

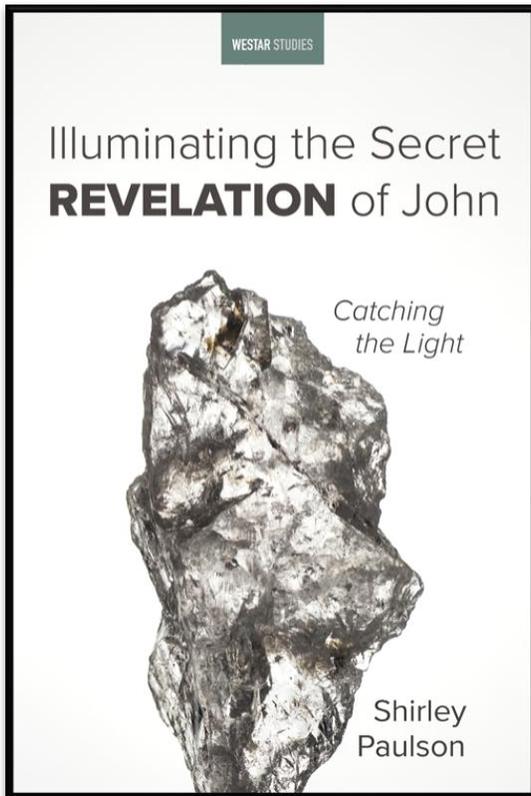
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Illuminating the Secret Revelation of John: Catching the Light
by Shirley Paulson
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New Title from Shirley Paulson
Illuminating the Secret Revelation of John: Catching the Light



Buried for more than a thousand years in the sands of Egypt, the Secret Revelation of John has stayed a secret far longer than it should have. Even now, more than seventy-five years after its discovery in 1945, it eludes easy understanding even as it shines with the message of God's loving presence amid suffering and violence. *Illuminating the Secret Revelation of John* is the first study written for the curious public, as well as for scholars who have not yet plumbed its depths. The ancient Secret Revelation of John unearths three gems of healing wisdom that have been encrusted in a millennium of doubt and theological limitation. This new work explores the many facets of these gems with a historical setting and background, a contemporary paraphrase, and a study section that invites pondering of and conversation about new questions to explore.

Shirley Paulson, an independent scholar, is the principal producer of the blog, podcast, and online courses for Early Christian Texts: The Bible and Beyond (earlychristiantexts.com). Her academic interests are in early Christian theology and healing practices. She is a contributing author to *Westar's After Jesus Before Christianity*. While serving as Head of Ecumenical Affairs for the Christian Science Church, she participated on two ecumenical boards and authored articles for the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (2014) and *Ecumenical Trends* (2017).



Why did you write the book?

From my first reading of this ancient writing, the “Secret Revelation of John,” I could hardly make any sense of it – as happens with most people who try to read even a good English translation. But I could also tell there was an extraordinary gem inside this rough exterior, and I wanted to make it accessible to thinking people today.

The ancient text is basically a spiritual message of hope and healing during the height of Roman oppression and cruelty. It was written in the 2nd century, probably lost in the 4th century, and re-discovered in the 20th century. I wanted to explain to readers why it was so valuable when it was written, why it became so controversial, and why it is so crucial now to our understanding of early Christianity.

How is this book related to the biblical Revelation to John?

There is no proven relationship between these two ancient books, but the author of one must have known the writing of the other because several of the mutual descriptions of Jesus are similar but unknown elsewhere. Both books circulated among early Jesus followers.

The “Secret Revelation of John,” also known as the “Apocryphon of John,” was an important manuscript that made its way around the Mediterranean area but was ultimately lost for about 1600 years! It wasn’t recovered until the 1945 discovery of many unknown writings near Nag Hammadi, Egypt.

The Revelation *to* John is an apocalyptic writing now included in the biblical canon. Although both books refer to John the disciple of Jesus in very different ways, scholars today generally agree that he is not the author of either book.

Is this about an ancient Gnostic writing?

Yes and no. Although for a long time, religious historians categorized the “Secret Revelation of John” as one of the Gnostic texts, I disagree with that position now. Gnosticism is especially difficult to define, and when carefully scrutinized, no specific characteristics of it can be found in the “Secret Revelation of John.” Typical heretical accusations, such as dualism, gnostic elitism, and anti-Jewish sentiments, are not present in this text. Rather, this early text is about a Christian understanding of salvation and healing in the context of second-century Roman atrocities.

How does Sophia (Wisdom) in the “Secret Revelation of John” compare with Sophia in the Bible and other Christian texts?

When this ancient book was written, around the same time as the later books of the New Testament, Sophia was familiar to readers of Hebrew scriptures. Sophia is one of the most important characters in this and other extracanonical texts because she appears to be presented as both the source of pain and sorrow and the rescuer for those who are suffering. In my book I argue that, especially in the “Secret Revelation of John,” Sophia—in her wisdom—is wise enough to illustrate for humanity why they are suffering. In doing that she can awaken human beings to claim their God-given freedom. Sophia exemplifies a female type of savior who, like Jesus, emulated the human condition in order to save people from victimization of all types.

You claim this book is about healing and salvation. What do you mean by ‘healing’ and ‘salvation,’ and how does it happen?

In antiquity, a common Greek word we now translate as ‘healing’ or ‘salvation’ was the same word, *‘soteria.’* It meant ‘help’ in whatever way one needed help, whether it was relief from bodily suffering, violent aggression, or divine punishment for sins for oneself or for the community. The teacher in the “Secret Revelation of John” confirms the Genesis teaching that God’s original creation is good and that all forms of brokenness come from a ruptured relationship with the divine consciousness of good. The ‘Savior’ in the “Secret Revelation of John” awakens sufferers to their divine right to freedom from others’ domination as well as influences that sicken the body.

Your book includes a chapter on the 21st century relevance of this 2nd century text. What are the key points of its contemporary relevance?

In this age, when people are feeling that their freedom is being constrained by the power of too much government and/or too much power in big institutions, this ancient book dares to expose the weaknesses in such human ego-built empires. It is self-destructive for these large, patriarchal systems to encourage personal agency, so a certain amount of subjugation is required (and thus encouraged and enforced). The “Secret Revelation of John” was written to help people in such situations overcome these limitations.

The “Secret Revelation of John” does this by hinting at the relocation of cause and effect. There are interesting parallels to the ‘observer effect’ of quantum physics, where the act of observation itself affects what is objectively being observed, suggesting that the autonomy of the ‘observer’ is more influential in what we experience than are the actual situations and objects surrounding us.

What did you learn in your research for this book?

When I started to figure out what the “Secret Revelation of John” was saying, I was stunned to realize that this 2nd-century portrayal of Jesus’s message offers a whole new view of the earliest Jesus followers, both challenging and enhancing what we’ve previously been taught within traditional mainstream Christianity. This new view emphasizes help and healing over doctrine and authority. It gives agency to those who seek spiritual guidance from Jesus, and it teaches why and how the Savior ‘heals and saves’ everyone with a pure heart.

It became clear to me, as the work progressed, why ideas in this ancient text, like acknowledging equal spiritual worth exclusive of gender, could have been seen as a threat to the patriarchal church structure that emerged in the 4th century. Yet I also began to wonder if the book fell from popularity since the new church leaders no longer felt threatened by Roman power.

What is your biggest takeaway?

This little-known but remarkable ancient text, the “Secret Revelation of John,” which was written and circulated around the same time as later New Testament writings, advocates for freedom and independence from oppressive and aggressive rulers and patriarchal systems. It is a thorough theological foundation for supporting the rights of everyone to find health, salvation, and individual worth. Since it predates church

doctrine, it serves as an ecumenical foundation for Christians, regardless of denomination, to discuss and understand their common heritage.

A few representative paragraphs from the book:

(p. 41) How many ways can you say that God is all-powerful and good? Apparently, the author of the Secret Revelation of John looked at this gem through the lens of a kaleidoscope and explained its dazzling relevance from countless angles. About one-third of the book is devoted to making certain his readers would be convinced of the reality and power of this God, this Goodness. It makes sense that our author would have to lay such a deep and firm foundation for this, because the winds of doubt are fierce, shaking the faith of nearly every human being. The unshakable generation will need to withstand the arguments of every form of evil imaginable.

(p. 64) Many people today define salvation as the deliverance from the punishment of sin at some point after death. But fear of God's judgment no longer holds the threat it used to carry. Either people don't think they've sinned very much, or else they're not convinced death will bring on the curse of eternal damnation. And yet if someone could promise an escape route from fear, disease, chaos, emotional torment, and physical danger, many of us would come running. This is what salvation meant in antiquity, and this is the promise of the Secret Revelation of John.

(p. 88) Since the Secret Revelation of John is a book of liberation for women, for enslaved people, for all levels of society, and even for human bodies, this poses a problem for maintaining any hierarchical system besides the supremacy of the divine benevolence. In the Secret Revelation of John, we see both the divine and the Savior figures expressed in male and female terms. Eve is part of the salvation story for Adam, not a source of evil. And the true power derives from the divine Oneness, not from humans atop the patriarchal ladder.

(p. 94) *In the context of the discussion on quantum physics:* To reconnect with the second century, the Secret Revelation of John helps us let go of our expectancy of physical measurements of time, space, and the substance of things, since, of course, Newton had not yet presented his theories. The ancient text provides a detailed account as to what it could look like if we did abandon our expectations of classical physics. We would be free to discover something more than "the same sense as stones or trees" (Heisenberg), because things behave in some kind of relationship to consciousness. "Its thinking became a thing" (Secret Revelation of John: King, 5:13).

An Excerpt from *Illuminating the Secret Revelation of John: Catching the Light*

A strange and ancient book has been moving from the bookshelves of scholars and into the hands of curious and (often) Christian thinkers and spiritual seekers. Even though scholars have been able to read the Secret Revelation of John since it came to light in 1945, the odd images of the Yaldabaoth god, the Mother Barbelo̅, and the unwise Wisdom have left most modern readers scratching their heads. The title is rather obscure, its logic appears to run in circles, and many people say it's one of those “gnostic” heresies. Understandably, many churchgoers have found little incentive to pick it up. But since scholars have been chipping away at these outer obstacles and polishing the rough gems, they've come to realize this book is of great value, especially to those who love the Bible!

The purpose of this book is to pick up the polished gems and look at them carefully in the light of our modern experiences and historical perspectives. To do so, we'll drop in for a visit in the city where all the forces came together to give it birth in the second century. Religion teachers, philosophers, Christ-followers, Jews, and students flocked to this cultural center of the world. No, not Rome, and not Jerusalem. But they converged on Alexandria, the great city situated along the north coast of Egypt and founded by Alexander the Great centuries before Jesus was born. All the constituent parts of the Secret Revelation of John cohabitate in second-century Alexandria, as we'll see after we listen to a few of the people we encounter.

After getting acquainted with second-century Alexandrian life, we'll look at the way the Secret Revelation of John speaks to the heart of twenty-first-century readers as well. Then we'll start to explore the text itself. The bulk of the book is organized like a kind of literary museum, where we can pause to think about some of the most important contributions to our lives today. We won't be able to see all the possibilities, but there will be enough to whet our appetite for returning again and again.

WELCOME TO SECOND-CENTURY ALEXANDRIA

We want to start our tour in second-century Alexandria, because the Secret Revelation of John was written for people who were looking for answers to life's tough questions of the time, a period of formidable upheaval. In the midst of political and social turbulence, people tend to seek a deeper understanding of their own identity, their communities, the divine Being, and the universe. This is the state of Alexandria we are about to encounter.

Alexandrians understood well the confluence of Roman, Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish customs. This city, known for its attraction to writers and thinkers, seems to have been the perfect spawning ground for the radically new, but Christ-based, ideas in the Secret Revelation of John.

If we could walk through the neatly laid out streets of this bustling port city in the second century, we might be startled to discover such a visible blending of the multicultural way of life. The great Library, the cultural center of the city, explains much of the draw for teachers and students throughout the Mediterranean area who are eager to learn philosophy, rhetoric, religion, science, or some other scholarly subject. The Library, a part of the vast Alexandrian Museum complex, holds the largest collection of papyrus scrolls in the world and functions like a modern interactive research center with a zoo, an observatory, and a medical laboratory.

Praise for *Illuminating the Secret Revelation of John: Catching the Light*

“Paulson makes the Secret Revelation of John approachable for laypeople and scholarly sound for the academy. Her treatment of the text is brilliant. . . . Paulson brings the Secret Revelation of John back from its biblical exile at a time when it is very much needed and solidifies its importance to the redemption of Christian spirituality in the twenty-first century.”

—Stephanie Duzant, Associate Minister, St. Matthew’s Community African Methodist Episcopal Church of Hollis

“Paulson insists on an integrated approach which includes incisive historical investigation, important literary analysis, twenty-first-century meaning making, and contemporary questions. She paints with a clear and broad brush. . . . Those of us who have known the importance of the Secret Revelation of John for more than a generation now have an accessible and informed next step forward.”

—Hal Taussig, Union Theological Seminary, retired

“Paulson provides an accessible introduction to the Secret Revelation of John. . . . Paulson unpacks its primary message and its spiritual insights in down-to-earth language. Most importantly, she addresses its relevance in the twenty-first century as she explores its multiple layers of meaning—including its subversive challenge to a Roman Empire that kept people in their place. . . . She helps us to grasp that SRJ reveals a liberation freely available to all.”

—Deborah Saxon, author of *The Care of the Self in Early Christian Texts*

