

# REDEEMER

R E P O R T

MARCH 2004

## THE GNOSTICS AND JESUS

*Gospel of Thomas sounds far more misogynist than anything found in the Bible.*

For some months I have been getting questions about the “Gnostic gospels” and *The Da Vinci Code*, so it seems right to give readers of this newsletter a bit of guidance. This is by no means a definitive response or analysis—it is more like pastoral counsel—but I hope it will clear up a few things.

### The Gnostics’ Jesus

In 1945 a red earthenware jar was found buried near Nag Hammadi, a town in upper Egypt. Within thirteen papyrus books dating from A.D.350 were discovered. The writings were those of believers in the philosophy/

religion of gnosticism.

Gnosticism is heavily influenced by the Hellenistic understanding that the material world is evil and the spirit is good. Gnostics believed that the ultimate supreme God did not create the world, but rather a lesser god, a ‘demiurge,’ created the world poorly and imperfectly. The result was a material world filled with decay, weakness, and death. But gnostics believed that human beings, though locked in this material body, have a spark of the higher spiritual reality within. This spark, if fanned into a flame, can liberate us and help us evolve back into

spiritual perfection. This happens through a process of self-discovery, in which you discover your divine identity, you separate from the world by ‘stripping off’ the consciousness of the physical body, and you finally experience the kingdom of light, peace, and life.

The writings of gnosticism were much wider than the Nag Hammadi texts, but what makes the NH texts different is that, as Craig Blomberg writes, they use the purported conversations of Jesus with his disciples as “*little more than an artificial framework for imparting Gnostic doctrine.*” (The Historical Reliability of the

*(continued on page 2)*

## HFNY CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

*Connect with your Community*

Hope for New York welcomes six new affiliates to partner with us in 2004 in serving communities throughout New York City. They are Generation X-cel, Teen Artists Living for Christ, Here’s Life Inner City, Living Waters Fellowship, World Vision, and the Bronx Collaborative High School for Technology and Humanities. We believe these affiliates will enhance and strengthen our commitment and service to the city. Hope for New York’s

vision is to partner with various affiliates throughout the city in serving our community - body, mind and spirit. We do this in two ways - 1) connecting volunteers to opportunities at our affiliates, and 2) giving grants to support these volunteer opportunities.

Through our six new affiliates volunteers can mentor and tutor youth, serve food to the homeless, teach GED/ESL classes, instruct in the arts, pack and distribute homeless care kits and even have

the opportunity to speak at a NYC high school. And these new opportunities are conveniently located in four of the five boroughs - Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx. Our new affiliates work with a wide range of targeted groups including youth, homeless, adult and immigrant populations. Each new affiliate offers volunteers an opportunity to enter into people’s lives and engage in cultural renewal of the city.

**Generation X-cel** provides a

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### INSIDE:

- THE PASSION OF CHRIST— WHY DID HE HAVE TO DIE?
- TESTIMONY OF A CHANGED LIFE.

Gospels, p.208) The most well-known of these Gnostic-Jesus texts include “The Gospel of Thomas,” the “Apocryphon of James,” “The Gospel of Phillip” and “The Gospel of Truth.”

The teachings of the gnostics’ Jesus flatly contradicts the Jesus of the Bible. The Gnostic-Jesus says, “*When you come to know yourselves... you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty.*” (Thomas-3) This reflects the gnostic concept that self-consciousness of one’s own divinity (rather than a new awareness of sinfulness and need) is the first step to salvation. The Gnostic-Jesus also says, “*When you disrobe yourselves and are not ashamed, and take your garments and lay them beneath your feet like little children, and tread upon them, then [shall ye see] the Son of the living One, and ye shall not fear.*” (Thomas-37) This and the other ‘undressing’ saying (Thomas-21) urges us to ‘disrobe,’ to trample underfoot and despise the physical nature.

The most interesting statement of all is Thomas-71 where the Gnostic-Jesus says: “*I will destroy this house and no one will be able to rebuild it.*” This is a clear contradiction of Jesus’ saying in John 2 that though others would destroy his body, he would be resurrected. This reflects the gnostic disdain for the very idea of the resurrection. Since, in their view, the material world is an evil thing we must be freed from, the bodily resurrection is completely rejected.

According to the gnostics, Jesus was not raised bodily, and neither will we be.

### Lost Gospels?

Helmut Koester of Harvard has argued that the Nag Hammadi Gnostic-Jesus texts were written very early, almost as early as the Biblical gospels themselves. And Elaine Pagels, who did a doctorate under Koester at Harvard, has popularized this view in The Gnostic Gospels and the more recent Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas.

But this is very much a minority view across the field of scholarship. N.T. Wright says, “*It has long been the received wisdom among students of early Christianity that the Gospel of Thomas...found at Nag Hammadi...is a comparatively late stage in the development of Christianity.*” (New Testament and the People of God, p.436) The great majority of scholars believe the Gnostic-Jesus texts to have been written 100-200 years after the Biblical gospels, which all were written within the first 30-60 years after Jesus’ death. Why this consensus?

As N.T. Wright points out in The Resurrection of the Son of God, the early Christians were all Jews. Jews had a thoroughly different world-view than that of the Greeks or the gnostics. They believed firmly that this material world was made good (see Genesis!) and that despite sin God was going to renew it and resurrect our bodies (Daniel 12:1-2.) Jews had no hope (or

concept) of disembodied souls living apart from the body. What does this mean? We know from the Pauline letters, some written only 13 years after Jesus’ death, that all the early Christians claimed to have met Jesus and that he was still alive. But it would have been impossible for Jewish believers to claim “Jesus is alive” without also believing he was raised physically from the dead.

Helmut Koester and others posit that the first Christians believed, as the gnostics, that Jesus was only ‘spiritually risen’ and decades later the idea of a bodily resurrection developed. But N.T. Wright shows that Christianity could never have arisen as a movement among Jews unless the original believers knew Jesus had been raised bodily from the dead. This means in turn that the attempt to create a Gnostic-Jesus must have been much later. The writings could not have represented an early but repressed true version of Jesus-faith. Wright asks: “*Which Roman emperor would persecute anyone for reading the Gospel of Thomas [since it so closely reflected Greek thinking]?...It should be clear that the talk about a spiritual ‘resurrection’ in the sense used by [the gnostic writings] could not be anything other than a late, drastic modification of Christian language.*” (Resurrection, p.550.) There is far, far more that could be said in criticism of the thesis that the Gnostic-Jesus is older than the Biblical Jesus. But I’ll stop here.

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## REDEEMER REPORT

Kathy Keller  
Rebecca Lock  
Fred Liedtke

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HUNTER COLLEGE AUDITORIUM  
East 69TH (Between Park & Lexington)  
services at 10:30AM • 5:45PM

ETHICAL CULTURE  
West 64TH and CPW  
service at 9:15AM

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH  
Corner of West 79TH and Broadway  
service at 7:00PM

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## **The Da Vinci Code and Misogyny**

The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown has become a best seller and, though it purports to be nothing but fiction, it takes up the basic ideas of The gnostic gospels makes them the premise of the story. The story assumes that Jesus was not resurrected and did not claim to be God, but rather married Mary Magdalene. His true, original teachings are found in the gnostic writings. The Biblical gospels were written later and the original truth of Jesus' life and teaching was repressed by the church.

What can I say? It's only a novel —so how can you criticize it? It tries to make the case that the Gnostic-Jesus was the one who lived, not the real Jesus. But as we showed, the scholarly world sees very little evidence that this is the case. There are plenty of other incongruities and oddities about The Da Vinci Code, but I'll just mention one. The story lifts up the gnostic-gospels as the "truth" and depicts the church as a repressive regime that wants to hide the importance

of Mary Magdalene as one of the early disciples. This gives the impression that the gnostic gospels are more pro-women than the Bible or traditional theology.

But the last saying in the Gospel of Thomas is far more misogynist than anything found in the Bible. *Simon Peter said to them: Let Mary go forth from among us, for women are not worthy of the life. Jesus said: Behold, I shall lead her, that I may make her male, in order that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who makes herself male shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.* (Thomas-114) This saying reflects the low view of women in the Gnostic philosophy. It is ironic that the author of the Da Vinci Code thinks the Gnostic-Jesus was friendlier to women.

### **No changed lives**

Thirty years ago when we were in seminary my wife and I (like all graduate students of Bible and theology) studied the gnostic writings. A simple reading of the texts shows they reflect a vastly different world-view than that of the Bible. Even young seminary students could see it was an effort of a different religion to co-opt

Jesus—and the effort failed miserably. That is a historical fact. Few took the Gnostic-Jesus seriously. There was no explosive movement of changed lives that resulted from these writings as like that with resulted from the proclamation of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And there won't be any explosion of changed lives today.

In the end, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, as the old proverb says. The Gnostic-Gospels fail in their fundamental definition —they are not **gospels**, good news. Instead of being the declaration of what God has done to accomplish salvation FOR us, they are just the same old same old—a rehash of self-improvement techniques and (sometimes) good advice about ethical living. This is NOT the good news that transforms lives. It is merely, like all other religions besides the true Gospel, a do-it-yourself- salvation based on teachings which must be obeyed in order to reach enlightenment. Nothing could be farther from the true Gospel, the news that Jesus, by his life and death, has actually SAVED us and given us new life, free for the taking.

## OPEN FORUM

### **Concert and Lecture – 6:00 PM, Sunday, April 4, 2004**

Hunter College Auditorium, 69th and Park Avenue

#### **Mozart: Requiem, K.626**

Performed by the Orchestra of the Redeemer

Miriam Burns, music director and the Redeemer Choir and Soloists

#### **Lecture**

by Dr. Timothy Keller

Open-microphone Question and Answer Session following the performance

**Free admission**

# MY STORY: TESTIMONY OF A CHANGED LIFE

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BY OMAR REYES ( AS TOLD TO JENNIFER KIZER)

In the Brooklyn neighborhood where I grew up, my family lived on the safest block. Of course, that was only because the area's drug dealers resided there, too. They didn't want any shootings on their turf. But like many Dominican poor, my family—my mother, my younger brother and sister, and I—were grateful for our subsidized public housing, even if crime and drugs came with the territory. We were also grateful for our food stamps, which to me were just another form of currency. We ate and dressed and lived right on the poverty line.

My mother didn't practice a religion, but I became a Christian during high school, as a result of first an encounter with the Jehovah's Witnesses and later the friendship of some believers at my school.

A few years later, I finished high school, and I had to make some hard choices. Though I'd gotten good grades, it seemed pointless for a penniless teenager to apply for college. How would I pay for it? My guidance counselor never told me I might be eligible for financial aid. So I joined the military, where they promised me a job, three meals a day, and college tuition.

Looking back, I'm glad I did it. Of course, to join the armed forces is to be thrown into some tough circumstances. But I really learned about community, and that lesson stayed with me. The guys in my unit were a family. Everybody looked out for everybody else. Even if you didn't like a guy, if he was in your unit, you took care of him.

These aspects of my life—my experience with poverty, my

salvation as a Christian, and my hard-won lessons about community—have done the most to shape my views on social issues. When I returned to New York (where I took night courses at City College and a series of jobs to pay the rent), I was ready to put those ideas into action. I began attending Redeemer, where Tim's lectures blew my mind, and I longed to get more involved in the church.

Problem was, I didn't feel like I fit in. Back then, in the early 90's, Redeemer didn't feel like a place for minorities—at least not poor Hispanics like me. It's not that the people I met weren't gracious. But when I went out to lunch with a group after one Sunday service, I found myself in an Upper East Side restaurant I couldn't afford. It was humiliating. I remember telling everyone I wasn't hungry—then eating all the bread on the table!

Then I heard about a ministry called St. Paul's House where several Redeemer members were volunteering. Basically, they needed volunteers to pitch in at a shelter that helped homeless men get back on their feet. I knew I could relate to the men—black and Hispanic guys caught in a downward cycle of poverty. I was painfully aware that in the past I too could have been sucked into that cycle, like so many of the urban poor.

So I joined. It wasn't long before I made some like-minded friends among the other volunteers, and the ministry quickly became one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. There were usually about 10 or 12 guys at the shelter, and we'd go on retreats

and have weekly bible studies. We'd also give them the spiritual, emotional, and sometimes financial support they needed to rise above their situations. I saw real changes happen, right in front of me.

Years have passed since I got involved with St. Paul's House. I've since moved—I'm now in my final year of seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. I married a former military woman (and now a stay-at-home mom with our two-year-old son, Azriel). And I hope to eventually serve God as an army chaplain. I recently returned to New York to speak at a Christmas dinner at St. Paul's House, and I was really encouraged by the ongoing efforts of the ministry, now supported by Hope For New York.

But there is still so much to be done! A perception remains, even among Christians, that the homeless ought to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Many who hold this view might have even done this themselves. I agree to an extent, and I realize it's a complicated political issue. But I also know what it's like for these men. Imagine being at rock bottom, alone, depressed and lacking confidence. No one's going to hire you if your clothes are rumpled, or if you smell, or if you lack, say, basic computer skills.

In fact, the task they face is so difficult that some kind-hearted contributions here and there aren't going to do the job, in my opinion. Based on my experience, I think it takes more than a few handouts to get people back on their feet. For deep, effective change to occur, I believe that a church



ministry would have to essentially *adopt* the 10 residents of St. Paul's House, working with them continually throughout the year.

You might say that I'm a person who pulled himself up by

his own bootstraps. After all, I've put food stamps and public housing behind me, in part because of ambition and discipline and faith in God. But when I look at the men at St. Paul's House—and know that I

could have been one of them—I don't pat myself on the back. I just feel very, very lucky.

*Editor's Note:*

*Jennifer Kizer, a freelance writer, attends Redeemer and is a long-time Hope For New York volunteer.*

## HFNY CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

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holistic youth outreach program in the Lower East Side near Astor Place. Their goal is to empower youth to realize their dreams and pursue hopeful alternatives to mediocrity, poverty, and delinquency. This is achieved through after-school education, mentoring, summer arts programs and community outreach efforts. Daily activities include programs in the performing arts and academic tutoring. They also have a homeless meals ministry every Saturday evening where at least 75 hot meals are served to homeless men and women in the community.

**Teen Artists Living for Christ** is an art program in Bushwick, Brooklyn that is committed to serving youth in the name of Christ. Projects include but are not limited to painting, sketching, fashion designing, mosaic tiling, etc. They have recently begun a Saturday tutoring program in order to respond to the needs in the community. Volunteers need not be artists, but people who are willing to engage inner-city youth.

**Here's Life Inner City** is an urban ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ. Their mission is to serve and mobilize the church to live out God's heart for the poor and fulfill the Great Commission - to love your neighbor as yourself. They partner with churches and faith-based organi-

zations to serve the poor by providing a multitude of resources. One way that volunteers can serve is through their popular group packing parties. At their warehouse in Long Island City, Queens, volunteers pack boxes with food, personal care items and Christian literature which are distributed to local. Here's Life also provides job readiness programs and youth programs that are located all throughout the city.

**Living Waters Fellowship** is a non-denominational church in Bushwick, Brooklyn which has a well-established outreach program to the local community. Not only do they provide after school programs for youth, they also offer ESL classes for adults. They also host a street kids ministry every Friday evening where 30-40 kids come for bible study, prayer, and games. In addition, they serve a breakfast every first Saturday of the month for anyone in the community.

**World Vision** is an international Christian humanitarian organization with a focus on children and families in need. One component of their work in New York City is their Storehouse Ministry in the Bronx that houses their gifts-in-kind program and Kids In Need Resource Center. These programs provide necessary items such as clothing, school supplies,

and toiletries to children and families in need in the greater New York area. Volunteer groups are needed to help fill backpacks with school supplies which is then distributed to the poorest New York City schools.

And finally, **Bronx Collaborative High School for Technology and Humanities** is one of the unique 60+ schools that were formed to replace large, underperforming high schools throughout NYC [partly funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation]. Volunteers will have the opportunity to speak at the school and share about their vocation. Mentors are also needed to help foster personal, social and academic development.

With the addition of these ministries Hope for New York has increased our network to 36 affiliates! If you are interested in any of these new opportunities, please contact:

Elise Chong, Manager of Affiliate Development, at (212) 808-4460 ext. 168 or [elise@hfny.org](mailto:elise@hfny.org).  
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To learn more about volunteering, or to make a donation, please go to [www.hfny.org](http://www.hfny.org).



## STEWARDSHIP CORNER

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BY DAVID BISGROVE

In Proverbs 3 we are told that honoring God with our wealth results in abundance beyond expectation (*Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.*) Once again, Redeemer's members and ministry partners honored God in exceedingly generous ways in 2003. The giving in December was the largest in Redeemer's history and will allow us to move forward with programs ("new wine") that had been provisionally approved at the end of last year. For example, we are looking forward to investing in our growing number of families by hiring a Family Pastor in 2004. Also, with our office lease ending in September 2004 we are well underway in the planning for new space that we hope will include conference facilities for the growing number of programs and ministries that are meeting during the week. Without your generous gifts we could have never moved ahead with these plans. Thank you again for your prayers and gifts!

P.S. Be on the lookout for our 2003 Annual Report. It contains summaries of each of our ministries and is designed to keep our friends connected to God's vision for Redeemer and New York City.

## EASTER WEEKEND SERVICE SCHEDULE

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### **Good Friday, April 9, 2004**

**5:00PM** and **7:00PM** All Souls Unitarian Church, Lexington and 80th Street

### **Easter Sunday, April 11, 2004**

**9:00AM** Ethical Culture Society, 64th Street & Central Park West

**9:30AM** and **11:30AM** Hunter College Auditorium, 69th Street between Park & Lexington Avenues

**5:45PM** (*usual time*) Hunter College Auditorium, 69th Street between Park & Lexington Avenues

**7:00PM** (*usual time*) First Baptist Church, West 79th & Broadway