreamed of sailing the seas (1 Nephi 17).

### **One Big Book**

We have often noted in the foregoing survey how very frequently the documents of one time and place will overlap in their ideas and expressions with those of other times and places. Herein we have an excellent means of testing the Book of Mormon. The sectaries of the desert were exceedingly conservative in their ways and tenacious in preserving the customs and teachings of their fathers. Lehi's was not the earliest offshoot, and since older communities than his have handed down writings through the long centuries which still reveal obvious affinities with the scriptures of later communities, we have every right to expect the Book of Mormon to have a lot in common with the whole body of writings.

The newly found libraries seem to reach out and establish connections in every direction, from the Nile to the Tigris, and from the days of Adam to the Middle Ages. "The Qumran covenanters," writes Bruce, "bound themselves by a new covenant, but it was not so new as they

President N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency examines ancient jar from the Qumran Caves. The jar was obtained by the Church through the Palestine Archeological Museum.



thought; it was a . . . reaffirmation of the old covenant of Moses' day."<sup>95</sup> But no one knew that better than the covenanters themselves, the opening lines of whose Manual of Discipline declare the object of the society to be the carrying out of all "that has been commanded by the hand of Moses and by the hand of all His servants the prophets." They were quite aware of the need to preserve intact the ways that went clear back to Moses. The Nag Hammadi books are just as insistent in tracing all their teachings and ordinances back to the ancients, even back to Adam himself.

"There is something unusual and coincidental," wrote the skeptical C.F. Potter, "almost what once was called 'providential,' in the fact that the 'Dead Sea Scrolls' . . . and the Gnostic codices . . . were both discovered in the same year."<sup>96</sup> Both raised the curtain on a background of the church that no living man dreamed of. It is a background of great breadth and depth, going back many centuries in time and covering vast areas of the Old World.

We have noted, for example, that the work called the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles, which was discovered in 1912 and which Origen claimed to be older than the Gospel of Luke, belongs to a group of writings reporting the Lord's teachings after the resurrection. And if we turn to the newly found Nag Hammadi texts, we find that the first one ever published (The Gospel of Thomas) begins with the words: "These are the secret words which the Living Jesus [i.e., the risen Savior] spoke and Didymos-Thomas wrote."<sup>97</sup> Next we learn that the New Testament quotations in this work (which was written down about A.D. 140) are "very similar . . . to a collection used by the writer of I Clement."<sup>98</sup> But we have also noted that the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles is also very close to Clement, and H.J. Schoeps has shown that no writings are closer to the Dead Sea Scrolls than the Pseudo-Clementines!<sup>99</sup> On top of that, Oscar Cullmann finds that this "jumbled mixture of old traditions" in the Gospel of Thomas indicates an origin in "the vicinity of Eastern Jordan where the Christian Jews settled after the fall of Jerusalem, in the year 70 A.D.,"<sup>100</sup> which takes us from the distant reaches of the Nile right into the desert communities of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where our two libraries, Jewish and Christian, seem to have a common origin.

When the scrolls were first examined, Brownlee classed as having "striking affinities" with each other the religions of Qumran, the "Covenanters of Damascus, the Essenes, the Therapeutae of Egypt, and the John-the-Baptist Movement," noting significantly, "to this list I would have added primitive Christianity."<sup>101</sup> Long ago R.H. Charles had suggested that when "a great company of the priests [became] obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7) it was actually one of these sectarian groups joining the church, and Brownlee specifically suggests the Qumran brethren.<sup>102</sup> The common motifs in sectarian Jewish and early Christian writings show "that the Essene sectaries were a fruitful field of evangelization

[Christian missionary work],” according to professor Cross, “and that they in turn had influence on the formation of institutions of the apostolic and sub-apostolic church.”<sup>103</sup>

Since the new researches have been made among the sectaries, Essenism is commonly used in a free and general sense as a sort of “over-all name or borderline concept for heterodox Judaism.”<sup>104</sup> In the fourth century, Epiphanius classed the desert sects of the Dead Sea and Jordan together as having common beliefs and practices but possibly for that very reason feuding fiercely among themselves. “The Sampsaeans or Elkesaites,” he writes, “still survive in Arabia, living around and beyond the Dead Sea. The followers of a false prophet, . . . they resemble the Ebionites very closely in everything,” the latter being almost exactly like the Corinthians and the Nazoraeans, who claim to be true Israel, and also like the Gorgethoi, who are called Essenes, and who are practically the same as the Dositheans, and so on.<sup>105</sup> Orthodox, Jewish-Christian, Gnostic—“were these three streams so clearly distinct in the earlier stages of church history?” asks R.M. Wilson. “Or should we not rather expect to find a certain interpenetration of thought, a gradual hardening of the lines of cleavage?”<sup>106</sup>

Whenever an important document of the past is discovered, students immediately begin comparing it with every other document that might conceivably have any connection with it. This is not necessarily wishful thinking or “parallelomania”; it is the only way in which an unknown work can be assigned a likely place among the records of the race. “From the most diverse scientific areas,” writes Dupont-Sommer of the Dead Sea Scrolls, “studies are beginning to accumulate and converge ever closer towards the solution of the comparative problem.”<sup>107</sup> Recently this writer called attention to a large number of resemblances between the community of Qumran and an ancient religious society described by certain commentators in the Koran. Whether the parallels are significant or not remains to be

seen, but the writer was entirely within his rights in calling attention to them.<sup>108</sup> It is also entirely in order for him to point out resemblances between the Book of Mormon and other religious writings. The most arresting and disturbing thing about the Dead Sea writings is the way they have of reminding the reader of everything else he has ever read in Jewish *and* Christian sources. Here we find the oldest and purest Old Testament readings known, written by the hands of Jews living long before the time of Christ,<sup>109</sup> and along with them written by the same hands, many ideas and phrases which have heretofore been thought peculiar to the New Testament, including characteristic expressions of John and Paul! The same pages swarm also with things that we have long associated with the Jewish and Christian apocryphal writings, as well as teachings attributed to various ancient sectarian groups, from the pre-Christian Therapeutae of Egypt to the ninth-century Karaites of Mesopotamia. And as if to atone for going so far astray, the same documents present sayings that are later to turn up in the writings of the most venerated and orthodox Fathers of the Christian Church and rabbis of the Jews! At the same time, these people seem to be particularly close to the Hassidic Jews, who, unlike the rabbis, believed in continuing revelation and displayed affinities with the medieval Catharian sects and other early forerunners of the Protestant movement, to say nothing of the Moslems.<sup>110</sup>

Though the overwhelming consensus of the experts is that these people were pre-Christian Jews, their teachings are so very Christian that as eminent an authority as Professor Teicher of Cambridge still maintains that they can only have been a Christian sect! It will hardly be necessary to point out to the reader that this surprising mixture of a strange kind of Judaism with a strange kind of Christianity ("the Church of Anticipation," Cross called it) is one of the things that has in the past so amused and offended the critics of the Book of Mormon.

The newly found *Logia* are particularly close to those pseudo-Clementine writings that represent the earliest postbiblical teachings of the Christian Church, and at the same time they present the closest affinity to the milieu of the Dead Sea Scrolls—that is to say, all these documents teach the same things in the same words.<sup>111</sup> The Sayings from various sources exhibit considerable variety and ample evidence of alteration and adaptation; some are abbreviated and some are expanded versions of the Lord's words in the New Testament; some combine elements and episodes that are separate and disconnected in the Bible (compare 3 Nephi!); others mix New Testament material with extra canonical material; while some are completely different from anything in the gospels.<sup>112</sup> The *Logia* as a whole do not follow any consistent doctrinal pattern, but seem just thrown together, as if jotted down at different times and places as the Lord spoke them.<sup>113</sup> In fact, H. Köster insists that the important thing is not that a Logion may really have been uttered by Jesus, but that it was accepted as authentic by the early Saints and so leads us into the midst of the first church, showing us what they believed and practiced.<sup>114</sup>

It was the heretic hunters of later ages who destroyed the early image by suppressing every Saying which did not agree with their concept of orthodoxy.<sup>115</sup> Here we see the literal fulfilment of Nephi's prophecy that many precious things that proceeded out of the mouth of the Jew would be taken away from the Book of the Lamb. Nephi's peculiar and repeated expression, "proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew" (1 Nephi 13:24), is a clear reference to *Logia*, "utterances of the mouth," and his statement that the apostles "bear record" of these things in writing points to the thesis now propounded "in the light of the recently discovered document" that there were "collections of the sayings of Jesus before our canonical gospels were written" and that the Gospels were originally based on such collections.<sup>116</sup>

Aside from documents coming forth from old Christian and Jewish centers, we may not ignore those of more exotic origin, for the ancient Saints were driven and persecuted, and one can never tell where their footprints or writings may turn up; for example, in 1900 a Saying of Jesus ("Jesus said: Life is a bridge—do not linger on it, but hurry over it") was found inscribed in Arabic over two different gates of a palace mosque of a long-ruined Mogul city in northern India. Subsequent documentary discoveries indicate that this may well be an authentic saying of the Lord, in spite of its surprising provenance.<sup>117</sup>

And what shall we make of the Mandaean writings, with their ancient doctrines and ordinances that are at once Jewish and Christian?<sup>118</sup> Though discovered far to the east, they are viewed today as representing "perhaps a late version of the North Israelite-Samaritan tradition," a tradition older than the days of Lehi; and part of that tradition, "entirely independent of Christian influence," was the keeping of "Sunday as a holy day."<sup>119</sup>