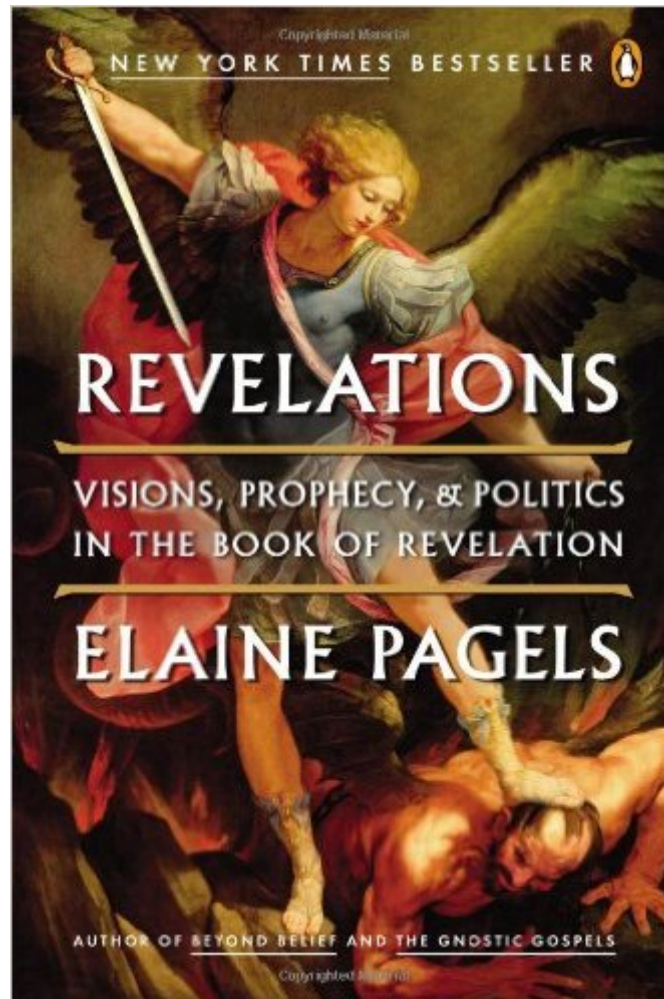


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Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, And Politics In The Book Of Revelation



Synopsis

A profound exploration of the Bible's most controversial book "from the author of *Beyond Belief* and *The Gnostic Gospels* The strangest book of the New Testament, filled with visions of the Rapture, the whore of Babylon, and apocalyptic writing of the end of times, the Book of Revelation has fascinated readers for more than two thousand years, but where did it come from? And what are the meanings of its surreal images of dragons, monsters, angels, and cosmic war? Elaine Pagels, New York Times bestselling author and "the preeminent voice of biblical scholarship to the American public" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*), elucidates the true history of this controversial book, uncovering its origins and the roots of dissent, violence, and division in the world's religions. Brilliantly weaving scholarship with a deep understanding of the human needs to which religion speaks, Pagels has written what may be the masterwork of her unique career.

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Customer Reviews

What Elaine Pagels does so well, in this book as in her previous, is to understand, explain, and evoke the context and writings of the period of formation of the Christian religion and the catholic church. In close and careful readings of the many conflicting texts available to present day scholars, she is able to untie the knots of ancient intrigue and conflict from the early days of Christianity. She traces the development of Christian writing through successive generations of apostles, prophets, and bishops to see how and why the core texts of the religion, specifically the Book of Revelation,

were chosen to be included in the New Testament. Pagels shows how the cult of Jesus worship began as a revolutionary movement on the fringes of Roman society, appealing to the lower classes, and offering a vision of equality before God, if not in everyday life. She finds in the words of Tertullian an early formulation of the desire for freedom of religious practice, freedom from the requirements to worship Roman gods and emperors. With careful argument, Pagels shows how the "eternal enemy", identified as the Beast in Revelations, is transformed in meaning over time. Initially the number of the beast - "666" - is a code for the emperor Nero who ordered the persecution of early followers of Jesus. Over three centuries, for a variety of political purposes, Revelations is transmuted into a condemnation of Christian splinter groups called "heretic" because of their failure to obey nascent church authority. Although Pagels does not delve deeply into the vision and drama of the text of Revelations, she is able to convey how the apocalyptic imagery of the book served to inspire physical and mental resistance to Roman persecution. It is this inspiration which resulted in the book becoming a tool of the early church: Initially supporting resistance to Rome, subsequently in the recruitment of non-Jews to the cause, and ultimately for banning and suppression of other variations of Christian revelation. Early church leaders found the text to be "irrational and incomprehensible" but effective because it incorporates messages of spiritual elitism, great sacrifice, climactic and certain victory, and ultimately a promise of resurrection in the city of God. For many readers, the works of Elaine Pagels have become the main entry point into the early Christian texts discovered at Nag Hammadi and generally known as "the Gnostic Gospels." In the current work, Pagels continues to explore these texts, specifically works of revelation similar to the one currently known as "The Revelation of John." Several of these works are quoted and characterized. The strong emphasis on personal revelation, direct connection with Jesus, and the communitarian context of these early groups of followers of Jesus is contrasted with the military structure and material greed of the early Catholic church. It is a measure of Pagel's brilliance and sensitivity that she is able to explore and illuminate all of these issues in a slim volume of only 180 pages. The reader will enjoy the historical irony as one apocalyptic movement after another succeeds in overcoming persecution, only to become the perceived evil as it consolidates its power. This is a never-ending story on the highway of human history.

Elaine Pagels has written yet another accessible and powerful book that will appeal to both religious history buffs and spiritual seekers attracted to mystic Christianity. In this book, she explores the Book of Revelations, and the role of revelatory experience in general within early Christianity. She brings her impeccable scholarship to bear, detailing the social and political forces that were most

likely in play when Revelations was written, and what the symbolism within it would have meant to readers at the time. She also explores the way it has been interpreted over time, and how different groups have used it at crises points in history to assert they are on the 'right' side of God, while their enemies are not. With all the hype surrounding 2012, and some interpreting this year as yet another 'end-times', Revelations is once again being used in this way, which makes this book especially relevant right now. While all this history is interesting to me, what I found personally even more fascinating were the sections on the role of revelatory experience in Christianity, and sections on early monastics and their mystic practices. Pagels describes some of the other 'Revelations' found among the scrolls of Nag Hammadi - the texts discovered in 1945 buried in Egypt that religious scholars are still interpreting and which are reshaping our understanding of the development of Christianity. Pagels other best-selling books - The Gnostic Gospels and Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas - are focused on Gospels found amongst these texts that were not included in the New Testament when it was canonized, while in this book she focuses on alternative Revelations that were found there. She describes 'secret' contemplative practices detailed in these texts, and profound spiritual experiences that are described by their writers. The passages she includes are powerful and inspiring, and display remarkable similarities to practices and insights described by mystic traditions in other religions, including Tantra in Buddhism, Sufism in Islam, Kabbalah in Judaism, and yogic traditions of Hinduism. The same goes for her coverage of early monastics - the communities of celibate men and women who lived together for the sole purpose of devoting themselves to early Christian spiritual practice. She sheds new light on Anthony of Egypt, typically considered the father of Christian monastics, and particularly on Bishop Athanasius's popular text 'Life of Anthony', which is all most people know of him. While Athanasius's biography paints Anthony as in sync with him and others trying to consolidate church power and hierarchy, it is clear from Anthony's own letters that he was quite opposed to many of the church's edicts. In fact, Pagels makes a strong case that Athanasius pushed for Revelations to be included in the New Testament when it was canonized because he saw a way to strengthen his own case for solidifying church power and decreasing the power of the monastics, and that his edicts banning all other revelations and 'secret' texts as heretical were possibly the reason the texts found at Nag Hammadi were originally hidden. So overall, this is another great book from Pagels, and one that will inspire both rich debate and spiritual exploration.

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