

**Elaine Pagels, *Scripturile gnostice de la Nag Hammadi*,
Trad. by Walter Fotescu, Editura Herald, București,
2013, 238 p.**

Elaine Pagels is one of the American specialists in gnosticism, being part of the group of scholars who have considered the Gnostic writings discovered in the library of Nag Hammadi. It can be seen from the title that he gives to the book, that for E. Pagels, the writings of Nag Hammadi are scripts, sacred writings, this status being given to them from the start. If, in the past, they were simply called Gnostic literature or Gnostic writings, in the present they were elevated to the status of Scripture, in a kind of counterpart to the Holy Scripture of the New Testament. We are, therefore, witnessing a change of perspective, significant for the present mentality.

The paper contains six chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by conclusions. The introduction presents a history of the discoveries from Nag Hammadi (December 1945), the epic that followed the discovery with the groups of scholars, a real cartel that has hindered the publication and the spread of Gnostic writings discovered in the years to come. Several groups of scholars have been formed who have deciphered Gnostic texts, excluding each other from this effort.

The author presents the doctrinal struggle between the Christian apologists of the Church and the Gnostic authors of the second and fourth centuries, using numerous examples of Gnostic texts, a conflict that has destroyed any traces of heretical blasphemy (p. 23) and the writings of Nag Hammadi.

Chapter I captures the controversy over the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, considered by the Orthodox as a primary Christianity historical event, and by the Gnostic Christians a symbol. The Gnostic Christians rejected the canonical Gospel testimony, calling “the literary conception of the resurrection” the fool’s faith. “The resurrection, they insisted, was not a unique event in the past: instead, it symbolizes the way Christ’s presence can be experienced in the present. Important was not the literary view, but

the spiritual vision” (p. 50). Gnostics always emphasized personal spiritual experience, not the adherence to a doctrine imposed by the Church’s hierarchy, as they thought.

Chapter II entitled “A God, a Bishop”: The policy of monotheism refers to the conception of God in the Gnostic vision that somehow imitates the vision of the heretic Marcion of the second century. He spoke about the contrast between the Old Testament God, who “demands justice and punishes any violation of his law, and the Father proclaimed by Jesus - the God of forgiveness and love in the New Testament” (p. 69). Therefore, when Orthodox Christians were confronted with the Gnostics, they often treated them as Marcionestest and Dualists, Saint Irenaeus of Lyon reproaching them the affirmation of the existence of a God other than the Creator. Elaine Pagels illustrates the Gnostic teaching of God by using several texts discovered at Nag Hammadi (pp. 70-71). Starting from the concept of divinity, the church organization of Gnostic and Orthodox Christians also developed. According to Clement, the bishop leads the community “as God leads in heaven”, as master, king, judge and lord (p. 80).

In the Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition, only a Father of God is mentioned, male epithets being the only ones to designate divinity (king, lord, master, judge and father), while the Gnostic writings also reveal the teaching of a Mother God. Elaine Pagels shows that “the Gnostic sources are constantly using sexual symbolism to describe God. We would have expected these texts to present the influence of the archaic pagan traditions of the Mother Goddess, but most of them use a specific Christian language, undoubtedly linked to the Jewish heritage. However, instead of describing a monist and masculine God, many of these texts speak of God as a diad comprising both masculine and feminine elements” (p. 93). There is a group of Gnostic writings that includes writings from Jesus time on James and Mary Magdalene, and the members of this group prayed to both the Father and the Divine Mother. For example, the Gnostic Valentine and his apprentice Mark addressed the Mother of All, also called Grace, and other gnostic texts suggested that the Holy Trinity of the Christian Trinity constituted the maternal element of the Trinity (p. 98). Gnostic sources “describing God as a diad whose nature also includes masculine and feminine elements often provide a similar description of human nature,” but these secret texts were omitted from the canonical collection and considered heretical by the Orthodox party (p. 102).

Another chapter is dedicated to the Passion of Jesus Christ and the persecution of the Christians. The canonical gospels tell the circumstances of death on the Cross of the Savior to prove His innocence (p. 118). Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi, such as *Peter's Revelation*, *Second Seth's treatise*, *The Acts of John* present a radically different version of the crucifixion. The crucified person was another one, not the historic Christ, who was rejoicing from the height of heaven (p. 120), the dochetist vision being present in the Gnostic texts. "According to the *Treaty of Resurrection*, discovered in Nag Hammadi, to the extent that Jesus was the" Son of Man, "being human, he suffered and died just like the rest of mankind. But because he was also the "Son of God," the divine spirit in him could not die: in this sense he overcame suffering and death" (p. 122). The author points out that there is an intimate connection between the suffering of the Christ the Savior and the sufferings of the Christians of the first centuries, the Passion of the Lord representing a response to the way in which they must manifest themselves in the face of persecution, which was an exhortation to martyrdom.

The fifth chapter, entitled: Whose church is "The True Church?" Refers to the polemic between the Orthodox and the Gnostic Christians on the true church. In the Second treatise of the great Seth, the Gnostics complain that they were persecuted "not only by the ignorant (pagan), but also by those who believed that they are thriving the name of Christ because they are naked inside without realizing..." (p. 153), the text referring to the Orthodox Christians of the first centuries. They are considered arrogant, oppressing and defaming those who touch the gnosis, but they do not really know who Christ is and obey the judgment of their rulers: bishops and deacons (p. 154). The Orthodox and the Gnostics offered different answers in trying to define the Church, each excluding the other. The Gnostic Christians referred to qualitative, not quantitative criteria. By protesting against the majority, they insisted that baptism does not make a Christian, nor the profession of faith or martyrdom count as evidence. Moreover, they refused to identify the Church with the present community, but demanded evidence of spiritual maturity to demonstrate that a person belongs to the Church. For them, membership in the Church was verified by the quality of the mutual relations, by the enlightenment they had access to, by participating in the "wisdom of the brotherhood that truly existed" (p. 157). At the same time, the Orthodox Christians had objective criteria for belonging to the

Church, such as the confession of the Creed, Baptism, participation in worship and submission to ecclesiastical clergy, the organizational system created proving to be an amazing effectiveness (pp. 155-156). The author's conclusion is that by suppressing Gnosticism "the Orthodox leaders have established that organizational system that unites all believers into a single institutional structure... The Gnostic Churches who have rejected this in favor of more subjective forms of religious affiliation have survived, as churches, only a few hundred years" (pp. 170-171).

The last chapter is entitled Gnosis: self-knowledge as a knowledge of God. The author explains why a book like *the Gospel according to John* could be part of the biblical canon, although it was also accepted by the Gnostics. "Once the Church was politically organized, it could admit within itself several contradictory ideas and practices as long as the elements disputed supported the institutional elements" (p. 173), a more rational explanation, calculated and not taking into consideration the divine presence, the assistance of the Holy Spirit in the composition of the biblical canon.

Elain Pagels's book is a very useful introduction to the study of the ancient Gnosticism, a prerequisite for the understanding of the contemporary phenomenon of neognosticism. The author may be suspected of a slight sympathy with the Gnostic phenomenon, even though, in most situations, there is the impression of impartiality that is so necessary for a scientific work.

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