

Pagels, Elaine H. *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John*. SBL Monograph Series 17. Nashville: Abingdon, 1973. 128 pp. \$3.50.

This monograph is the product of a doctoral dissertation (Harvard, 1970), written under Helmut Koester. The burden of the study is that Valentinian exegesis, which was denounced by the heresiologists—Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement, Origen—as “arbitrary,” “contrived,” or “irrational,” was misunderstood by such “mainstream” anti-Gnostics, and furthermore has generally been misunderstood to this day. Hence Pagels tries to correct this long-term fault by offering an analysis of the Valentinian exegesis of John (especially that by Heracleon) in which she argues that the Valentinians were serious exegetes, that within their theological framework they were remarkably consistent, and that their theology arose from such exegesis as often as it was brought to it.

Chap. 1, on Jn 1:1-4 in Gnostic exegesis, is the key to much of the rest. Here Pagels argues convincingly, on the basis of several interpretations of Jn 1:3, that what was previously seen as arbitrary or contradictory in reality coheres under a threefold exegetical scheme which in turn corresponds to the three stages of the Valentinian myth of redemption: *pleroma*, *kenoma*, *cosmos*. The various exegetes, she argues, and sometimes the same exegete, interpret Scripture in each of the stages. Furthermore, interpretation in terms of the *pleroma* was intended for initiates, while interpretation in terms of the *cosmos* was intended for non-initiates. She concludes that Heracleon's commentary was intended for non-initiates—hence its differences from Ptolemy's.

On this base, the rest of the book offers an analysis of Heracleon's understanding of key passages in John to show that the various Valentinian theological positions derive from, or are consonant with, a consistent exegesis of the Gospel.

There is much that one may learn from this study. For those for whom Gnostic texts are still something of a mystery, a side-by-side reading of Heracleon and Pagels should prove an enlightening venture. But since a guide like hers is most surely needed in order to make sense out of Heracleon, one wonders whether her argument will hold that the commentary was intended for non-initiates.

For the beginner in Gnostic studies, the book is a major contribution to an understanding of Valentinianism. Not all will be as convinced of Heracleon's consistency as she (there seems to be a major shift in his view of the dwellers in Capernaum, who apparently are non-redeemable “hylics” in 2:12, but are “psychics” only linked with matter in 4:46ff.); nor will all be persuaded by her analysis of Valentinian anthropology in terms of a biblical theology of election. The Valentinian notion of election, which must deal with *three* “natures,” still seems to this reviewer more deterministic with regard to the “pneumatics” and “hylics” than Pagels allows. Nonetheless this is a major study, one with which all further work on Valentinianism must reckon.