HOW NOT TO GET LOST WHEN READING THE LOST GOSPELS

The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it evolved through countless translations, additions and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book,” says hero Robert Langdon in The Da Vinci Code.1

The book asserts further that the pagan emperor Constantine edited the Scriptures to make Jesus appear divine. Though thousands of documents already existed chronicling Jesus’ mortal life, Constantine had the New Testament writings edited and embellished in order to make Jesus appear godlike: The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned, and Jesus’ humanity thus suppressed.

According to The Da Vinci Code, these suppressed and subsequently lost gospels tell us the truth about Jesus as a “mere man.” Fortunately for historians, some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive. These lost gospels highlight glaring historical discrepancies and fabrications, supposedly clearly confirming that the modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed an agenda to promote Jesus’ divinity and use His influence to solidify their own power base.2

Of course, Time and Newsweek reports of the actual find of one of these lost gospels, the Gospel of Judas—a crumbling Coptic papyrus, 13 sheets, in more than 1,000 fragments, written on both sides, found in an Egyptian desert cave in the 1970s, passed from one antiquities dealer to another, sold for $1 million, now being restored and translated—only adds authenticity to Brown’s fiction, not only to assertions of conspiracy but also to questions about the biblical record.3 No matter the science and scholarship of piecing together crumbling fragments and filling in the gaps like a great jigsaw puzzle, the evident story line is as controversial as The Da Vinci Code. Judas was really Jesus’ best friend whom Jesus asked to betray Him in order to free His spirit from its fleshly prison. Somebody had to betray Jesus. In the end, Judas was a victim of a design bigger than himself. It’s another one of those “everything-you-know-is-wrong” thrill rides.

People gravitate toward conspiracies. And in an age when the volume of available information vastly exceeds the quality of education, it is easy to become confused or skeptical about where truth lies, to believe conspiracy conjectures. It is easy, too, to look for and find someone or something that will substantiate what you want to believe is true. Inaccurate information can be both deadly and self-affirming. People tend to look for versions of Jesus (and spirituality) that reinforce the one they already have.

Historical scholarship points out that these gospels only repeat what the Gnostics a hundred years after Christ were claiming to have found in the canonical Gospels.4 The lost gospels say more about the group that produced them than about the facts of Jesus’ life and death or even the understanding of the earliest followers.5 They are a product of their time. A.D. 150 was a heyday for quasi-Christians who postulated a higher God above the God of the Old Testament and tried to reinterpret Christianity from a Gnostic perspective—an ancient form of the New Age Movement. Even scholars who deny the unique authority of the Christian Scriptures readily admit that the canonical Gospels provide the historically closest glimpse of Jesus. Those familiar with this subject also observe that there are thousands of biblical manuscripts or copies of manuscripts that date as far back as the second century—exponentially more than for most...
other historical documents. The correct assumption is that the originals appeared in the first century within 20 years of Christ’s death, extending through the writing of John’s Gospel somewhere in the A.D. 90s.

When dealing with translations, it is impossible to avoid some variance, especially when working with ancient languages. Those familiar with existing translations of the Bible, however, know that the differences among them are minor. The same body of Scripture has been used for almost 2,000 years. One would be hard-pressed to find a single book with so many contributors that is as coherent and consistent as the Bible. The Da Vinci Code’s assertion that humanity has never had a definitive version of Scripture is pure fiction.

The best place to go for accounts of Jesus is and always has been the Bible. In The Da Vinci Code, the author and characters rarely reference the Bible (the same with media reports on the Gospel of Judas). Yet, for serious seekers, Scripture is a “must read.” Perhaps instead of asking whether everything that’s been taught about Jesus is a lie, it might be best to ask, What if what He said about Himself is true? To answer this question, the best place to start is not The Da Vinci Code, but the best seller that has withstood the test of time.

But our generation seems to be mirroring that of the second century’s quest for the mystery without the restraints of Scripture. Rather it wanted to rewrite Scripture, to adjust it to its own liking. They wanted to reinterpret Scripture from their Gnostic perspective. All the old questions—the original questions sharply debated at the beginning of Christianity—are being reopened—the nature of Christ (His person and work), His death, and His resurrection. And there is an agenda. It is the rejection of Christian faith as a historically unified set of core beliefs that reflects the most major and central points of the New Testament. It is an increasingly secular and godless world that seems bent on returning to pagan views of spirituality.

It is here that Brown’s novel essentially reflects a culture wanting to remake Christianity after a New Age model in which spirituality is linked neither to Scripture nor Scripture’s God, let alone Scripture’s Jesus. Movies and fiction have become the benign educator of our culture. The Da Vinci Code has a foothold in the hearts and minds of readers. Perhaps Scripture should come with a warning, much like the “fact” statements that preface Brown’s novel. Readers should be cautioned that the Bible is not easy. It does not offer a quick fix, nor is there a code for deciphering it. Rather, the Bible is mysterious and its key figure, Jesus, is likewise mysterious at times. We understand that while penned by people, Scripture is divinely inspired and authoritative (2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:21). We understand, too, that such revelations of the Spirit are “spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:13, 14). At bottom they unequivocally point to Jesus—and ultimately to His substitutionary death (John 5:39). Ultimately, knowing who Jesus is demands a view from above in which the Father through the Spirit reveals truth to our very human hearts and minds (Matt. 16:13-20). Jesus is the real code breaker and the real code to overcoming a great conspiracy to ruin our world. But such revelation today takes a high view of Scripture, or at least heartfelt honest exposure to Scripture in which we are both familiar with it and open to it. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17, NIV). It’s easy to get lost when reading these authentic Gospels because it demands a surrender of reason and heart and life unlike any other sacred text. It calls for the willingness to see one’s true self and need in light of the biblical witness. It calls for faith that allows the biblical record literally to transform us by the renewing of our mind. The best place to go for accounts about Jesus is and always has been the Bible. Where are you turning in your quest for Jesus and spiritual answers?

REFERENCES

2 Ibid., p. 317.
4 Gates, p. 49.
5 Van Biema, p. 51.
The 'lost gospels' are those non-canonical gospels such as the Gospel According to the Hebrews, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Thomas, Infancy Gospel of Thomas and many others. It should be born in mind that these attributions are no more reliable than are the attributions of the canonical gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. For scholars, the most important of the non-canonical gospels are the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter. A search of the internet will access English translation of some of these texts, and they are also available (with difficulty) in print. When the church accepted the Hebrew Scriptures, it implicitly rejected Gnosticism before it had a chance to get started. Thus we are already at a watershed moment in the development of early Christianity, one that could not allow Gnosticism to ever be regarded as a legitimate development of the Christian faith. A good example of this is Serapion of Antioch (a bishop from 190 to 211), who let some of his flock read the Gospel of Peter in church until he read the book himself. He concluded that it had a heretical Christology, teachings about Jesus that did not conform to other ancient apostolic documents. Or compare the Apocalypse of Peter with the canonical gospel portraits of Jesus’ Passion. If this is true, how accurate could they be if they are so far removed from the life of Jesus? Answer. Thank you for your question. For many people, the dating of the Gospels seems like an unimportant matter until questions of the Gospel’s accuracy begin to rise. So the problem of where Mark got his information from is taken care of, but what about the late dating of Mark? If Mark was written in AD 70 and the other Gospels were written later then doesn’t that mean that these other Gospels (which contain more information) were too late to be written by eyewitnesses? For this we need to examine the reason why scholars think that the first Gospel was written in AD 70. Premise 1: The Gospels cannot be trusted because they were written several decades after Jesus’ death and are therefore legendary. The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus’ Marriage to Mary the Magdalene is a book published by investigative journalist Simcha Jacobovici and Religious Studies historian Barrie Wilson in 2014. It contends that the 6th century manuscript commonly referred to as "Joseph and Aseneth" is really a disguised history. The book's assertions are not supported by mainstream Biblical scholarship.