

HOW DID WE GET OUR BIBLE?

By Rev. Will Nelken

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2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. ¹⁷ It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do.

Teabing cleared his throat and replied, "The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven. The Bible is the product of *man*, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book." (emphasis in *The Da Vinci Code*, page 231)

Of course the Bible did not arrive by fax, but was it merely a product of human evolution and selfish ambition?

In 1945, a group of ancient documents, dating at the earliest from 350 A.D., were discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Although many of the documents had been referred to and denounced in the writings of early church theologians such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, the texts themselves were long thought to have been extinct. The Nag Hammadi discovery made many of the manuscripts available to modern investigation for the first time.

Scholars and historians have found little new or significant information in the documents. However, those inclined to the teachings of the Gnostics (an early Christian cult), have delighted in their revelation and argue that Gnosticism should be considered at least as legitimate as orthodox Christianity because (they say) the "heresy" was simply a competing strain of early Christianity.

Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* seems to take this approach, popularizing ancient Gnostic heresies as believable doctrines for today's seekers. The four major theological issues any reader will confront include (1) the teaching about God and the cosmological "worlds" associated with Him; (2) the person of Jesus, His work on the cross, and salvation; (3) the role of revelation, authority, and spirituality in defining the faith; and (4) to a lesser degree, the role of women.

One of Brown's characters, Sir Leigh Teabing, a former British Royal Historian, is full of opinions about Christianity that are critical of the church and that present conspiratorial implications. The nature of this character exudes confidence and reliability, transforming his preposterous assumptions and outright historical errors into credible rubbish. This is the primary source of the controversy over the novel. The uninformed masses may be unable to distinguish truth from the novel's fiction, precisely because its author calls his fiction "fact."

Rod of Iron or Irony?

In another brash exaggeration, Teabing adds, "More than *eighty* gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them."

"Who chose which gospels to include?" Sophie asked.

“Aha!” Teabing burst in with enthusiasm. “The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.” (emphasis in The Da Vinci Code, p. 231)

Teabing claims that Constantine “commissioned and financed a new Bible, which 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” (p. 234). The Vatican is made responsible for suppressing the release of the Nag Hammadi texts. The modern Bible “was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda—to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use His influence to solidify their own power base.”

Then Teabing claims that “almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*” (emphasis in The Da Vinci Code, p. 235). He adds, “Christ as Messiah was critical to the functioning of Church and state. Many scholars claim that the early Church literally stole Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power.”

In these claims, two ideas are brought together, both of which need examination: (1) How did the New Testament Gospels emerge as central to Christian belief? (2) How was it determined that Jesus was divine? We will tackle the first of these today, and the second next weekend. The issue that needs investigation today is: When did early Christians begin to believe what they believed?

Examining the Historical Record

There were not more than eighty gospel documents. For example, The Nag Hammadi Library, published in English in 1977, consisted of forty-five separate titles—and not all of them were gospels. In fact, it names five separate works as gospels: Truth, Thomas, Philip, Egyptians, and Mary. The collection of The Gnostic Scriptures by Bentley Layton has just short of forty works, three of which bear the title gospel and overlap with the Nag Hammadi list.

The most generous count of extrabiblical documents appears in Harvard Professor Helmut Koester’s Introduction to the New Testament. That count stands at sixty, excluding the twenty-seven books in the New Testament. However, a vast majority of these works were not gospels. So, we may conclude that the candidates for gospels were actually no more than about a dozen.

Church fathers, such as Irenaeus (ca. 130–200), Hippolytus (ca. 170–236), and Tertullian (ca. 160–after 220), lived in the second and third centuries and played a major role in describing what many in the early church believed. These fathers were very critical of the Gnostics, insisting that their teachings were at odds with apostolic preaching and teaching. So elements of these doctrines are not as “secret” or as “new” as some currently suggest. The views of such groups have been known for well over a millennium. They are “ancient” history. Much study has been given to these documents, and they have been heavily debated.

Gnostic View of God

Just what did these documents, which were not accepted into the canon of Scripture, teach? Furthermore, what kind of Christianity did they espouse?

Whether looking at these ancient documents or reading the early church teachers who were highly critical of them, four major theological issues and one underlying conviction drove the ancient debate. The basic conviction underlying these issues was that these documents reveal mysterious, new truth, the *gnosis* or knowledge. Scholars call these works Gnostic because they deal in *special knowledge*

only for insiders who had access to mysteries or advanced, exclusive teaching that other Christians did not possess.

Gnostic views held to a dualism, a radical opposition that taught that the world of ideas was a pure world, while the physical world was corrupt. The true God (often called the Incorruptible) was a part of this world of ideas and was light. He did not enter directly into the physical creation.

This point stands in some contrast to the view of revelation in the Bible. The biblical texts are recorded and given openly for all to consider, accept, or reject, while setting forth the benefits and consequences of such decisions.

The Eastern Orthodox scholar Frederica Mathewes-Green gives a helpful overview of the Gnostic's view of God and creation in the article "What Heresy?" published in Books and Culture (November-December 2003):

Valentinus [an early proponent of Gnostic views] supposedly taught a hierarchy of spiritual beings called "aeons." One of the lowest aeons, Sophia, fell and gave birth to the Demiurge, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. This evil Demiurge created the visible world, which was a bad thing, because now we pure spirits are all tangled up in fleshy bodies. Christ was an aeon who took possession of the body of the human Jesus, and came to free us from the prison of materiality.

"Us," by the way, didn't mean everybody. Not all people have a divine spark within, just intellectuals; "gnosis," by definition, concerns what you know. Some few who are able to grasp these insights could be initiated into deeper mysteries. Ordinary Christians, who lacked sufficient brainpower, could only attain the Demiurge's middle realm. Everyone else was doomed. Under Gnosticism, there was no hope of salvation for most of the human race.

In short, the view of God found in these texts is very different from that in the biblical texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In these texts, we see a distant God, too transcendent to get his hands dirty with humanity, working through emissaries. In the New Testament, we see God becoming flesh and entering into our suffering to the point of taking it upon Himself for our behalf. The difference is huge.

Why does this difference matter? The Gnostic or Gnostic-like view means that there is no representation by Jesus on behalf of humanity. The issue of salvation is not a matter of dealing with sin or being a sacrifice on behalf of others. The Gnostic God does not deal with sin for us out of His goodness and grace. Nor does He really show that the depths of His love extend to His willingness to die so we can live. All of that vanishes in the view of these non-New Testament texts. Salvation resides in proper knowledge, grasping the mystery aright. Jesus is merely a conduit to this higher knowledge. In sum, salvation is up to us.

Mathewes-Green points out the deficiencies of the new quest:

Now you can begin to see what the early Christians found heretical. Gnosticism rejected the body and saw it as a prison for the soul; Christianity insisted that God infuses all creation and that even the human body can be a vessel of holiness, a "temple of the Holy Spirit." Gnosticism rejected the Hebrew Scriptures and portrayed the God of the Jews as an evil spirit; Christianity looked on Judaism as a mother. Gnosticism was Elitist; Christianity was egalitarian, preferring "neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free." Finally, Gnosticism was just too complicated. Christianity maintained the simple invitation of the One who said, "Let the little children come unto me." Full-blown science-fiction Gnosticism died under its own weight.

Neo-Gnostic writings affirming the value of the ancient Gnostic documents are picking and choosing for the most part; they are not giving us the full story. Filling in the gaps exposes their lack of inspiration and the stark heresies derived from them.

Mathewes-Green sums up the current story line:

The Gnostics, developers of a variety of Christ-flavored spiritualities in the earliest centuries of the Christian era, are enthroned as noble seekers of enlightenment. The early Church, which rejected these theologies, is assigned its usual role of oppressor, afflicting believers with rigid Creeds. It's the old story of oppressive bad guys and rebellious good guys, and Americans never tire of it.

Combating Historical Amnesia

These issues are ancient; the New Age is not new. They have been known and debated for thousands of years. They represent a theological battlefield for generations. Yet *The Da Vinci Code* genre suggest they are secrets, freshly-released from conspiratorial suppression. Many historians and academics are aware of this stilted treatment of the past. From historian Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (2001), we are reminded that for those who propose so-called new information and new realities, "a kind of historical amnesia is a necessary feature of the whole myth of concealment and discovery."

The notion that Christians shared a vast array of writings that some people later reduced in number to produce Scripture of their own design ignores this debate's contentious nature from the beginning. This dispute erupted from the moment these two expressions of faith emerged.

This Council of Nicea and the creed it established represented what a sizable number of Christian communities had believed for more than two hundred years. That was a major reason this view found overwhelming support at this council. The Nicene Creed put in precise philosophical and theological language what had been expressed in more general terms for many years. It also affirmed which texts taught such views. What is more, the four Gospels highlighted at this council had been solidly established and recognized in these communities for more than a century before Nicea. The vote at Nicea, rather than establishing the church's beliefs, affirmed and officially recognized what was already the church's dominant view.

Our own movement, like the Early Church, was founded on a momentous move of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the twentieth century. Forced from their existing congregations, Pentecostal believers banded together in small groups to worship the Lord Jesus in the liberty of the Spirit and encourage one another in good works.

Splintered and often duplicating one another's efforts to spread the Gospel, at last they gathered for a general convocation in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in the summer of 1914, where they found great camaraderie and unity of belief.

Two years later, it was evident that the movement was being fractured by various tangential beliefs and practices. We argued again about many of the same issues the Early Church had struggled with—in twentieth century packaging—and a few of our own.

To avoid promulgating doctrinal error, they began to carve out the fundamental beliefs about which they agreed. In 1918, they met again to ratify the Sixteen Statements of Fundamental Truth, a creed which stands virtually unchanged nearly ninety years later.

However, the agreement was not unanimous. Some, unwilling to adhere to the fundamentals, separated themselves. Many of those groups are now defunct, while a few of the lesser doctrinal twists still remain in the larger body of Pentecostals.

There may always be people who prefer to depart from the solid rock of historical revelation to live on the sandy shores of personal imagination and experience. But it is an unwise choice, which history has affirmed repeatedly.

Gnosticism is still alive and well, even within the halls of the Christendom. While Gnostic views of God and man are broadly rejected by mainstream Christianity, some of its dualism and elitism still remain. Some teachers or congregations act as if they have a corner on revelation that the rest of the Body of Christ is missing.

Outside the Christian church, Gnosticism's humanizing of Jesus is enjoying a resurgence. Once confined to religious libraries and seminars, *The Da Vinci Code* is one sign of its growing popular interest. Beware.

Many of today's points have been informed by Dr. Darrell Bock's book, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nelson Books).