The Da Vinci Code and the Nag Hammadi Gospels

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Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*[1] is a publishing phenomenon, having sold, so far, over thirty million copies in 40 languages. A movie is also scheduled to be released shortly. The book begins with murder and continues as a high-stakes mystery in which the two heroes, Langdon and Sophie, frantically try to solve a sequence of puzzles that will eventually lead them to the holy grail,[2] all the while running from the police and a psychopathic killer. A crucial part of the plot of *The Da Vinci Code* revolves around the claim that Christianity is, in fact, one big conspiracy. To back up this claim, the character Teabing provides evidence based on a couple of the so-called "gospels" found at Nag Hammadi.

What are these "gospels"? What do they teach, and what can we learn from their appearance in *The Da Vinci Code*?

Nag Hammadi

In 1945, two brothers discovered a jar in a field in Nag Hammadi of Upper Egypt. Within the jar were 12 codices, which contained 52 tractates.[3] After many adventures, worthy of a book themselves (including a murder), the documents ended up in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, Egypt. The tractates are fourth-century Coptic translations of works that were originally in Greek. They all have been published and are available in English.[4]

Several of the Nag Hammadi tractates are identified as gospels, which include the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of the Egyptians, and the Gospel of Mary.

In *The Da Vinci Code,* the two gospels that the fictional character Sir Leigh Teabing, former British Royal Historian, quotes from are the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Philip. The first six pages of the Gospel of Mary have not survived, but what is left begins with "Peter said to Mary, 'Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember—which you know (but) we do not nor have we heard them.' Mary answered and said, 'What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you.' "[5]

Mary's speech becomes more and more philosophical. Toward the end of it she says, " 'When the soul had overcome the third power, it went upwards and saw the fourth power, (which) took seven forms. The first form is darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth is the excitement of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the sixth is the foolish wisdom of flesh, the seventh is the wrathful wisdom. These are the seven [powers] of wrath. They ask the soul, "whence do you come, slayer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space?" ' "[6]

At the end of the speech is the following: "Andrew answered and said to the brethren, 'Say what you (wish to) say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas.' Peter answered and spoke concerning the same things. . . . Levi answered and said to Peter, 'Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the women like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us.' "[7]

The Gospel of Mary claims to present the secret words of Jesus, words unknown to the regular apostles but revealed to Mary. What do these secret words reveal? They reveal a version of Christianity that is philosophical—in which the Cross of Jesus has no place. A type of Christianity, in fact, that has much in common with the "heresies" described as Gnostic by the second-century writer Irenaeus.[8] But Andrew and Peter, as representatives of more orthodox Christianity, reject these secret words of Jesus. In this reading, the Gospel of Mary is an apology for Gnosticism—it claims that those advocating Gnostic ideas are correct, and that the rest of Christianity is wrong.

This, however, is not the reading of the gospel presented by the character Teabing

in *The Da Vinci Code,* which quotes the words cited above. According to Teabing, Peter is speaking out of jealousy of the real status of Mary, a status that Teabing had revealed a couple of pages earlier, when he quoted the Gospel of Philip: "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 rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?'

"The words surprised Sophie, and yet they hardly seemed conclusive. 'It says nothing of marriage.'

" 'Au contraire.' Teabing smiled, pointing to the first line. 'As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse.' "[9]

The passage Teabing cited from the Gospel of Philip is certainly one of the more sensational passages in the Nag Hammadi library. The paragraph concerned is actually a reconstruction of a fragmentary text, which reads, "As for the Wisdom who is called 'the barren,' she is the mother . . . angels. And the companion of the . . . Mary Magdalene . . . her more than . . . disciples . . . kiss her . . . on her . . . the rest of . . . by it . . . They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?' "[10] The reconstruction is probably not that far from the original. But the interpretation provided of the word *companion* by Teabing is open to dispute. While Jesus doubtless spoke Aramaic, the Gospel of Philip was written in Greek and then translated into Coptic. The particular word *companion* is a loan word from Greek, and elsewhere means "companion." It is not impossible that "sexual partner," or even "spouse" is intended in the Gospel of Philip, but this would be an unusual use of the word. Besides, we hear of Jesus' mother, brothers, and sisters in the canonical Gospels (e.g., Matt. 13:55). Would we not also expect to hear if He had a wife?

According to the character Teabing in *The Da Vinci Code,* Jesus was just a man, albeit an important man, and married to Mary Magdalene. It was only later, and under the somewhat sinister instigation of the Emperor Constantine, that Jesus was said to be the Son of God, and all other documents that might suggest otherwise were suppressed. Among these documents were the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Philip.

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Conclusion

It is, indeed, true that the noncanonical gospels of Nag Hammadi portray a Jesus different from what's in the canonical Gospels. But here is where historical judgment must be exercised. Which of these pictures of Jesus is most likely? The early church had little doubt. Spurred on by Marcion, who vigorously advocated that Christians should use only Luke and some of Paul's writings, various Christian leaders produced a list of books, or canon, which should be considered authoritative by Christians. Admittedly, the list that was exactly the same as the books found in today's New Testament did not appear until A.D. 367.[11]

But here is the point. There was *never* debate as to whether Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John should be on that list. The debate was over such books as Revelation and Hebrews.

The question as to whether or not the early church chose the right Gospels remains, and it can be answered by reading the other gospels that have survived, such as what was found at Nag Hammadi. I, for one, after reading these other gospels, think that the early church made the right decision, and that we should form our understanding of Jesus from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As the Bible says of itself: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV). That would include, of course, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Most parishioners can recognize that *The Da Vinci Code* is fiction, but some will have questions regarding assertions made in the book about such writings as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary. Welcome these questions, because they provide an opportunity to discuss several matters of great importance to Christianity, such as the authority of the New Testament and the divinity of Jesus. M

1 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi, 2003).

2 Many stories from the medieval period feature a search for the holy grail—said to be the cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper, and which was attributed mystical properties. The holy grail also appears in modern stories and movies.

3 A tractate is a short work, mainly of a religious nature.

4 See James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

5 All of the translations of the Nag Hammadi Documents cited in this article are taken from Robinson, 472.

6 Ibid, 473.

7 Ibid.

8 In several places in *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge, 2003), e.g. pp. 155–60, Karen L. King argues that the Gospel of Mary is not Gnostic, because "there was no religion in antiquity called Gnosticism" (p. 155). On the other hand, Fred Lapham describes the Gospel of Philip as "broadly Gnostic," and the Gospel of Mary as beginning with a "Gnostic discourse." See *An Introduction to the New Testament Apocrypha* (London: Clark, 2003), 95, 162. The term *gnosticism* remains a convenient term to describe a cluster of versions of Christianity that focused on philosophy and downplayed the Cross. Even so, strictly speaking we should probably talk of *gnosticisms,* rather than of *Gnosticism.*

9 Brown, 333.

10 Robinson, 138.

11 The list was produced by Athanasius in his 39th Easter festival letter.