

QUESTION 1

What Is at Stake Regarding the Four Gospels?

What is at stake concerning the four gospels is nothing less than historic Christianity. No Gospels, no Jesus; no Jesus, no Christianity. This chapter offers a rationale for the first part of this book since it is rather technical in nature, yet of extraordinary importance. Accordingly, two questions undergird Part 1 of this work: Are the four gospels reliable and why are only those gospels included in the New Testament? Because the first question has been bandied about for centuries we will spend the bulk of our time in this chapter introducing the second question, since it was unanticipated by many.

Are the Four Gospels Reliable?

One of my students approached me recently, obviously upset. The student had just finished a class in which the professor cast doubt on the reliability of the Gospels by comparing them to the game of whispering in a person's ear a statement, and then having that person whisper the same statement to the individual next to him or her—continuing around the circle until it came back to the first person who started the statement, with the humorous result that the original statement nowhere matched the statement at the end. The professor said that is how the four gospels came into being. Jesus made his statements and performed his deeds in the AD 30s, but that these were passed along only in oral form and not written down. By the time the four gospels were composed in the 60s and later, based on the traditions of Jesus passed along for decades, they nowhere matched what Jesus actually said and did. Thus, the Gospels dare not be trusted. This story could be repeated hundreds of time, upsetting the faith of the unsuspecting.

But most Christians have not read their gospels in that fashion. Rather, for centuries, the laity in the churches read the Gospels as trustworthy accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus of Galilee. The Gospels were authored by

some of those who followed Jesus and therefore provided eyewitness accounts of what Jesus actually said and did. For them, the story line of the canonical gospels goes something like the following: Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary (the virgin birth). He was born in Bethlehem and then later moved with his family to Nazareth of Galilee. At the age of about thirty years old, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, a sign of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus then went into the Judean desert to be tempted by Satan but prevailed over the tempter by being obedient to his heavenly Father. After that, Jesus called twelve men to be his disciples. These men witnessed firsthand the many miracles that Jesus performed, heard his declaration that the kingdom of God had arrived, marveled at his teaching with authority, joined him in prayer, observed the opposition to him by the religious establishment of the day, followed him as he entered Jerusalem to be received as Israel's Messiah-King, participated with him in a Passover meal/Lord's Supper, stood by as he was arrested by the temple police and Roman escort, watched him die a cruel death on the cross (at least John did), and celebrated his bodily resurrection from the dead.

But such a straightforward reading of the four gospels has been greatly challenged by liberal theologians since the late eighteenth century. It is that skeptical mentality that appeals to the circle game referred above. Two biblical scholars especially expressed their mistrust of the Bible in general—and in the Gospels in particular—over two centuries ago. The first theologian to protest the reliability of the Bible was J. P. Gabler. Gabler championed three points about the Bible: (1) the Bible should only be read for what it reports rather than what it prescribes; (2) the Bible is filled with contradictions; and (3) it is natural in origin, not supernatural. The net result of these three claims was to deny that the Bible is the Word of God, thereby destroying its historical reliability. This new approach to the Bible that Gabler fostered was called the historical-critical method.¹

If Gabler called into question the dependability of the Bible in general, then H. Samuel Reimarus called into question the reliability of the four gospels. Writing about the same time as Gabler, Reimarus put a wedge between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith by asserting that the latter was the portrait that emerged from the canonical gospels, but which was a fabrication of the early church. Consequently, the former—the historical Jesus—has been lost to posterity, never to be recovered. In specific, Reimarus scurrilously claimed that the historical Jesus never called himself to be the Messiah. Rather, Jesus was an ordinary Jew who died without seeing the Messiah or the kingdom of God arrive in history. But after Jesus' death, according to Reimarus, the disciples made up the legend of the resurrection thus making Jesus into a supernatural being

1. J. P. Gabler, "About the Current Distinction of Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Right Definition of Their Goals" (inaugural address, University of Astdorf, March 30, 1787). Published in *Opuscula Academica* 1 (1831): 179–94.

who should be worshipped as on par with God.² Since Reimarus's essay, many a scholar came to deny the reliability of the four gospels.

Though both Gabler and Reimarus's arguments have been resoundingly defeated in the years that have passed, the die had been cast regarding the historical reliability of the Bible and the Gospels in particular. Armed with the historical-critical method, liberal biblical scholars now offered a considerably paired down account of the life of Jesus: Jesus was a Jew who was baptized by John the Baptist, lived a controversial life in his relationship with the Jewish and Roman authorities, and was accordingly crucified under the governorship of Pontius Pilate. And that's it! No miracles; no kingdom of God; no atoning death; nor resurrection; no matter. Such a skeptical attitude even affected one of the greatest presidents in American history—Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson famously doubted the supernatural and miracles reported in the Gospels, so he extracted everything miraculous in them thereby producing a miracle-less version of the four gospels. I have read "Jefferson's Bible" and one will find no miraculous Jesus therein, only his moral teachings.

While this skeptical portrait of Jesus of Galilee was the favorite of much of academia, it has only been rather recently, in the last twenty years or so that the laity has latched onto this understanding of Jesus and the Gospels. The first part of this book is devoted to re-establishing the reliability of the four gospels, critiquing the usual tactics of the historical-critical approach as well as highlighting the newest developments in the discussion. Thus, we will discuss oral tradition and the Gospels, the authorship of the four gospels, and non-biblical testimonies regarding the historical Jesus. Assuming that we can discover the historical Jesus, what portrait of Jesus best characterizes him—apocalyptic, Gnostic, Cynic, or what? When we have dealt with these issues and more related to the four gospels in Part 1, the reader will have reached great confidence about Jesus, in specific, that the historical Jesus (the Jesus who really lived) is none other than the Christ of faith (the Jesus presented to us in the Gospels).

Why Are Only the Four Gospels in the New Testament?

Once some of the contemporary laity rejected the reliability of the four gospels, it was ripe for wrestling with a second question rather recently posed by liberal biblical scholars, namely, why should only the traditional four gospels have a monopoly on the New Testament? Should not other gospels written at the time of the New Testament and beyond—the apocryphal gospels—be included in the New Testament? Such a question goes hand in hand with the pluralistic society America, and indeed most of the western world, has become. Thus, a politically correct culture such as we live in today wants to read today's religious pluralism back into the New Testament. If there are conflicting views

2. Reimarus (1716–68) wrote his essay anonymously because it was so radical. It was later published by G. E. Lessing.

toward the Gospels today, some reason, then why could not there have been similar conflicts back then? Could it be that the traditional gospels were embraced by the church (the majority), whereas the apocryphal gospels—those as, if not more, reliable—were discounted because those who affirmed them were in the minority? But why should this be? Today, one of the most widely read novels of our time has argued precisely that—*The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown.³ This work makes the case for the inclusion of non-traditional gospels in the New Testament, if not to replace them. Its formula for success is the mixture of a conspiracy theory, a potent long-held secret, and a good dose of vilifying historic Christianity, especially the Catholic Church.

The basic plot of *The Da Vinci Code* is as follows: Robert Langdon, the hero of the book, is a professor of religious symbology at Harvard whose skill at cracking codes puts him on the trail of a long-held secret by the Priory of Sion. The latter supposedly is a guild (that included people like Sir Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, and most importantly, Leonardo Da Vinci) with origins back to the Crusades whose task it is to protect the Holy Grail, the chalice from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper. That, however, is but a diversion from the real truth which is that Jesus of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene were lovers who married and bore children. Thus, the real Holy Grail was Mary Magdalene.

However, the ire of the church need not have been raised over this book but for the way Brown presents his fictitious story; namely, he begins his work with a page labeled, “FACT,” which claims that “all descriptions of ... documents ... in this novel are accurate.”⁴ This gives the distinct impression that the novel is based on sound historical research. The next pages of this chapter beg to differ with Brown’s claim that his novel is rooted in fact. Accordingly, we will expose three key errors upon which the novel is based.⁵

Error 1: The true gospels are the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene) and the Gospel of Philip, not the canonical gospels.

Dan Brown’s theological perspective is expressed through the British scholar Teabing. Teabing accused early Christianity of waging a conspiracy against the truth. He declares that “more than *eighty* gospels” were considered for the New Testament, but only four were chosen.⁶ The former were the historical losers while the latter were the historical winners. The intent of this assertion is

3. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). More than 80 million copies of the book have been sold, it has been translated into 44 languages, and a major motion picture directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks was released in 2006.

4. *Ibid.*, 1

5. Taken from Marvin and Sheryl Pate, *Crucified in the Media: Finding the Real Jesus Amidst Today’s Headlines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

6. See the review by Ben Witherington, “Review of the Da Vinci Code,” *Biblical Archaeological Review* 30, no. 3 (May/June 2004): 58–61 as well as his full book, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press,

obviously to discredit historical Christianity and replace it with the New Testament Apocrypha. In reality, however, there are only about fifty non-canonical gospels.⁷

Here we discuss two of those New Testament Apocrypha—the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary* (Mary Magdalene). They are the foundation of Dan Brown’s thesis that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers who got married. The *Gospel of Philip* surfaced in the Coptic (Egyptian plus Greek) texts at Nag Hammadi. It is thoroughly Gnostic in orientation.⁸

It is the emphasis that the *Gospel of Philip* places on Mary Magdalene that is of immediate interest to us. In saying 32, Mary Magdalene is called Jesus’ “companion,” a possible reference to Mary as the wife of Jesus.⁹ Saying 55b in the *Gospel of Philip* is thought to confirm this interpretation:

The S[aviour lov]ed [Ma]ry Mag[da]lene more than [all] the disciples, and kissed her on her [mouth] often. The other [disciples’ [...]]. They said to him: “Why do you love her more than all of us? The Saviour answered and said to them [...]: “Why do I not love you like her?¹⁰

While the kiss referred to here could be a kiss of Mary’s cheek or forehead, in light of saying 32 it could also refer to a kiss on the mouth: “The perfect conceive through a kiss and give birth. Because of this we also kiss one another. We receive conception from the grace which we have among us.”

What is clear from these texts is that Mary is favored by Jesus above the twelve disciples, because she shares with him the knowledge (*gnosis*) of the true nature of reality. Nevertheless, even though these non-biblical passages seem to indicate that Jesus and Mary were married, in typical Gnostic fashion, physical marriage is made secondary in importance to the spiritual intimacy between the two of them—that is, their shared *gnosis* (= knowledge).

2004). See also the penetrating critique by Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everyone’s Asking* (Nashville: Nelson, 2004).

7. See Witherington, “Review of the *Da Vinci Code*,” 58–59; and Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, 61–62.

8. We will define and critique Gnosticism (the Greek word for knowledge) in subsequent chapters. Here we note that many of the Gnostic apocryphal gospels were discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1948. These documents go back to the second to fourth centuries AD. All quotations of the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* come from Wilhelm Schneemelcer, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McLain Wilson, vol. 1 of *Gospels and Related Writings* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke and Company; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991).

9. Witherington, however, does not believe this to be the case, because it is far more likely that the word “companion” used here is not a synonym for a spouse, but rather refers to a spiritual “sister” (“Review of the *Da Vinci Code*,” 60).

10. The bracketed portions represent words or portions of words not in the text, but which have been filled in due to context, etc., not necessarily the original words intended by the author.

The *Gospel of Mary* (implied Magdalene) is a second-century fragment written in Greek. Like the *Gospel of Philip*, it also places Mary Magdalene on a pedestal above the disciples. The passage below indicates that Jesus entrusted Mary with secret knowledge because he recognized her superior worth. This aroused jealousy in Andrew and Peter. Hence the ensuing tense conversation:

When Mary had said this, she was silent, so that the Saviour had spoken with her up to this point. But Andrew answered and said to the brethren: "Tell me, what think ye with regard to what she says? I at least do not believe that the Saviour said this. For certainly these doctrines have other meanings." Peter in answer spoke with reference to things of this kind, and asked them [*the disciples*] about the Saviour: "Did he then speak privily with a woman rather than with us, and not openly? Shall we turn about and all hearken unto her? Has he preferred her over against us?" (Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 17.7–22)

Then Mary wept and said to Peter: "My brother Peter, what dost thou then believe? Dost thou believe that I imagined this myself in my heart, or that I would lie about the Saviour?" Levi answered (and) said to Peter: "Peter, thou hast even been of a hasty temper. Now I see how thou dost exercise thyself against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Saviour hath made her worthy, who then are thou, that thou reject her? Certainly the Saviour knows her surely enough. Therefore did he love her more than us. Let us rather be ashamed, put on the perfect Man, [form ourselves] as he charged us, and proclaim the gospel, without requiring any further command and any further law beyond that which the Saviour said." (Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1–21)

The Gnostic character of this work is evident. Right before the preceding dialogue, Jesus says, "The Son of Man is within you, follow him" (Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 8.12–9.5). This alludes to the Gnostic idea that humans are divine and need to become aware of such. Another Gnostic thought occurs in the same context, where Mary says she becomes a man, thereby affirming the androgynous nature of humanity.

Although the Gnostic view that God and humans are androgynous seems to argue for equality between the genders, the *Gospel of Thomas* (one of the most important Gnostic gospels) dispels such an ideal:

Simon Peter said to them [the disciples], "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead

her, in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (114)

Thus, in the Gnostic approach, women are subservient to men.

The point to be made from all of this is that the Gnostic thought undergirding the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary* dates no earlier than the second to third centuries AD, precisely the false teaching opposed by the church father Irenaeus (ca. 130–200), Hippolytus (ca. 170–236), and Tertullian (ca. 160–220). This is in utter contrast to the message of orthodox Christianity evident in the first century AD in the four gospels.

Error 2: Jesus is a mere human in the earliest historical sources who was only later divinized at the Council of Nicea in AD 325.

It is argued that this was due to the oppressive tactics of Emperor Constantine, who suppressed the earlier (Gnostic) gospels and replaced them with the four canonical gospels. That is, for the first four centuries after Jesus’ death, numerous documents existed chronicling Jesus’ life as a mere mortal, but Constantine rewrote history by replacing these with the four canonical gospels.

Nothing could be further from the truth than this theory. The four gospels, which undeniably date to the first century AD, equate Jesus with God. And so did the apostle Paul (see Phil. 2:9–11) where he calls Jesus “Lord,” the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Yahweh*).

To the contrary, long before Constantine and even before the Gnostic gospels existed, the four gospels of the New Testament were considered authoritative by the churches. Thus, Irenaeus in AD 125 recognizes the “four-fold gospels” (*Heresies*, 3.11.8). Tatian, a student of the church father Justin Martyr, combined the four gospels into one harmony at around AD 175 (called the *Diatessaron*—Greek for “through the four”) because they were so well received in the churches. Earlier, Justin himself attested to the canonicity of the four gospels, calling them the memoirs of the apostles (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 103.19). Coming from the late second century AD, the Muratorian canon (a list of the canon named after the man who discovered it) lists the four gospels as authoritative for the church. Origen (ca. 185–254) concurs that only the four gospels should be accepted by the churches (*Homily on Luke 1:1*). By AD 325, Bishop Athanasius in the Eastern church and the papal see in the West recognized only four gospels. Eusebius, the fourth-century AD church historian who wrote *Ecclesiastical History*, quotes with approval Origen’s restriction of inspired gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.¹¹

11. The preceding quotations come from Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, 120.

Error 3: Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.

The most provocative claims in *The Da Vinci Code* are that Mary Magdalene (Mary from Magdala, a town on the sea of Galilee; Luke 8:2) was the wife of Jesus and the mother of his children, and that this was a secret the church wanted to cover up to protect the divinity of Jesus. But even if the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary* (Magdalene) wish to say that Jesus and Mary were married, there is no New Testament evidence for such a notion. We offer here two rebuttals to the preceding hypothesis: first, Jesus was not married to Mary; second, Jesus was never married. First, the Gospels' references to Mary Magdalene show no indication whatsoever that she and Jesus were married. Here are the references:

- Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary (Luke 8:2).
- Mary witnessed Jesus's crucifixion (Mark 15:40–41; Matt. 27:55–56; John 19:25).
- She was present at the burial of Jesus (Mark 15:47; Matt. 27:57–61; cf. Mark 16:1).
- She was the first to see Jesus in his resurrection body (John 20:10–18).
- She along with other women announced Jesus's resurrection to the apostles (Luke 24:10; John 20:18).

The fact that emerges from these references is that, except in John 20:10–18, Mary and Jesus were consistently in the presence of other people when together. In John's account, Mary touched Jesus out of surprise and joy on the first Easter morning. There are no sexual innuendoes in the narrative at all. Mary's embrace of Jesus is born out of spontaneity and reverence. Furthermore, while Mary supported Jesus' ministry, there is not so much as a hint in the Gospels that Mary was an apostle, or enjoyed a privileged place among followers of the historical Jesus; nor was she placed on a pedestal by Jesus, contra the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary*. Moreover, in the gospel references to Mary and other women followers of Jesus, all the other ladies are connected to males as relatives except Mary, strongly suggesting she had no man in her life, and certainly not Jesus.¹²

Second, there is no good indication that Jesus was ever married. Bock nicely summarizes the evidence that Jesus was single:

It has long been believed by Christians and scholars that Jesus was single, and there are good reasons for this belief. When He was in ministry, there was no mention of a wife. When He was tried and crucified there was no mention of a wife. Jesus' family members—His mother, brothers, and

12. See Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, 34–35.

sisters—were mentioned more than once, but never a wife. Nor was there any indication that He was widowed.¹³

It is true that the normal expectation was that Jewish males in Bible times were supposed to be married and have children (Gen. 1:26–28), but there were notable exceptions to that norm. It may well be that the Old Testament prophet Samuel was single, as well as Hosea (until God commanded him to marry Gomer). Certainly the Essenes (the probable authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls) were celibate.¹⁴ And, no doubt, John the Baptist was also single. These individuals apparently felt a calling to forego marriage in order to be able to devote themselves fully to the kingdom of God, as did the apostle Paul himself (1 Cor. 7). This seems to be what Matthew 19:10–12 is saying in describing certain disciples who had chosen to be celibate for the sake of the kingdom. Most scholars believe this reference alludes to Jesus' own justification for remaining single.

Conclusion

This opening chapter has raised two pressing questions about the four gospels. Are they reliable? And are they rightly the only gospels to be included in the New Testament? Our answer to the first question is, “yes,” while our answer to the second question is also “yes.” But these two questions only represent the tip of the iceberg relative to the historical Jesus. To that discussion we now turn in the rest of Part 1.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is at stake regarding the four gospels?
2. How did Gabler and Reimarus attack the Bible and the four gospels, respectively?
3. What is the first error of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*? What is the response to this error?
4. What is its second error? What is the response to this error?
5. What is its third error? What is the response to this error?

13. Ibid., 19, 41–42.

14. See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.1.5.20–21 and *Jewish Wars*, 2.8.2

