

## The Gnostic Gospels and Current Popular Views of Jesus

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It is astonishing, even if fascinating and entertaining, to read the claims of Leigh Teabing, a fictional historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, concerning the gospels and our knowledge of Jesus. He makes the following claims, among others:

- (1) The life of Jesus was “recorded by thousands of followers,” and “more than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament.”<sup>1</sup>
- (2) The Bible was “collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great,” leaving all of them out except four.<sup>2</sup>
- (3) Constantine “commissioned and financed” a Bible that “omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s *human* traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.”<sup>3</sup>
- (4) But some of these “gospels” have survived. The Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi scrolls tell “the true...story” and “speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms.”<sup>4</sup>
- (5) The Q document was possibly written by Jesus.<sup>5</sup>
- (6) Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, and the Nag Hammadi document known as *The Gospel of Philip* is the basis for the claim.<sup>6</sup>
- (7) And “it was not *Peter* to whom Christ gave directions with which to establish the Christian church. It was *Mary Magdalene*.”<sup>7</sup>

The claims of Teabing are not spun out of air, for some of them can be derived from scholarly literature. It is common knowledge, for example, that dozens of other gospels were written in addition to the four canonical gospels. These have been published in two widely used collections. The first is the two-volume *New Testament Apocrypha*, edited by Wilhelm Schneemelcher,<sup>8</sup> containing the actual texts of apocryphal gospels, fragments of others, and references in early Christian authors to even more that existed at one time but are no longer extant. The texts of the apocryphal Nag Hammadi

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 231.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 245-46.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>8</sup> *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991-92).

gospels – Coptic documents discovered in 1945 – are included in the work by Schneemelcher, but are also in the widely used volume, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, edited by James M. Robinson.<sup>9</sup> To say, as Teabing does, that more than eighty gospels were composed may be a numerical stretch, but even more is it a stretch to suggest that “more than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament.” That the Bible was “collated,” “commissioned,” or “financed” by Constantine rests on a fanciful imagination.<sup>10</sup> Whoever composed the (hypothetical) Q document – assuming that there was one – cannot be known. And the Dead Sea Scrolls contain nothing in the way of direct information concerning Jesus of Nazareth.

There are two other claims by Teabing that are of interest for a more lengthy discussion, for they have been taken up in other places and have had an impact on popular views of Jesus. It is those issues that will be addressed in the following sections.

### I. Was Jesus Married?

Whether Jesus was married and had descendants, as claimed by Teabing, has been discussed before. In 1970 a book by William Phipps was published with the title, *Was Jesus Married?* Phipps picked up the usual answer to the question and challenged it. The usual response is that, since the gospels say nothing about his having a wife, we conclude that Jesus was single. But, according to Phipps, one should actually come to the opposite conclusion. Since it was expected in the world of Jesus that Joseph would have arranged a marriage for his son, and that a person was to marry in one’s youth, and since the gospels do not say that Jesus did *not* have a wife, we should expect that he did.<sup>11</sup>

The issue can be dealt with as both theological and historical. On the theological side, it hardly seems like a formidable Christological problem. Assuming that Jesus was truly human, his having a wife would be but an aspect of his incarnate life. The church has never affirmed a doctrine of “the perpetual virginity of Jesus,” even though his singleness has been assumed. A person who thinks that a sexual relationship between Jesus and a wife would undermine the “sinlessness” of Jesus could have a problem, but that would be a matter of personal opinion, probably not something that can be raised to a doctrinal level.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> For brief treatments of the process of canonization, see the discussions of James A. Sanders and Harry Y. Gamble, “Canon,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:837-61.

<sup>11</sup> William E. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 15-38.

The question whether Jesus was married or not is, in the final analysis, a historical one, not a theological one. The assertion by Teabing that Jesus was married and that his wife was Mary Magdalene rests on two points. First, as with Phipps, Jesus would have been expected to marry. Not to be married would be an anomaly. But even though it would have been unusual for Jesus to have been single in his religious and cultural environment, it would not have been unheard of or impossible. There were men who did not marry, such as Saul of Tarsus (1 Cor. 7:7), perhaps John the Baptist, and – according to both Philo and Josephus – the Essenes, of whom they both count four thousand throughout Palestine and Syria, and both claim that the Essenes were celibate.<sup>12</sup> The saying of Jesus at Matthew 19:12 (“there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”) indicates that there must have been some Jewish Christians who remained single as well.

Second, Teabing relies on the apocryphal *Gospel of Philip*, in which it reads (in the version that Teabing has):

And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth.

The term “companion” is then explained by Teabing to mean “spouse” in Aramaic, the language of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

There are a number of issues here. First, the *Gospel of Philip*, as we have it from Nag Hammadi, exists in Coptic (not Aramaic), and no other versions have been found. It is commonly thought to have been composed originally in Greek in the third century, or perhaps even in the second, but the extant Coptic text is conventionally dated from 350-400.<sup>14</sup> The lateness of the gospel is already sufficient cause to be a bit skeptical about its traditions concerning Jesus and those around him.

Second, the text quoted is riddled with lacunae. It reads as follows in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* with lacunae in dots and brackets and conjectures within brackets:

And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [...loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [...].<sup>15</sup> (*Gospel of Philip* 63.32-34).

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<sup>12</sup> Philo, *Hypothetica* (*Apology of the Jews*), 11.14; *Every Good Man is Free*, 12.75-87; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.5.

<sup>13</sup> D. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 246.

<sup>14</sup> R. McL. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip: Translation from the Coptic Text, with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: Mowbray, 1962), 3; Wesley W. Isenberg, “The Gospel of Philip: Introduction and Translation,” *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. J. Robinson, 139-41.

<sup>15</sup> *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. J. Robinson, 148. The translation is by Wesley W. Isenberg.

A third issue revolves around the meaning of the word for “companion.” Although the text is in Coptic, it contains some words in Greek, and that is the case for what is usually translated as “companion” in this particular passage and also at 59.9. The Greek term is *koinwnoj*.<sup>16</sup> There is no compelling reason to understand the term as meaning a spouse. The term appears in the New Testament several times where it can refer to a business partner (Luke 5:10), a coworker in ministry (2 Cor. 8:23; Phlm. 17), or a partner in suffering (Heb. 10:33).<sup>17</sup> The use of the term in classical Greek texts is similar, not referring to a spouse.<sup>18</sup> According to one point of view, Mary Magdalene is portrayed in this gospel not as a sexual partner of Jesus, but as a beloved disciple.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the *Gospel of Philip* is considered to be of Valentinian Gnostic origin. According to the Valentinians, the problem of humanity is the differentiation of the sexes, which leads to death. The original androgenous unity of humankind was broken when Eve was separated from Adam. Christ came to “repair the separation” between the sexes (70.12-17). In order to do so, it could be maintained that he had to have a consort (whether spiritual, sexual, or both), and Mary Magdalene would have been considered the most likely choice.<sup>20</sup> Given the theological investment that the *Gospel of Philip* had, as a Valentinian gospel, plus its late date in composition, it can hardly be considered a reliable historical source concerning Jesus. If Jesus had married, and if he and his wife would have had children, it is inconceivable that there would be no record anywhere of the children, but of course there is none. To be sure, one can argue that there has been a massive cover-up of the evidence. That is precisely what Teabing claims at great length in *The Da Vinci Code*.

## II. Gnostic Gospels, Jesus, and Christian Origins

The other major claim of wide interest is the question of the use of the various gospels, both canonical and apocryphal, for what they affirm about Jesus of Nazareth. Teabing claims that when Constantine collated the Bible, those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits were omitted; the gospels that emphasize his divinity were included. But fortunately the Nag Hammadi gospels “speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms.”

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<sup>16</sup> For an edition displaying the Coptic text that contains the Greek words, see *Das Evangelium nach Philippos*, ed. William C. Till, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 2 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1963), 20, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Other passages using the term, which are not relevant for the discussion are at Matt. 23:30; 1 Cor. 10:18, 20; 2 Cor. 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1; 2 Peter 1:4.

<sup>18</sup> This statement is limited by reference to the entry for *κοινωνός* in Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940), 970.

<sup>19</sup> Hans-Martin Schenke, *Der Philippus-Evangelium (Nag-Hammadi-Codex II,3)*, *Texte und Untersuchungen* 143 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 270, 335-36.

<sup>20</sup> R. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip*, 97.

Teabing is way off base on these points. The Nag Hammadi gospels emphasize the divinity of Jesus much more than do the canonical gospels. Or at least one can say that they diminish his humanity more than the canonical gospels do. The most famous of them, the *Gospel of Thomas*, opens with the words, “These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down.”<sup>21</sup> As the “living Jesus,” the Savior is one who has come from above to utter sayings (114 in all) that need to be interpreted, and “whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death” (logion 1). The boundary between the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ is extremely thin in the *Gospel of Thomas*. In the final analysis, the gospel does not convey to the reader an earthly, human Jesus, even though some of the sayings contained in it most likely go back to him.<sup>22</sup> Other gospels from Nag Hammadi all but deny the humanity of Jesus as well. According to the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth*, Jesus had only a “fleshly form,” but not a fleshly existence (31.5-6). And several of the gospels deny his suffering and death, including the *Gospel of Philip* (57.28-58.10), the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (56.4-19), and the *Apocalypse of Peter* (81.3-24).

The fictitious historian of *The Da Vinci Code* has scholarly allies concerning the use of Gnostic gospels in a quest for our understanding of Jesus and Christian origins. There is a major difference, however. While Teabing thinks that the Gnostic gospels can aid in establishing the humanity of Jesus – a point on which he is clearly wrong – various scholars have made the claim that the Gnostic gospels do give a legitimate accounting of who Jesus was in other respects. Moreover, they regard those gospels as important sources for understanding Christian origins. In fact, it is commonly held by some of them that the Gnostic gospels provide resources for a more egalitarian form of Christianity than does that stream of Christian tradition that has come to be known as orthodoxy.

Elaine Pagels of Princeton University, in her book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, has written that the early Christian leaders representing orthodoxy appealed to tradition, claiming to represent the apostolic legacy, but that their claims had political implications.<sup>23</sup> Their teachings “legitimized a hierarchy of persons through whose authority all others must approach God.”<sup>24</sup> Alternative forms, such as Gnostic Christianity, were “forced outside” the mainstream “to the impoverishment of the Christian tradition.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted from *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. J. Robinson, 126. The translation here and elsewhere in this essay is by Thomas O. Lambdin.

<sup>22</sup> The literature is vast, but to mention one resource, see Bruce Chilton, “The Gospel according to Thomas as a Source of Jesus’ Teaching,” in *The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels*, ed. David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 155-75.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), xxxvi.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 27; cf. 118.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 149; cf. 118.

Pagels has written a more recent book, entitled *Beyond Belief*, that was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for thirteen weeks in 2005.<sup>26</sup> Its subtitle is *The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, and much of the book is a study of that document. Pagels considers the *Gospel of Thomas* to have been written near the end of the first century.<sup>27</sup> She goes on to claim that the Gospel of John was written about the same time, and that it was written to oppose the theology of the *Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>28</sup> She does not say that the Gospel of John was written in reaction to the actual text of the *Gospel of Thomas* as we have it, but the casual reader might think that that is what she means. To quote her, she says this:

To my surprise, having spent many months comparing the Gospel of John with the Gospel of Thomas, which may have been written about the same time, I have now come to see that John's gospel was written in the heat of controversy, to defend certain views of Jesus and to oppose others....What John opposed...includes what the Gospel of Thomas teaches.<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere she says that "those who enshrined the Gospel of John within the New Testament and denounced Thomas's gospel as 'heresy' decisively shaped – and inevitably limited – what would become Western Christianity."<sup>30</sup> She gets specific, naming one person in particular as a culprit, when she says that:

It was Irenaeus...who became the principle architect of what we call the four gospel canon, the framework that includes in the New Testament collection the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.<sup>31</sup>

While it is true that Irenaeus used well-known arguments for the exclusive use of the four gospels that became canonical, it should be pointed out that (1) in doing so, he was opposing a single gospel canon (as in the case of the Ebionites who used only Matthew, Marcion who used an abbreviated Luke, and the Valentinians who made primary use of John),<sup>32</sup> and (2) his late second-century contemporaries, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian of North Africa, used those four as their "working canon" as well.<sup>33</sup>

Besides Pagels, there are other scholars who have had a major impact on popular views of Jesus and Christian origins. Among the most well-known is Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina. In 2003 a book by Ehrman was published that goes by

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<sup>26</sup> This is stated on a brochure announcing her appearance to lecture on the topic of her book at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota, October 27, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2005), 29, 34.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 45.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.11.7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 282, 296.

the title, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. In that book Ehrman discusses alternatives to what he calls proto-orthodox Christianity. They include the Ebionites, Marcionites, and various Gnostics. Much of what Ehrman does is simply give a popular treatment of what is covered in a good course on early Christianity. But he makes some notable value judgments. He concludes that Christianity has suffered a loss by the demise of the heretical movements. Yet the reader looks in vain to find just what Ehrman thinks that loss might be. He says that the “alternative understandings of Christianity,” as he calls them, “can be cherished yet today.” And he says that “they can provide insights even now for those of us who are concerned about the world and our place in it.”<sup>34</sup> But, again, he does not amplify his statement or explain what he has in mind.

The work of the Jesus Seminar should be mentioned as a contributor to both the scholarly and popular ferment of our times concerning Jesus as well. Its major blockbuster book was called *The Five Gospels*, which appeared in 1993. In that book it is asserted that the *Gospel of Thomas* probably assumed its present form by the year 100, but that an early version of it may have originated as early as the fifties of the first century.<sup>35</sup> The inference to be drawn from that is that an early version of that gospel existed prior to the writing of any of the four canonical gospels.

That the *Gospel of Thomas* was composed so early is unlikely. It has been considered by various specialists in the field to have been composed in eastern Syria in the second half of the second century.<sup>36</sup> It is striking that there is no known reference to the *Gospel of Thomas* until the third century in the writings of Hippolytus (d. 235).<sup>37</sup> There are three Greek fragments among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri that are known to be from the *Gospel of Thomas*, and they have been dated to the years 200-250.<sup>38</sup> As I have shown in my book

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<sup>34</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 257.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Funk et al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 474.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. R. McLean Wilson, *Studies in the Gospel of Thomas* (London: Mowbray, 1960), 7-8; Bertil Gärtner, *Theology of the Gospel according to Thomas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 271; Beate Blatz, “The Coptic Gospel of Thomas,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, 1.113.

<sup>37</sup> Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 5.2.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, ed. Bernard P. Grenfell, Arthur S. Hunt, et al., 31 vols. (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1898-1966), 4.1; and Harold W. Attridge, “The Gospel According to Thomas (Greek Fragments),” in *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7*, NHS 20, ed. Bentley Layton, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 1.96-99. Attridge places POxy 1 “shortly after A.D. 200” (97); POxy 654 “in the middle of the third century” (97); and POxy 655 “between A.D. 200 and 250” (98).

on the parables of Jesus,<sup>39</sup> at least two of the Greek fragments are dependent on redactional features of the synoptic gospels, so the *Gospel of Thomas* can hardly be placed prior to the writing of the Synoptics.

### III. Scholarship, Jesus, and Popular Culture

There is much in our culture that finds the alternatives to what became the “orthodox” stream of Christianity appealing. There is suspicion and distrust of institutional Christianity. There is an emphasis on spirituality rather than doctrinal and corporate expressions of faith. There is the so-called “New Age” movement and religious communities that identify themselves as Gnostic Christians. The Gnostic gospels have an appeal for people in those movements and communities. Moreover, the credo of post-modernity is that doctrinal teachings are weapons used by those already in power for exerting control.

But one must also be aware of the views and values of the alternatives to make a fair assessment of them and of what became orthodoxy. To go with the Gnostics is to compromise the oneness of God, which Jesus affirmed daily in reciting the *Shema* (Deut 6:4), in favor of a multitude of gods. It is to reject the goodness of creation and adopting a view not unlike that of the *Gospel of Philip*: “The world came about through a mistake” (75.2-3). It is to deny the true humanity of Jesus. It is to dispense with a concern for the neighbor in favor of the cultivation of one’s own spirituality. It is to become an elitist in regard to salvation, for, according to the *Gospel of Thomas* (logion 23) as well as Basilides,<sup>40</sup> only one in a thousand can be saved or two in ten thousand. The widely held view that the Gnostics were spiritual egalitarians is simply not the case, for the discovery of *gnosis* is the key to salvation, whereas in the stream leading toward orthodoxy, faith in the gospel is sufficient, which means that the latter stream was also the most comprehensive and inclusive.<sup>41</sup>

It has been asserted that orthodoxy is the religion of the winners in early Christian struggles.<sup>42</sup> There may be truth in that, empirically speaking, but it is too simplistic. What became orthodoxy is rooted in views and values concerning God, the world, the neighbor, community, and the self that have roots in the Old Testament as well as in the New. Moreover, normative (or proto-orthodox) and orthodox Christianity are capable of embracing a wide diversity, as wide as the New Testament canon itself and beyond, as Christians have recognized both prior to and following the canonization of the New

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<sup>39</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 432-40.

<sup>40</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.24.6; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 24.5.

<sup>41</sup> These and other points are elaborated in Arland J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

<sup>42</sup> John Dart, *The Jesus of History and Heresy: The Discovery and Meaning of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), xvi.

Testament. The alternatives to orthodoxy are really not all that appealing, especially if one considers the whole world, even the whole creation, as the object of God's great love, as expressed in Jesus of Nazareth.

