

Apologists & the Gnostic Crisis

How the second-century church defended the faith on two fronts — Roman persecution outside, Gnostic infiltration inside • c. AD 130–200

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 5 in the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — the supplementary lesson between **Lesson 4 (the Apostolic Fathers)** and the coming Lesson on Nicaea (AD 325). The four weapons the second-century church forged against Gnosticism — *Rule of Faith, canon, apostolic succession, episcopal order* — are the same weapons the church will bring to the Arian controversy a century later. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

By AD 150 the church was fighting for its life on two fronts. On the outside, the Roman Empire thought Christians were atheists (they refused to worship the gods) and cannibals (they ate someone's body and drank someone's blood every Sunday). Sporadic persecution turned into systematic harassment. On the inside, an elegant, spiritual-sounding, Bible-quoting counterfeit called *Gnosticism* was drawing educated Christians away from the apostolic faith by promising them a secret, higher knowledge than the village bishop could teach.

The response was a generation of brilliant writers. Outward-facing, the *Apologists* (from Greek *apologia*, “a spoken defense”) wrote to emperors and educated pagans to show that Christianity was philosophically serious and socially harmless. Inward-facing, *Irenaeus of Lyon* and his colleagues built the architecture that would define orthodoxy for every century after: the *Rule of*

Faith, the developing *canon of Scripture*, the doctrine of *apostolic succession*, and the *episcopal order*. Without this generation there is no Nicaea, no creed, no Bible in a bound volume. This is where the church learned how to say what it was.

Greek NT (1 Tim 6:20): Ὁ Τιμόθεε, τὴν παραθήκην φύλαξον, ἐκτρεπόμενος τὰς βεβήλους κενοφωνίας καὶ ἀντιθέσεις τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως.

1 Timothy 6:20 (ESV): “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’ (*gnôsis*).”

Paul’s warning is eerily prescient: the Greek word the false teachers of the second century used for their system was the very word Paul had already flagged — *gnôsis*.

PART 1 — THE TWO FRONTS

FRONT 1 — ROME

By the reign of Trajan (98–117) the Roman state had a policy: Christians were not to be hunted down, but if they were accused and refused to curse Christ and offer incense to the emperor, they were to be executed. Pliny the Younger describes the procedure in a 112 AD letter to Trajan. Christians were hated because they were *exclusivists*: they rejected every god but one, would not honor the emperor with token worship, and withdrew from the common life of Roman religion.

The *Apologists* wrote to fix this misunderstanding. Their audience was emperors, senators, educated pagans.

FRONT 2 — GNOSTICISM

From inside the churches came a different threat. Charismatic teachers — Basilides in Alexandria, Valentinus in Rome, Marcion in Sinope — claimed to possess a secret teaching, received from a hidden Jesus, for the spiritually advanced. They read the same Scriptures as the church, but they read them through a philosophical grid borrowed from Middle Platonism and Hermetic literature. Matter was evil. The creator God of Genesis was a lesser deity. Jesus had only appeared to have a body. Salvation was escape through *knowledge*.

The *anti-Gnostic Fathers* — Irenaeus above all — wrote to fix this too. Their

Their tools were philosophy, history, and public reason.

audience was the church itself. Their tools were the public apostolic deposit: the Rule of Faith, the Scriptures handed down, the bishops appointed by the Apostles.

PART 2 — WHO WERE THE APOLOGISTS?

The Greek word *apologia* means “a spoken defense” — think of Socrates’ *Apology* before the Athenian court, or 1 Peter 3:15 (“always being prepared to make a defense”). The second-century *Apologists* were Christian writers addressing the pagan world from inside the categories the pagan world would recognize: philosophy, ethics, rational argument.

The main apologists (roughly chronological):

- **Quadratus** (c. 125) — earliest known apologist, addressed an *Apology* to Emperor Hadrian. Only one short fragment survives.
- **Aristides of Athens** (c. 125–140) — presented an *Apology* to Antoninus Pius arguing that the God of the Christians is the only rational God.
- **Justin Martyr** (c. 100–165) — by far the most important. See Part 3.
- **Tatian** (c. 120–180) — Justin’s pupil; author of the *Diatessaron*, a harmony of the four Gospels that became the standard Syriac gospel text for centuries.
- **Athenagoras of Athens** (c. 133–190) — his *Plea for the Christians* to Marcus Aurelius refutes the charges of atheism, cannibalism, and incest then being leveled at believers.
- **Theophilus of Antioch** (d. c. 183) — *To Autolytus*; the first Christian writer to use the Greek word *Trias* (“Triad,” i.e. Trinity) of God.
- **Melito of Sardis** (d. c. 180) — author of the beautiful *Peri Pascha* (*On the Passover*), a Paschal homily that reads like Christian poetry.
- **Minucius Felix** (c. 200) — his Latin dialogue *Octavius* is the first Christian apology in Latin.

Three common themes thread through the Apologists:

- **Christian worship is rational**, not superstitious or subversive. They explain the Lord's Day gathering, baptism, and Eucharist in plain terms.

- **Christian ethics are the highest visible morality**. Apologists routinely point to Christian chastity, generosity, care for the poor, and refusal of abortion and infanticide as evidence that the faith produces the kind of citizens the empire says it wants.

- **The best of pagan philosophy anticipates Christ**. Justin will call the Greek philosophers "Christians before Christ" because wherever reason (the *Logos*) had operated in them, the *Logos* was already Christ at work.

PART 3 — JUSTIN MARTYR (C. 100–165)

Justin of Neapolis (Flavia Neapolis, Samaria) — “Justin Martyr”

PHILOSOPHER • APOLOGIST • MARTYRED UNDER MARCUS AURELIUS, C. AD 165

Logos

Philosophy

Apology

Martyr

Justin was born to Greek-speaking parents in Roman Palestine around AD 100. He tried every philosophical school of his day in search of the truth: Stoicism, Peripatetic Aristotelianism, Pythagoreanism, Platonism. Walking one day on a beach (he tells us), he met an old man who directed him to the Hebrew prophets and to Jesus. He converted, kept his philosopher's cloak, and opened a Christian school in Rome.

We have three surviving works:

- **First Apology** (c. 155), addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius. A systematic defense and exposition of Christian faith. Chapters 65–67 give us the earliest

detailed description of a Christian Sunday service outside the New Testament itself:

“On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read... Then we all rise together and pray, and... bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings... and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.”

— **Justin, *First Apology* 67 (c. AD 155)**

Notice what is already in place: Sunday as the Lord’s Day, public reading of “the memoirs of the Apostles” (i.e. the Gospels), the homily, the intercessions, the Eucharist, the collection for the poor, a remembrance of the absent sick. Justin describes a worship service our congregations would still recognize.

- ***Second Apology*** (shortly after) — a shorter companion piece responding to a recent martyrdom in Rome.

- ***Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*** (c. 160) — the earliest surviving Christian apology to Judaism. A Christian and a learned Jew debate courteously for days. Justin argues from the Hebrew Scriptures that the prophecies point to Jesus as Messiah.

Justin’s signature idea — the *Logos Spermatikos*. Justin holds that the eternal Logos (John 1:1) — the divine Word who is Christ — has been scattering *seeds* (*spermata*) of truth throughout human history, even among the pagans. Every true insight Plato or Heraclitus ever had was a seed of the Logos. The Incarnation is not the beginning of the Logos’ work; it is its climax.

“Christ is the first-begotten of God... and that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers. And those who lived reasonably (meta logou) are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists — Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks.”

— Justin, *First Apology* 46

His martyrdom. Around 165, Justin and six students were arrested and brought before the prefect *Junius Rusticus*. The court record of their trial (*Acta Justini*) survives — one of the earliest authentic martyrology documents.

Rusticus: “If you are scourged and beheaded, do you believe you will ascend to heaven?” —Justin: “I hope that, if I endure these things, I shall have his gifts... Do what you will. We are Christians, and do not sacrifice to idols.”

— *Acts of the Martyrdom of Justin, c. AD 165*

They were beheaded. The church has called him *Justin Martyr* ever since.

PART 4 — WHAT IS GNOSTICISM?

“Gnosticism” is a modern umbrella term (coined in the 17th century) for a cluster of second- and third-century movements with shared features. The discovery of the **Nag Hammadi Library** in upper Egypt in 1945 — 13 codices of Coptic Gnostic texts including the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Gospel of Truth* — revolutionized our primary-source knowledge. Before Nag Hammadi, we knew Gnosticism almost entirely through its *opponents*. Now we can read it in its own words.

The Gnostic pattern — what most of these systems share:

- **Radical dualism.** Matter and the body are evil; spirit alone is good. This is a borrowing from Middle Platonism pushed to a degree Plato himself would have rejected.
- **A lesser Creator-god.** The God who made this material world is *not* the true, unknowable High God. He is the *Demiurge* (Greek for “craftsman”), often identified with YHWH of the Old Testament and typically portrayed as ignorant, arrogant, or malicious.
- **The Pleroma and aeons.** The true spiritual realm consists of emanations from the unknowable Father — ranks of *aeons* in a harmonious *pleroma*

(“fullness”). Salvation is return into the Pleroma.

- **Humanity as divine sparks.** Some (not all) humans contain a divine spark trapped in flesh. Ordinary Christians (“psychics”) can be saved to a middle level; only the spiritually elite (“pneumatics”) reach the Pleroma.
- **Christ as messenger of gnôsis.** Christ is a spiritual emissary from the High God, come to *inform* the sparks of their true origin. His death does not atone for sin; it reveals ignorance. In most Gnostic systems Christ only *appears* to die, because the divine cannot really suffer (docetism again).
- **Secret knowledge (gnôsis).** Salvation is by knowing — knowing who you really are, where you came from, and the passwords (*synthemata*) the soul must recite to the archons who guard the spheres on its ascent back to the Pleroma.

Theologically: this is not a variant of Christianity. It is a rival cosmology that *uses* Christian vocabulary. It denies the goodness of creation (Gen 1:31), the reality of the Incarnation (John 1:14; 1 John 4:2), the atoning death of Christ (1 Cor 15:3), and the bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15). What it offers in place is information.

Greek NT (1 John 4:2–3): πᾶν πνεῦμα ὁ ὁμολογεῖ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἔληλυθότα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν, καὶ πᾶν πνεῦμα ὁ μὴ ὁμολογεῖ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἐστίν.

1 John 4:2–3 (ESV): “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.”

PART 5 – THE MAJOR GNOSTIC TEACHERS

Basilides of Alexandria (c. AD 117–138)

FLOURISHED UNDER HADRIAN • FOUNDED AN ALEXANDRIAN SCHOOL • CLAIMED TO TRANSMIT SECRET TEACHINGS RECEIVED FROM PETER VIA AN INTERMEDIARY NAMED GLAUCIAS

Basilides taught that from the unknowable Father emanated a descending series of aeons; the material world was the work of the lowest, ignorant rank. Christ was a divine messenger who did not actually die; Simon of Cyrene was crucified in his place. (*Not* the Simon Magus of Acts 8 — a different figure.) Basilides' system survived in his son Isidore's teaching and in a sect that persisted in Egypt until the fourth century.

Valentinus (c. AD 100–160) — the most sophisticated Gnostic

EDUCATED IN ALEXANDRIA • TAUGHT AT ROME UNDER HYGINUS, PIUS, AND ANICETUS • REPORTEDLY CAME VERY CLOSE TO BEING ELECTED BISHOP OF ROME

Valentinus is the Gnostic the church took most seriously because he was the hardest to dismiss. He was a brilliant, cultured, biblically literate teacher who remained *inside* the Roman church for decades; Tertullian says he was passed over for the Roman episcopate and left in bitterness. His disciples (Ptolemy, Heracleon, Theodotus) produced the most developed Gnostic systems, complete with:

- **Thirty aeons** in pairs (*syzygies*), culminating in *Sophia* (“Wisdom”), whose fall produces the material world.

- **Three classes of humanity:** *hylic* (material — unsaveable), *psychic* (soulish — ordinary Christians, saved to a middle heaven), and *pneumatic* (spiritual — the Valentinians themselves, saved to the Pleroma).

- **A detailed allegorical reading of the New Testament** in which ordinary Christian texts concealed spiritual truths only the Gnostics could unlock.

The *Gospel of Truth* (Nag Hammadi Codex I) is generally attributed to Valentinus himself; it is, in its way, a beautiful meditation on the Logos — but it is a beauty founded on a very different cosmology from the church's.

Marcion of Sinope (c. AD 85–160)

SHIPOWNER'S SON FROM PONTUS • ROME, 139 • EXCOMMUNICATED 144 •
FOUNDED A RIVAL CHURCH THAT PERSISTED FOR CENTURIES

Dualist

First canon

Anti-OT

Marcion is not technically a Gnostic (he lacks the emanation-system, the secret knowledge, the elaborate cosmology) but the wound he inflicted on the church was at least as serious. Arriving in Rome as a wealthy donor around 139, he began to teach that the God of the Old Testament — harsh, legal, vindictive — was simply *not* the God of Jesus. Jesus had revealed a completely **different, previously unknown God of pure love and grace**. Everything Jewish, including the Old Testament, was to be discarded.

To back this up, Marcion did what no Christian had ever done before: he produced a **list of approved books**. His canon was:

Marcion's canon (c. AD 140):

- An edited Gospel (a version of Luke, stripped of what Marcion considered Jewish elements).
- Ten Pauline letters (all except the Pastorals), similarly edited.
- *Nothing else*. No Old Testament. No Matthew, Mark, John. No Acts. No General Epistles. No Revelation.

Rome excommunicated Marcion in **AD 144**. He walked out, refunded his 200,000 sesterces, founded his own parallel church, and appointed his own bishops. Marcionite congregations existed across the empire for the next three centuries.

Marcion's unintended gift to the church. His list forced the question: *if Marcion's canon is wrong, what is the right one?* The church's gradual, public, conciliar answer over the next two hundred years — the 27 New Testament books, held alongside the Old Testament of Israel — was articulated with a sharpness it might never have needed without him. Many historians consider the church's decision to insist on

the Old Testament as Christian Scripture one of the most consequential of the second century.

PART 7 – IRENAEUS OF LYON (C. AD 130–202)

Irenaeus of Lyon — the Bishop Who Answered the Gnostics

BORN IN SMYRNA • DISCIPLE OF POLYCARP (DISCIPLE OF JOHN) •
BISHOP OF LYON IN GAUL • AUTHOR OF *AGAINST HERESIES*

Anti-Gnostic

Rule of Faith

Apostolic Succession

Four Gospels

Irenaeus is the single most important theologian of the second century. Born in Smyrna around 130, he grew up hearing **Polycarp** preach — the same Polycarp who had personally known the Apostle John. As a young presbyter he migrated west to Gaul (modern France), where he became bishop of Lyon. When a Gnostic teacher named Marcus began drawing church members in Gaul into Valentinian circles, Irenaeus wrote his masterwork.

Against Heresies (Adversus Haereses), written around AD 180 in five books, is the longest and most systematic response to Gnosticism the early church produced. Book 1 describes the Gnostic systems in painful detail; Books 2–5 refute them. Irenaeus is one of our most valuable sources for what the Gnostics actually taught — and, more importantly, for what the church believed *instead*.

Irenaeus' strategy against the Gnostics has four legs:

- 1. The Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*).** There is a public summary of the apostolic teaching — a proto-creed held by every true church everywhere — and the Gnostics do not hold it:

“The church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the Apostles... this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God... As I have said, the church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it.”

— **Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1–2 (c. AD 180)**

2. The Scriptures — Old Testament and New. Against Marcion: the Creator of Genesis is the Father of Jesus. Against Valentinus: the Gospels come from four named Apostles (or their direct associates), not from secret revelations:

“It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds... the Gospels... are indeed four, as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.”

— **Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8**

Irenaeus’ argument for four Gospels (and only four) is allegorical, but the underlying claim is historical: these four were written by (or from) the Apostles, and nothing else was.

3. Apostolic succession. If the Gnostics have a secret tradition passed from Jesus to them, they should be able to name the chain. They cannot. The church can: the named bishops of Rome (Irenaeus lists them), of Smyrna (Polycarp → John → Jesus), of Ephesus (Timothy → Paul). If any hidden apostolic knowledge existed, the men the Apostles actually appointed as their successors would have it.

“It is within the power of all, therefore, in every church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the Apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who

were by the Apostles instituted bishops in the churches, and to demonstrate the succession of these men to our own times.”

— **Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.1**

4. Recapitulation. Irenaeus’ positive theology is summarized by the Greek word *anakephalaiôsis* (Eph 1:10) — Christ *heads up all things in himself*, undoing in his own person what Adam did. Mary is the new Eve; Jesus is the new Adam; he passes through every stage of human life sanctifying it.

“He became what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself.”

— **Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, Preface**

“The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.”

— **Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.7**

Irenaeus’ instincts — that Christian theology is *public, historical, rooted in the apostolic deposit, and oriented toward the healing of creation* — will shape every orthodox theologian after him. It is not too much to say that Nicaea won because Irenaeus had already defined what it meant to win.

PART 8 — THE FOUR WEAPONS FORGED

Put Justin and Irenaeus together and the church of AD 200 walks out of this crisis with four new weapons it did not carry in AD 130:

1. The Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*) — a public baptismal summary of the apostolic teaching. Not yet the Nicene Creed, but the embryo of it. Any teacher whose doctrine did not fit inside the Rule of Faith could be recognized immediately as preaching a different gospel.

2. The beginnings of canon — a list of apostolic writings, received openly by the churches across the empire, used in public worship, measurable against the same Rule of Faith. By the end of the second century the four Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters are functionally canonical everywhere; the remaining edges (Hebrews, 2 Peter, Revelation) take another two centuries. (See **Lesson 1 Part 6.**)

3. Apostolic succession — a named, documentable chain of public teachers going back to the Apostles themselves. If someone claimed a secret tradition, you could ask from whom. Gnostic teachers rarely passed that test.

4. The monarchical episcopate — already present in Ignatius (see **Lesson 4 Part 3**), now hardened by the Gnostic crisis into the universal pattern. Each local church has one bishop, teaching and guarding the Rule of Faith alongside his presbytery.

These four weapons will be used again, together, in the Arian controversy of the fourth century. Nicaea's creed (325) is a formal extension of the Rule of Faith; its appeal to the "received faith" of the churches is Irenaeus' argument for apostolic succession; its authority rests on the conciliar agreement of bishops. The template was forged by Irenaeus against Valentinus before it was ever used by Athanasius against Arius.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

Three disciplines come out of the Apologist / anti-Gnostic era for disciples today:

- **Gnosticism never dies; it rebrands.** Every generation produces a new version: a spiritual path for insiders; knowledge rather than grace; a Jesus separated from Israel, from the body, from ordinary churches. American popular religion is shot through with it — from "finding the divine inside yourself" to the idea that the Christian Jesus is a white-Western bureaucrat from whom a liberated, hidden Jesus must be rescued. Irenaeus' four weapons are still the right answer.

• **Defending the faith is a public act of reasoning.** Justin’s *Apology* was not a Sunday-morning pep-talk; it was submitted to an emperor. Peter’s charge — “always being prepared to make a defense (ἀπολογία) to anyone who asks you for a reason (λόγον) for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15) — is still the apologetic posture. Neither shouting nor silence; public reason with kind manners.

• **The Rule of Faith still matters.** A Christian who can articulate the Rule of Faith — one God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit; creation good; Christ incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended, returning — cannot easily be seduced by any variant of the ancient lie. Memorize it. Pray it. Die for it if you must, as Justin did.

Psalm 100:5 (ESV): “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

LXX (Ps 99:5): ὅτι χρηστοὺς κύριος, εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἕως γενεᾶς καὶ γενεᾶς ἡ ἀλήθεια αὐτοῦ.

The generation of Justin and Irenaeus handed the faith forward intact. By God’s mercy, so may we.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Justin called Socrates and Heraclitus “Christians before Christ” because the Logos had already been at work in them. Is that generous or reckless? What New Testament texts do you think support or limit his move (Acts 14:17, 17:22–31; Rom 1:19–23)?

2. Gnosticism promised its adherents that they were among the spiritually advanced. What parts of modern Christianity could easily slip into a similar “insider’s club” posture?

3. Marcion's fundamental move was to separate Jesus from the Old Testament. Where do you see that move happening today — and what is lost when we make it?

4. Irenaeus' answer was a short summary of the faith that every baptized believer could hold on to. Try to write your own one-paragraph "Rule of Faith" before looking at the Apostles' Creed.

5. The Gnostic systems produced a Jesus who was all spirit, all message, and no real body. The Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists insisted on a Jesus who was fully flesh. Where does your own imagination of Jesus drift — and how does the Incarnation correct it?

6. Irenaeus argued that a faith with four named Gospels and an open list of apostolic succession was stronger than a faith with a secret hidden teaching. What is the equivalent argument for our moment?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, you sent the Son to be our Way, our Truth, and our Life; you did not hide him in an inner circle. Thank you for Justin, who walked every philosophy until he found yours; for Irenaeus, who kept us from losing Genesis; for the bishops and apologists who answered the lie in public courts and on public pages. Give us their clarity and their charity. Keep us from every counterfeit gospel that promises secret knowledge in place of your open Son. Let us hold the Rule of Faith, love the whole Scripture, honor those you have set over us, and be prepared always to make a defense — with gentleness and respect — for the hope that is in us. Through Jesus Christ, the Logos made flesh. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources (all public domain; standard translations by Roberts-Donaldson or ACW):

- Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, *Second Apology*, and *Dialogue with Trypho*.
- Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians (Legatio pro Christianis)*.
- Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus*.
- Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover (Peri Pascha)*.
- Irenaeus, *Against Heresies (Adversus Haereses)*, Books 1–5; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*.
- *Acts of Justin and His Companions* (the trial record).
- The Nag Hammadi Library — *Gospel of Truth* (Valentinian), *Gospel of Thomas*, *Apocryphon of John*, etc. (primary Gnostic sources).

Modern studies:

- Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012), ch. 2 treats this era as the setup to Nicaea.
- Eric Osborn, *Justin Martyr* (1973); and *Irenaeus of Lyons* (2001).
- Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (useful for the social setting of Gnostic assemblies).
- Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) — sympathetic to Gnosticism, but the best-known introduction to Nag Hammadi.
- N. T. Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus* (2006) — a gentle corrective to Pagels.
- Michael J. Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church* (2018).
- James B. Wiggins & Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (1987) — the standard English translation of primary Gnostic texts.

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