



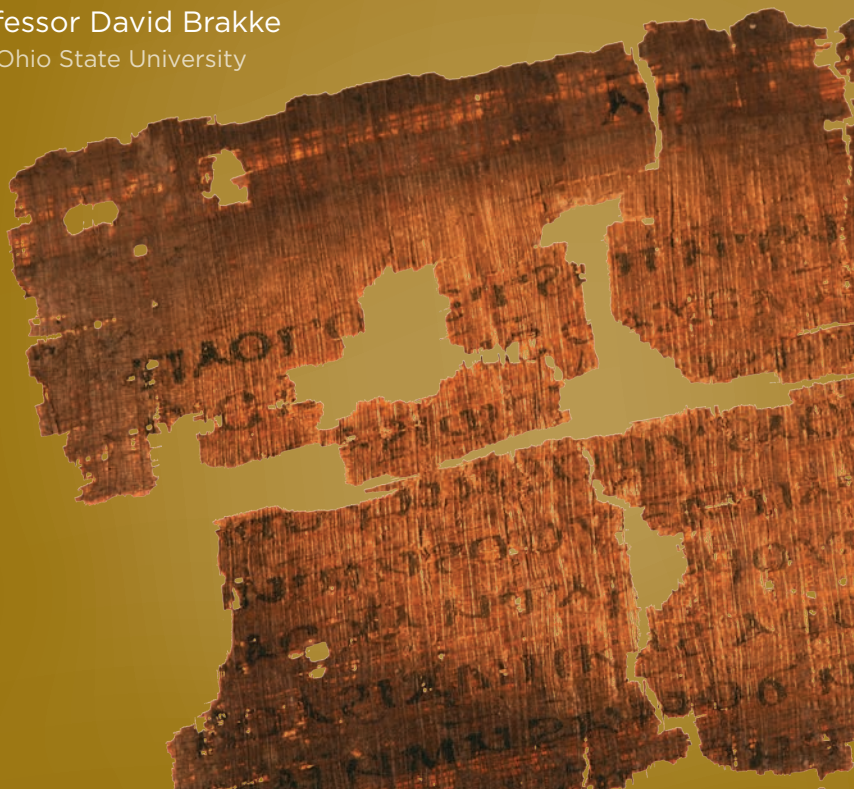
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# Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas

Course Guidebook

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Professor David Brakke is the Joe R. Engle Chair in the History of Christianity and Professor of History at The Ohio State University, where he has taught since 2012. After receiving his B.A. in English with highest distinction from the University of Virginia, he received his M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School and his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Yale University. He taught for 19 years (from 1993 to 2012) in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University, where he was department chair for 5 years.

Professor Brakke has published extensively on the history and literature of ancient Christianity, especially Egyptian Christianity, early monasticism, the formation of the biblical canon, and Gnosticism. He has edited and translated several ancient works that survive in Coptic and Syriac. He is currently a member of an international team of scholars producing the first unified critical edition and translation of the works of the monk Shenoute of Atripe (348–465), the greatest native writer of Coptic. Professor Brakke is also preparing a revised edition of Bentley Layton’s *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

At Indiana University, the professor received recognition for his teaching and research, including the Outstanding Junior Faculty Award. He has held several important fellowships, including ones from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. He has held visiting positions at Concordia College, the University of Chicago, and Williams College.

Professor Brakke is the author of *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*; *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*; *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*; and *Introduction to Christianity*, with Mary Jo Weaver. He has coedited six

volumes of scholarly essays and contributed nearly 40 articles to professional journals and volumes. From 2005 to 2015, he served as editor of the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*. ■

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# Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas

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## Scope:

**G**nosticism is one of the most fascinating and perplexing phenomena in Western religious history. At its heart was *gnōsis*—direct knowledge of God—expressed in complicated myths. Yet Gnosticism itself often escapes our knowledge. Was it the first great Christian heresy? A new world religion? Or an invention of alarmed Christian leaders and modern scholars? How did it influence other religions? And why did its mythology appeal to so many people? Above all, what does *Gnosticism* mean?

During the last 75 years, previously lost Gnostic writings have reappeared, from the codices found near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 to the Gospel of Judas, first published in 2006. These texts have given scholars new insights into the diversity of Gnosticism. This course uses these new writings to explore the myths, rituals, and teachings of the first Gnostics and the other movements that used mythology to seek knowledge of God. Gnostics, Valentinians, Manichaeans, and others offered profound answers to the deep questions of human existence, especially the problem of evil. And “orthodox” Christianity developed partially in direct response to these groups.

In this course, we’ll discover the diversity of early Christianity, beginning with the so-called Gnostic school of thought, which flourished in the Roman Empire during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries A.D. In such works as the Secret Book According to John and the Gospel of Judas, the Gnostics combined the book of Genesis with Jewish, Platonist, and Christian traditions to create a strange but beautiful myth that explained how this universe came into being through an ignorant and malevolent lower god. The Gnostics offered salvation from ignorance and fate through knowledge of a higher God, who sent Jesus, and they claimed that people could have mystical contact with that God now. The Christian teacher Valentinus and his disciples revised the original Gnostic myth to make it even more Christ centered, and they invited Christians to a deeper understanding of the Christian scriptures, sacraments, and doctrines. The Valentinian school existed alongside of, and in competition with,

“orthodox” Christianity for centuries. The Gospel According to Thomas did not share the Gnostic myth, but it did teach that to know one’s self is to know God, that is, the Jesus who is within you and who you are.

From these core groups within Gnosticism, we’ll follow the paths of *gnōsis*, myth making, and new revelations through the ancient Mediterranean world into the Middle Ages and to the present day. We’ll meet Mani, who founded a worldwide religion, Manichaeism, that left its traces in the thought of one of Catholic Christianity’s heroes, Saint Augustine. And we’ll encounter Plotinus and the Neoplatonists, the followers of the Greco-Egyptian god Hermes Trismegistus, the Cathars of medieval Europe, and the Mandaeans, who continue to follow a myth much like that of the Gnostics. We’ll follow Paul to the tenth heaven and learn secret teachings of Jesus from Mary Magdalene. And we’ll see how “orthodox” Christians, such as Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria, invented the idea of heresy and their Christian doctrines in opposition to the Gnostics and Valentinians. The course concludes with the revival of Gnostic themes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in pop culture and new religious movements.

By studying movements that were condemned as heretical and lost, we will gain new understanding of why orthodox Christianity developed as it did, and we will encounter alternative religious paths in the Western tradition—paths to *gnōsis*. ■