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**Title** A Faint but Interesting Christian Voice from the Dust of Egypt

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**Abstract** Review of *Gospel of the Savior: A New Ancient Gospel* (1999), by Charles W. Hedrick and Paul A. Mirecki.

# A FAINT BUT INTERESTING CHRISTIAN VOICE FROM THE DUST OF EGYPT

John W. Welch

As has been recently announced, the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts, Brigham Young University, has launched several new efforts in the direction of studying and publishing materials on the New Testament and early Christianity. From this Early Christian Initiative, I anticipate that a number of new bits of information may interest Latter-day Saints. I am therefore pleased to note the publication of this obscure monograph on a very fragmentary Coptic document acquired in 1967 by the Berlin Egyptian Museum (Charlottenburg). These fragments, which likely date no later than the seventh century and perhaps quite a bit earlier (p. 15), suggest that some elements of early Christianity still remain lost or opaque. First assembled in 1997, these glimpses into an otherwise unknown Christian gospel imply that many things remain yet to be revealed and understood about the primitive church.

This publication contains a carefully crafted introduction on the discovery, collation, linguistics, paleography, dating, and contents of these fragments (pp. 1–25). The full text of each piece is then presented with the Coptic on the left page and a parallel English translation on each facing right page (pp. 28–87). This presentation is enhanced by

Review of Charles W. Hedrick and Paul A. Mirecki. *Gospel of the Savior: A New Ancient Gospel*. Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge, 1999. 165 pp., with index. \$35.00.

thirty-three pages of line-by-line commentary (pp. 89–121). Plates of the fragments (pp. 124–51), along with very useful indexes, conclude the volume.

“Conclusions presented in this book,” the author indicates, “must be regarded as tentative. We felt it was more important to make a critical edition and an initial commentary of the text available to the public as soon as possible, rather than to aim at an exhaustive treatment and attempt to answer all questions and address all issues” (p. vii). The authors have succeeded admirably in putting into the hands of interested persons the tools necessary for assessing the contents and value of this document. They hope that this new record eventually “will find its proper position in the history of early Christian literature” (p. vii).

The remains of this gospel include remnants of about a dozen speech passages, with words attributed to Jesus interspersed with questions from the apostles. Interesting details feature beatific statements (pp. 28–29), a mention of “the garment . . . of the kingdom, which (i.e., garment) I bought with the blood of the grape” (pp. 28–29), additions to the words spoken by Jesus at the last supper (pp. 30–33), and a report of a vision seen by the apostles “upon the mountain” during which their bodies became transfigured like the Savior’s (pp. 34–35). The apostles asked such questions as, “O Lord, in what form will you . . . reveal yourself to us, or . . . in what kind of body . . . will you come?” to which the Lord answered, “If one is [near] to me, he will [burn.] I am the [fire] [that] blazes” (pp. 40–41, brackets in the original). A series of statements, each followed by the repeated refrain of a single “amen” (pp. 36–39, 42–43), possibly indicates that part of this gospel once contained a text in which the Lord liturgically gave a set of instructions or charges (notice the word *leitourgia*, pp. 48–49, 113), which the apostles accepted one by one with an oath or promise (compare the antiphonal “amens” in Deuteronomy 27:15–26). The result of this conversation appears to be the elevation of the apostles to the status of seeing the Lord “[after] he attained to the [fourth] heaven” (pp. 44–45, brackets in the original) and of becoming his “holy members” and his “seeds . . . who are blessed” (pp. 34–35, 60–61). These are

tantalizing and intriguing tidbits that invite further reflection and consideration.

While little can be made of much of this broken text, it seems that “the author clearly knows both the Matthean and Johannine traditions” (p. 20). Seeing these two types of text together in a single gospel may prove to be of interest to students of the Book of Mormon, for the gospel-like account in 3 Nephi 11–26 obviously manifests a mixture of these two traditions as well, as has long been noted. One can only regret that the text is so incomplete that very few conclusions can be drawn about its origins, its original contents, or its historical significance with any degree of confidence.