

THE DA VINCI CODE, CONSPIRACY THEORY
AND THE BIBLICAL CANON

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1. *Introduction*

I picked up a book in a bookstore recently, and this is how it started:

Of the two most powerful military alliances in the world today, one is predominantly Christian; the other, predominantly God-less. Their opposition makes our task invidious. Any reasoned study of Christian origins which questions the historical dogmas of the Roman and Protestant Churches is likely to be either dismissed as fanciful or censured as wilfully weakening the morale that binds the “Free World” together.¹

We can see the making of a conspiracy—us vs. them, the powerful vs. the oppressed, sanctioned vs. suppressed knowledge, and built in excuses for failure. The authors go on to explain why they hold to such a position on the basis of the response that they received to a previous book that they had published:

It is an accepted rule throughout the lay press in English-speaking countries that, although nine readers out of every ten may be Christian merely in name, all books on Christian subjects must be reviewed by orthodox

1. R. Graves and J. Podro, *Jesus in Rome: A Historical Conjecture* (London: Cassell, 1957), 1.

critics; the believing minority being so well organized that any offence offered them may cause a serious loss of circulation.²

More opposition from “them,” including disenfranchisement from power, ganging up in subtle and not so subtle ways, and the spectre of “big money” driving decisions. They continue:

Though our coherent, if unorthodox, theory of Gospel origins has been loosely described by professional theologians as based on a complex of historical errors, nobody has yet succeeded in isolating and identifying any of these; and until someone does, and offers an even more coherent theory, we are entitled to refer readers of this Epilogue to the book itself for points argued there in detail.³

More grist for the conspiratorial mill—seeing what others, even professionals, cannot. They substitute assertion for proof. They reject the findings of professionals, simply because they are, well, professionals and part of the problem. They believe that failing to disprove is the same as providing proof.

These passages are quoted from Robert Graves and Joshua Podro’s *Jesus in Rome: A Historical Conjecture*, published in 1957. The authors contend that Jesus, after he was crucified, was not resurrected, but that he survived the crucifixion and ended up making his way to Rome. Where did I find such an arcane and potentially explosive piece of important and yet no doubt “suppressed” historical research? In the labyrinthine bowels of a distant monastery shrouded in a fog conspiring to keep out the uninformed? Was it put there by those who were protecting the precarious truth, so that it did not fall into unworthy hands, until such times as it could emerge and revolutionize our understanding? No, I found it in plain sight in an excellent second-hand bookstore in downtown London, England, one block away from the British Museum, on a shelf reserved for first editions, and I purchased it for £9. I was not followed from the bookshop by anyone more sinister than my wife, as we made our way through the streets of London.

Why is it that this unexploded timebomb of enlightening truth and knowledge has not shaken the foundations of our world, including the Free World that the authors see as jeopardized by these explosive ideas? After all, this book was co-authored by a well-known scholar and literary figure, Robert Graves. Graves, for those who aren’t aware, first

2. Graves and Podro, *Jesus in Rome*, 1-2.

3. Graves and Podro, *Jesus in Rome*, 2.

became known as a war poet of the first world war, and went on to write numerous books. These included *I, Claudius*, made into a noteworthy if not memorable movie, other novels historical and otherwise, poetry, and various critical and historical works, including the two volume *The Greek Myths* published in the Penguin series.⁴ If anyone had a chance to expose the truth to the air of acceptance, it was Robert Graves—author of over 120 books. Why did this not happen? The simple reason is that he was wrong and no reputable scholarship has found reason to accept his theory of Jesus’ travelling to Rome. There was no conspiracy of silence. Many other scholars have posited numerous theories about the crucifixion and resurrection, and other elements of Christianity. These are widely discussed and debated.

More to the point of this lecture is this fact—the world seems to love a conspiracy. Who really killed JFK? How did Marilyn Monroe die? What really happened to Pope John Paul I? We love conspiracies even more when they involve politics, noteworthy people or such major institutions as Christianity. After all, rather than holding them up on pedestals, or even recognizing that they have very human faults or shortcomings, isn’t it far more exciting to think that there is some sinister plot that lurks behind what we don’t know or, perhaps, don’t want to accept? In the climate of the openness of discussion in scholarly circles, it is interesting to me to note that so many people have latched on to *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel*, by Dan Brown,⁵ as a vehicle for expressing their “deep-seated”—though, as we shall see, poorly-grounded—doubts.

In this lecture, I will do essentially two things. The first is that I will say a few things about Brown’s novel. Then I will spend the majority of my time examining fundamental issues that he and others raise regarding the origins of Christianity. At the end, I will bring you up to date on the latest discovery of the Holy Grail that took place just this last century. You perhaps have not heard of this discovery—resist the urge to let your conspiratorial imagination run wild. If you had been attentive (and not depending on Dan Brown for your guidance), you could have read about it in any number of publications, just as I did.

4. R. Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, rev. edn, 1960).

5. (New York: Doubleday, 2003); illustrated edition (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

2. Claims of *The Da Vinci Code*

Let me be honest about *The Da Vinci Code*. Quite frankly, I don't know why this novel has had the response that it has. The response is clearly not on the basis of its quality as a novel. The novel is blandly written, has very poor character development, and, though the plot has potential, has serious chronological problems. For instance, how does so much happen in so little time? Then there is the rather pedestrian and patronizing lecture by Leigh Teabing. Let me remind you of what happens. Our hero and heroine, Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu, on the run from the French police (who apparently are more like the Keystone cops than anything else), visit the mansion of the pseudo-scholar Sir Leigh Teabing. In the midst of their flight, Teabing decides to launch into a lecture on the origins of Christianity, which, with other conversation on the topic, amounts to nearly 10% of the length of the novel.⁶ Now, at least if the lecture were factually accurate, there perhaps might be some justification for it. The fact that much of what he says is completely wrong simply perplexes me more.

a. *Fact or Fiction?*

The problem seems to stem from p. 1 of the novel. Here is the twist that you may or may not have noticed. On p. 1 of the novel the author, Dan Brown, lists what he calls a "fact." It is actually a series of what he pretends to call facts concerning the so-called Priory of Sion, in which he installs a number of famous people, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo and Leonardo da Vinci; Opus Dei, which he calls into question by claiming that they have "been the topic of recent controversy"; and then a catch-all statement—"All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." The statement is pretty vague, perhaps intentionally so, but the intention is clear. We are to trust him and accept what he says as the factual truth, though it is presented in novel form.

b. *Some Easy Tests*

One way to easily test Brown is to examine something that is clearly establishable, and see if he is right. If he can get the obvious stuff right, perhaps he can be trusted on the other, more difficult, matters.

6. The novel is 454 pp. and the speech from Teabing is roughly 40 pp., not counting other episodes of extended discussion throughout.

1. *YHWH*. On p. 309, he has Robert Langdon, his entirely fictitious Professor of Religious Symbology at Harvard University, say, in the midst of one of his tedious, overdone and (to anticipate my conclusion!) misguided and wrong discussions about the sacred feminine in the ancient world, “The Jewish tetragrammaton YHWH—the sacred name of God—in fact derived from Jehovah, an androgynous physical union between the masculine *Jah* and the pre-Hebraic name of Eve, *Havah*.” Not only does Brown wish to depict Christianity—in particular and especially Catholicism—as suspect with regard to its origins and continual hiding of the truth, now he wishes to impugn Judaism as well. It is unbelievable to think that someone could be tenured at Harvard spewing such drivel as this.⁷ In fact, the opposite is how we arrived at YHWH. Jehovah is derived from pronouncing YHWH (without its original vowels, as in Yaheweh) with the vowels from the word Adonai, and hence Yehovah.⁸ The tetragrammaton or four-letter name dates from the Torah. Jehovah dates no earlier than the thirteenth century and was not common until the sixteenth century,⁹ and was not the result of linking the masculine Jah and the name for Eve. So, the etymology is wrong and Brown’s androgyny is not to be found.

2. *Sex in the Temple*. On the same page, Brown also says that early Judaism involved “ritualistic sex” in the temple, since “Early Jews believed that the Holy of Holies in Solomon’s Temple housed not only God but also His powerful female equal, Shekinah” (p. 309). That’s all very interesting, except that the term Shekinah or its equivalent is not used in the Old Testament or the New Testament, but was a term used in the Targums and by rabbinic writers after the time of the New Testament, and what dwells in the temple is not God’s mate but God himself.¹⁰ So far Brown is not doing very well. Let’s give him a last chance.

7. A check of the web-site reveals that Harvard University does not appear to have a Professor of Symbology—another fact gone awry.

8. See E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (ed. A.E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon, 2nd edn, 1980), 300; thanks to my colleague, Dr. Mark Boda, for this reference.

9. See C.E. Olson and S. Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 291-92.

10. D. Cleaver-Bartholomew, “Shekinah,” in D.N. Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1203-1204.

3. *Companion*. Brown makes much of a passage in the *Gospel of Philip*. This is a late third-century AD compilation of thematically organized statements about the sacraments attributed to Valentinian gnosticism—gnosticism being a set of beliefs that emphasized special knowledge and denigrated earthly existence.¹¹ In fact, this passage is crucial for Brown’s entire hypothesis regarding Mary Magdalene. Teabing turns to the *Gospel of Philip* as “always a good place to start” (p. 246)—which, as a New Testament scholar, is news to me. He has Sophie quote a passage that refers to Mary Magdalene as Jesus’ “companion” (p. 246; *Gospel of Philip* 63.33–64.6, Robinson translation),¹² and says that they used to kiss on the mouth, which offended the rest of the disciples. Teabing pronounces: “As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word *companion*, in those days, literally meant *spouse*” (p. 246). Since the *Gospel of Philip* is written in Coptic as a probable translation from Greek, it really makes no difference what an Aramaic scholar thinks. What does a Coptic or Greek scholar think? First, there is a lacuna or hole in the middle of the parchment, so it is unclear whether it is the other women or men who are offended.¹³ Brown does not mention the lacuna. Secondly, the word for companion, κοινῶνός, is simply a transliterated Greek word.¹⁴ It has a range of glosses in the standard lexica (LSJ, BDAG), including “companion,” “partner,” “accomplice,” “fellow,” or “sharer”—but apparently not spouse. Thirdly, Teabing thinks this is a good place to start regarding Mary Magdalene, but it is also a good place to finish, since this appears to be the only place in all of the gnostic or Coptic texts that has Mary Magdalene depicted in this way.¹⁵ Rather than being representative, this is clearly exceptional—and no earlier than the third century, the date for composition of the *Gospel of Philip*. It also may not even be that important, since in the *Second Apocalypse of James*—a gnostic revelatory text from the third century—Jesus is similarly depicted as kissing James (56.14–19).¹⁶ When we realize that Paul endorses greeting each other with a holy kiss (Rom

11. W.W. Isenberg, in J.M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: Harper & Row, 3rd edn, 1988), 139–41.

12. Isenberg, in Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 148.

13. See R.McL. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip* (London: Mowbrays, 1962), 115.

14. W.C. Till, *Das Evangelium nach Philippos* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1963), 28–29.

15. Olson and Miesel, *Da Vinci Hoax*, 93.

16. Olson and Miesel, *Da Vinci Hoax*, 95.

16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:16) we realize that what might appear to us to be an overly friendly or intimate gesture was simply the way some friends greeted each other in the ancient world (and which many cultures retain to this day).

c. Fiction not Fact

As a result, and back to p. 1 of the novel, it will not be a surprise therefore to discover that I believe that, contrary to any claim, Brown is wrong not only on a number of clearly checkable facts but also on the Priory of Sion, the nature of the involvement of Opus Dei (regardless of what one may think of the organization in other regards), and especially a number of significant details regarding the origins of Christianity. Note two things that are often overlooked—(1) this is the first page of a *novel*, and (2) Brown makes no claim regarding the accuracy of any number of other historical elements—which is a good thing, since virtually no scholar would or could. This is the reason that Brown writes a novel, rather than the historical work that Graves attempts—which makes it all the more bewildering that so many people are willing to accept the first page of a novel as fact, when the first page itself is actually part of the fiction.

3. The Da Vinci Code and Development of the Biblical Canon

I could discuss a number of people, institutions or historical events cited or alluded to in *The Da Vinci Code* related to Christianity. What I wish to discuss are those items that have a direct relevance for early Christianity, especially the development of the biblical canon and the gospels.

a. Tangential Items

Let me review quickly a few tangential items simply to dispense with them. I am not a historian of later church history, nor am I an expert in Renaissance art, but it is not difficult to discover that Dan Brown clearly is not either.¹⁷

1. *The Priory of Sion*. Brown contends that this was a secret organization founded in 1099 (p. 1). Apart from Brown, and those he relies upon in coming to this conclusion, there is only one scholar that I

17. I acknowledge the use of Olson and Miesel's book, *The Da Vinci Hoax*, throughout this list of discussion items.

have found who is willing to entertain the idea that the Priory of Sion as depicted in *The Da Vinci Code* as a continuing organization safe-guarding merits regarding Mary Magdalene is older than the twentieth century, and he does so in a guarded way and without committing himself. Although there was an earlier Priory of Sion, all of the evidence points to Brown's Priory of Sion being founded by a twentieth-century Frenchman named Plantard, who forged documents to try to establish the age of this organization. If the organization was founded in 1956, as the evidence indicates, then the organization would not have existed earlier than that time, and hence Newton, Botticelli, Hugo and especially Leonardo da Vinci would not have, indeed could not have, been members of it. With this plank gone, much of the plot of *The Da Vinci Code* disappears, since there is no secret organization safe-guarding (I dare say, creating) the myth regarding Mary Magdalene—no one protecting what isn't really there anyway.

2. *Knights Templar*. There is a lot of mythology regarding the Knights Templar, but all indications are that they were never what rumour has made them to be. It is also clear that whatever one thinks of the king's or the pope's involvement in their demise, they were effectively disbanded in 1307 on Friday, October 13. It was with the rise of Freemasonry, however, that the Knights Templar got a new lease on life—or at least their name was resurrected, even if the original order was not.

3. *Holy Grail*. In *The Da Vinci Code* there is a link made between Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail, involving all sorts of supposed indicators, such as belief regarding the sacred feminine, various signs and symbols, and supposed interaction between Jesus and Mary. This linkage is of recent vintage and not supported by the traditional accounts or the evidence. In fact, Brown's attempt to link the Holy Grail with "*sang real*" or "royal blood" (p. 249) is a false etymology. The term "grail" only goes back to 1330 in English, with the word "grail" from a Latin word that represents a type of platter used in medieval banquets.¹⁸ In other words, as one might have thought before reading *The Da Vinci Code*, the Holy Grail has always been associated with the chalice or cup used at the Lord's supper.

18. Olson and Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax*, 182-83.

4. *Mary Magdalene*. *The Da Vinci Code* is so determined to make its point about Mary Magdalene that it makes a number of preposterous claims for her, including that she is the Holy Grail (not the chalice), that this was taught by Jesus (!) and that this was depicted by Leonardo da Vinci in his *The Last Supper*, but that the Catholic Church has smeared her up until the present by depicting her as an evil woman (she is supposedly the prostitute of Luke 7) when in fact Jesus and Mary were married. Let's be very clear here—there is absolutely no evidence that Jesus was married at all, much less to Mary Magdalene. According to the New Testament, she was a woman from whom Jesus expelled demons, and who, as a close follower of Jesus, witnessed the crucifixion, Jesus' burial and the empty tomb, and to whom Jesus appeared. That's it.¹⁹

5. *Art*. One of the major claims of *The Da Vinci Code* is that Leonardo da Vinci depicted Mary Magdalene in his *The Last Supper*, both by putting her at Jesus' right and in painting the groupings of people in the shape of a letter M. I am no art expert, but I have seen a lot of art in many of the major art galleries of the world, including *The Last Supper* by Leonardo, and there are a lot of men who are painted with feminine characteristics. This is simply the way Renaissance art is. As for the M in the painting, I picked up my copy of the well-known *History of Art* by Jansen,²⁰ and I can find any number of different letters in a host of pictures, by Leonardo and other artists (e.g. Os, which no doubt represent fertility!). What does this mean? The same thing that Brown's M means—nothing. Paintings have geometrical shapes in them—that's part of what it means to be art.

So much for many of the details that Brown wishes to rely upon. These do not, however, get to the heart of the matter.

19. The most recent book on Mary Magdalene known to me is E.A. de Boer, *The Gospel of Mary: Beyond a Gnostic and a Biblical Mary Magdalene* (JSNTSup 260; London: Continuum, 2004), which appeared in a series I formerly edited. Her conclusions are that Mary was significant in the gospels as one of the close followers of Jesus, but that she is depicted in egalitarian terms in the later accounts. She does not mention marriage to Jesus as a serious proposition.

20. H.W. Janson, *History of Art* (New York: Abrams, 1962).

b. *Brown's Major Claim*

Now let's turn to what I see as the gist—or should I say grist?—of what Brown is trying to depict in his novel. In his novel, Brown seems to hold to the following scenario regarding developments in early Christianity—*Jesus Christ was simply a human being who, because of his tremendous influence, had a huge number of followers.* In fact, according to Brown, many of them wrote about his life, and created 80 gospels that all were vying for acceptance, until the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great made a choice among them. Despite his supposed best efforts to suppress them, some of those gospels, such as ones from Qumran and Nag Hammadi, Brown notes, have survived for us to examine. According to Brown, Constantine made a number of other crucial choices, including shifting Christian worship from Saturday to Sunday and holding an ecumenical council at Nicea, at which council, among other things, the gathered bishops voted to make Jesus divine.²¹

c. *A Preliminary Response to the Brown Hypothesis (or Hallucination)*

It is hard to know where to start, since Brown's reconstruction is so far from the truth that it is hard to imagine anyone taking him seriously. But let's start with some of the obvious problems.

1. *Problem One: Constantine and Sunday.* Constantine did not shift Christian worship from Saturday to Sunday. That was already present in the first century, as Acts 20:7 and 1 Cor 16:2 make clear, as well as numerous other references (e.g. *Didache* 14.1 [end first century AD]; *Epistle of Barnabas* ch. 15 [end first century]; Ignatius [AD 110]; Justin [mid 2nd century]; Tertullian, *De orat.* 23 [c. 200]; etc.).²²

2. *Problem Two: Council of Nicea.* Concerning the Council of Nicea, Brown is wrong in a number of ways. One is in the way that he treats the council as having decisively conferred divinity upon Jesus. The historical record shows that there was debating of issues—not whether Jesus was divine, but in terms of what it meant that he was divine—both

21. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 230-69.

22. Olson and Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax*, 159-61.

before and after the council.²³ In that sense, the council settled very little. More to the point, however, is this mistaken notion that the issue of divinity was something that came on the scene for decision in the fourth century. There has been debate in scholarly circles for a number of years regarding the earliest references in the New Testament to the pre-existence and divinity of Jesus. One recent treatment has suggested that the prologue to John's Gospel (John 1:1-18), from around AD 90, is the earliest clear statement.²⁴ This conclusion, however, has been widely rejected by many if not most scholars, who have instead seen clear statements about Jesus' divinity made in such earlier passages as Phil 2:6-11 (c. AD 62), with its three-part Christology of Jesus as equal with God, becoming incarnate and then ascending, and Col 1:15-20 (c. AD 61/62), with its depiction of Jesus performing the creative functions of God—besides a number of others (as well as John's prologue). In fact, there are some scholars who wish to see the makings of a formulation of what was later called the Trinity in such passages as 2 Cor 13:14 (c. AD 56), Rom 1:1-4 and Rom 8:9 (c. AD 57). It is clear that many of Jesus' earliest followers accepted and articulated his divinity, including many later church fathers, some of whom gathered at Nicea.

But how about Jesus himself? A number of passages could be turned to, but there is one, I believe, that shows this clearly. In his trial before the sanhedrin, as described in Mark 14, Jesus is asked by the high priest whether he is the Christ, the son of the Blessed One. One must remember that making a claim to being the Christ or Messiah was not against Jewish law of the time, even if people didn't believe you. However, Josephus, the Jewish historian, records a number of contemporaries of Jesus who laid claim to being Messiah—and who almost inevitably ended up dead at the hands of the Romans, who greatly disliked competing kings and kingdoms. What qualified for the death penalty in Jewish thought of the time was to blaspheme or make a claim to being God. When Jesus answers the high priest's question about being the Christ, he says, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62 NASB). In this response, Jesus not only accepts the title of

23. For a brief summary, see C.H. Dodd, "The History of Christianity from the Death of St. Paul to the Reign of Constantine," in *The History of Christianity in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (London: Blackie, n.d.), 448-49.

24. J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 213-50.

Messiah, but goes further and claims as the son of man the prerogative of coming in judgment with God, seated at his right hand as he comes on his judgment chariot (Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13). This gets the high priest pretty excited. He tears his clothes, says that he has heard blasphemy, and condemns Jesus as deserving death.²⁵ Indeed, it was clear to those of the time that Jesus was making a claim to be God. All this goes to show that not only is Dan Brown not a very good novelist, but he is a very poor historian of early Christianity as well.

d. *The Formation of the Canon and Dan Brown*

What I am more concerned with here, however, is the historical reconstruction that Brown offers regarding the canon. When that is corrected, a very different scenario begins to make sense of the evidence about the formation of the biblical canon. The major issue concerns the Gospels.

1. *The Qumran Gospels?* For the sake of clarification, let's be clear that there are no gospels of Jesus in the Qumran writings, and no gospels whatsoever among these scrolls. In fact, there are no clearly accepted *Christian* documents in the Qumran scrolls. There has been much controversy surrounding the Qumran documents—much of it completely unnecessary in my opinion, promulgated at least in part by conspiracy theorists who “knew” that the Cave 4 documents—so long delayed in publication, but that's another story—contained material that would undermine Christianity. But the Cave 4 documents have if anything enhanced and supplemented the canonical or biblical Gospel accounts. For example, I think that we understand much better Jesus' citation of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4—“the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor”—when we see that this was a passage interpreted the same way at Qumran as well. Far from undermining Christianity, it shows that the kind of messianic talk that we find in the Gospels is in fact the kind of thing that was being discussed at the time of Jesus. It is not some anachronistic retroversion to Jesus created by the later church after reflection on their religious experience, but indicative of the kind of thought that Jesus had that led his earliest followers to declare that he was the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

25. C.A. Evans, *Jesus and his Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 407-34.

2. *Other Gospels?* More to the point regarding the Gospels themselves is the number of gospels that were supposedly vying for acceptance, and when they were doing this. Eighty is an interesting number—how Teabing and Brown arrive at it is not made clear. Why not 74 or 81 or 107? By my reckoning—and we must remember that Brown does not provide a list to give any idea of which ones he is thinking of (if he is thinking about any of them)—there are around 90 gospels that can be taken into consideration. Brown missed a good chance to have even higher numbers. These gospels include everything from rather large documents such as the *Protevangelium of James*, to highly fragmentary scraps of papyrus such as the Fayyum fragment (7 lines), to simple references to gospels in the early church fathers, such as the *Gospel of Andrew* referred to by Augustine. In other words, there is quite a range of documents here—not all of them of equal value. One of the underlying currents of *The Da Vinci Code* is that there has been some incredible conspiracy of silence to keep the unaware from knowing of these gospels. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Let's take a look at a few of these.

a. *Protevangelium of James*. The non-biblical gospels referred to in the church fathers have been known for centuries, even if we no longer have the documents themselves. Others have also been known in various ways for centuries. For example, the *Protevangelium of James*²⁶ is probably the earliest and most significant interpretation of, or midrash on, the Gospel infancy accounts. It draws upon both Luke's and Matthew's stories, as well as possibly other sources.²⁷ It has been dated by most scholars to AD 150 to 200. Rather than being suppressed, as one might expect for such an influential and well-known gospel, it was an incredibly popular work. It still exists in over one hundred Greek manuscripts dating from the third century on, although most of them date to later than the tenth century. Translations were apparently made into Syriac, Ethiopic, Georgian, Sahidic, Old Church Slavonic, Armenian, Arabic and probably Latin. The *Protevangelium* was

26. See J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 48-52, for information below.

27. It may be better not to classify this as a gospel at all, since its title in the earliest manuscript is given as "Birth of Mary, Revelation of James." See R.F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1995), 4; cf. 31 for manuscript.

prohibited in the western church because it talks of Joseph having had a first marriage, but this just shows how badly supposed attempts at suppression sometimes work—there are manuscripts and versions of this document everywhere. There have been printed editions since the sixteenth century.

One of the most famous editions of this *Protevangelium* was published by the great (and I might add thoroughly orthodox) biblical scholar Constantin Tischendorf in 1853, with a revised edition in 1876. Tischendorf, for those who do not know, undertook to find and edit more biblical manuscripts than anyone, because he believed that there was a firm textual basis for belief in the veracity of the New Testament. Along the way he edited a number of non-biblical manuscripts. These included volumes on the apocryphal gospels. Since Tischendorf's edition,²⁸ four earlier manuscripts of the *Protevangelium of James* have been discovered. That this material has been widely known for years is further confirmed by the number of English translations alone of the apocryphal gospels. These include at least eight English translations that I know of.²⁹ I own copies of both Tischendorf's first and second editions of his apocryphal gospels. The first edition copy was owned at one time by a person at Pusey House in Oxford and the second edition copy was owned by the Anglican bishop A.E.J. Rawlinson when he was at Christ Church Oxford, and then passed on to C.W. Emmett of University College, before being put in the Bishop Rawlinson Library in Derby Cathedral (and then eventually bought by me). These are both well-used books—obviously not very well suppressed.

b. *Papyrus Finds*. More recent discoveries have also taken place.

(1) *Fayyum Fragment*. The first fragmentary Greek apocryphal gospel to be found and published was the so-called Fayyum Fragment, now in the Austrian National Library in Vienna. It was discovered and published in 1885, and has continued to arouse interest because it quotes both Matthew and Mark. Editions have been published by such well-known scholars as Carl Wessely, Harnack, Resch, Preuschen, Klostermann, Lührmann, and now more recently Kraus and, of all people, Stanley and

28. C. Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha* (Leipzig: Avenarius & Mendelssohn, 1838; 2nd edn, 1876).

29. Hone, Walker, Cowper, James, Lightfoot/James/Swete, Hennecke/Schneemelcher, Cameron and Elliott—published by such reputable publishers as Oxford, among others.

Wendy Porter—whose edition will appear in a collection of all of the New Testament Greek papyri and parchments and related documents from the Vienna collection to be published by the Austrian National Library later this year.³⁰

(2) *Greek Gospel of Thomas*. When the first Greek fragments of what was later identified as the *Gospel of Thomas* (I'll say more about this below) were discovered at Oxyrhynchus, a city in Egypt, they were published in their own separate special edition (1897),³¹ and then these fragments launched the now famous Oxyrhynchus papyrus collection as P.Oxy. 1 (1898)—in front of papyri from Matthew and Mark. Then when two more fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas* were found, these were published as the opening texts of their respective volume of papyri as P.Oxy. 654 and 655—in front of papyri of Genesis and Hebrews. This latter discovery led to a new edition of all three fragments.³² Knowledge of these apocryphal gospels was not something confined to biblical scholars alone. These fragments were widely discussed in numerous scholarly and popular venues.³³ In fact, I own a series of sermons delivered on these “words of Jesus,” published as “*Sayings of Jesus and a Lost Gospel Fragment. Being a Series of Village Sermons on Three Papyrus Fragments. Preached in St. Kentigern's Church, Crosthwaite, Keswick, in the Years 1897 and 1904*,” by H.D. Rawnsley (1905).³⁴

(3) *Egerton Gospel*. The Egerton gospel came into the possession of the British Library early last century. As the editors say, rather than wait—or suppress the information!—they rushed to publication.³⁵ The first edi-

30. S.E. Porter and W.J. Porter, *New Testament Greek Papyri and Parchments: New Editions* (Vienna: Austrian National Library, forthcoming). For the history of publication, see Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 43-44.

31. B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt, *Logia Iesou: Sayings of Our Lord* (London: Frowde, 1897).

32. B.P. Grenfell, L.W. Drexel and A.S. Hunt, *New Sayings of Jesus and Fragment of a Lost Gospel from Oxyrhynchus* (London: Frowde, 1904).

33. J.A. Fitzmyer, “The Oxyrhynchus Logoi of Jesus and the Coptic Gospel according to Thomas,” *Theological Studies* 20 (1959), 505-60; repr. in *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1974), 355-433.

34. (Laleham, England: Beaver Press, 1905).

35. H.I. Bell and T.C. Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and Other Early Christian Papyri* (London: British Museum, 1935), v.

tion appeared in 1935. Due to popular demand, so their subsequent prefaces say, they issued popular editions of this gospel fragment in 1935, 1951 and 1955.³⁶ A fragment of papyrus from the Cologne collection has now been joined to it (P.Köln 255). The Egerton gospel consists of quotations and paraphrases from all four of the canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), and is clearly dependent upon the canonical gospels in three of its four units of material.

(4) *Nag Hammadi Documents*. As a final example, I will mention the discovery in 1945 of the Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in Egypt.³⁷ This collection of Coptic documents, consisting of twelve codexes—the codex was an ancient form of book—and some other leaves from a thirteenth codex, contains forty-five separate titles of works, some of them gospels. After some delays in publication of these documents, serious work began in the late 1960s, which was soon sponsored by the Ministry of Culture of Egypt and UNESCO. The entire library was published by 1979. The works were published in Coptic editions and then in English translations (1977). One of the documents discovered was the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*, which was one of the first documents published (1959). I will say more about this document in a moment. The Nag Hammadi library of Coptic documents reflects gnostic belief in many of its documents. All are thought to have been translated out of Greek and into Coptic, including a small part of Plato's *Republic* and some of the Sentences of Sextus, among other documents. The publicity surrounding the Nag Hammadi library provides grist for a conspirator's mill, since these gnostic, Coptic documents were found in jars probably stashed away around AD 400, when the monastery was destroyed. It is only one of several monasteries like this, however. In 1952, a Pachomian monastery (named after the Christian Pachomius, who founded the first Christian monastic order in the early fourth century) was found near Dishna (not far from Nag Hammadi). It apparently was destroyed in the seventh century. This library had biblical, apocryphal, martyriological and other theological texts, as well as a few fragments of authors such as

36. Under the title: *The New Gospel Fragments*.

37. On which, see J.M. Robinson, "Introduction," in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 22-26.

Thucydides, and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, mostly in Greek but also in Coptic.³⁸

3. *Gathering the Gospels Together*. In many ways, Constantine is the bad person in *The Da Vinci Code*, since he is supposedly responsible for much of the suppression of the competing gospels and the selection of the four canonical ones. I won't defend all that Constantine did, but two things are clear. One, he did not establish the four canonical gospels. Two, he did not head up the council that "made" Jesus divine (as we have already discussed).

a. *Two Big Books from the Time of Constantine*. By the time of Constantine, not only were the canonical Gospels fixed, but the rest of the canon was pretty much established as well. This is clearly shown by the two major codexes that we have from the fourth century. These are the two earliest close-to-complete Bibles, and they only have four Gospels in them, the four that we know as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There is some thought that these two codexes, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, were two of the fifty Bibles commissioned by Constantine from Eusebius of Caesarea (Eusebius, *De Vita Constantini* 4.36-37).³⁹ Perhaps this is what Brown is thinking of when he talks about Constantine choosing the Gospels, when, as we shall see, these two codexes simply included what had already been established as the four canonical Gospels. Constantine did not choose their content. In fact, most New Testament scholars believe that these codexes originated in Egypt, probably Alexandria, independent of Constantine's intervention.⁴⁰

b. *Complete Gospels?* Perhaps a better way to approach the various gospels that were present in the first few centuries is to go to several scholars who write about such developments. In *The Complete Gospels*, edited by Robert Miller,⁴¹ there is the contention made that they have

38. See J.M. Robinson, *The Pachomian Monastic Library at the Chester Beatty Library and the Bibliothéque Bodmer* (ISAC Occasional Papers 19; Claremont, CA: Claremont Graduate School, 1990).

39. T.C. Skeat, *The Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Alexandrinus* (London: British Museum, 1963), 21-22.

40. See F.G. Kenyon, *The Text of the Greek Bible* (rev. A.W. Adams; London: Duckworth, 3rd edn, 1975), 82.

41. (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

gathered “all the surviving gospels and gospel fragments into one volume” (p. vii). What exactly does that consist of? They list 21 gospels, plus a number of “orphan sayings” or *agrapha*.

Let’s look at this list more closely. First of all we can eliminate the “orphan sayings” from consideration, since they are not gospels, but simply short sayings which may or may not have ever been part of a gospel—in fact their isolated presence may argue *against* their being part of gospels. There is little doubt that Jesus said more than is recorded in the canonical Gospels, whether these *agrapha* record some of these words or not. Miller also includes the four canonical Gospels, and then something called the Signs Gospel. But that Signs Gospel should not be included, since that is only a supposed gospel reconstructed from the canonical Gospel of John. It does not have the same status as a real Gospel does. There are a number of “sayings gospels,”⁴² including Q, the *Gospel of Thomas*, Greek fragments of Thomas, the *Secret Book of James*, the *Dialogue of the Savior* and the *Gospel of Mary*. Again, Q should not be considered in the same way as the others, since it is hypothetically constructed from the material that Matthew and Luke have in common—it does not have the independent status of a Gospel, as we will discuss further below. We should not count the Greek fragments of Thomas as independent of the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*, since the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* is a translation of a form of the Greek text. There are also two infancy gospels, of Thomas and of James, and five fragmentary gospels. The *Secret Gospel of Mark* must also be eliminated, since there is much speculation that this was at best a later fragmentary account, and possibly even a later or even modern forgery. There is some question about the status of P.Oxy. 840, which is a miniature codex perhaps used as a lucky charm. All three of the Jewish-Christian gospels are only known through later quotations, such as the *Gospel of the Hebrews* or *of the Nazoreans* being quoted by Jerome (4–5th century AD), and the *Gospel of the Ebionites* by Epiphanius. In other words, apart from the canonical Gospels, there are only about 13 gospels at most in the “complete gospels.”

42. A distinction is often made between narrative and sayings gospels. Since the canonical gospels are all narrative gospels, it is questionable whether sayings gospels should be treated together with them. Exclusion of sayings gospels here would decrease the number of gospels further.

c. *Dates of the Documents*. What about the dates of these documents? There is much dispute about them, since many of the manuscripts themselves are later than the date of composition of the document itself. We could look to Miller's volume, but we have already seen that there are all sorts of problems with his categorization. In a recent treatment, Bart Ehrman discusses what he calls major Christian apocrypha, including gospels.⁴³ He singles out 16 gospels for consideration. What is noteworthy is that none of them, according to him, dates before the second century and some are as late as the fifth century. Ehrman includes the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, but he also notes that the date might be 58, 1758 or 1958 (more grist for a conspiratorial mind)! When one eliminates the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (5th century), and the *Epistle of the Apostles*, which is more of an apocalypse than a gospel,⁴⁴ we are left with at most 13 reasonably early gospels—but none of them earlier than the canonical Gospels. So, rather than 80 or 90 gospels, what we are really talking about is approximately 13 gospels, probably none of them as early as the New Testament Gospels.

d. *Canonical Lists*. This situation is what one would expect when one examines the documents that attest to the development of the canon with respect to the gospels. Working backwards from the fourth century to the second, we consistently find in the catalogues or lists of the books of the New Testament that only the four canonical Gospels are listed or directly implied—not counting the two major codexes already mentioned. These fourth-century catalogues or lists include the following:⁴⁵ Rufinus (AD 400), Syrian Catalogue of St. Catherine's (c. AD 400), Augustine (AD 396–97), Jerome (AD 394), Cheltenham/Mommsenian List (4th century), Carthaginian Council (AD 397), Gregory Nazianzus (AD 391), Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 386), Apostolic Canon (c. AD 380),

43. B.D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), xi-xii.

44. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 555, who also notes that it is dependent upon the canonical gospels, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Epistle of Barnabas* and *Shepherd of Hermas*.

45. See B.F. Westcott, *The Canon of the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 7th edn, 1896), 548-90, Appendix D; A. Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (rev. C.S.C. Williams; London: Duckworth, 2nd edn, 1954), 194-220; M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (trans. J. Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 64.

Amphilochius (AD 380), Athanasius (AD 367), Laodicean Council (AD 363), and Eusebius (AD 323)—but these might be expected since they are at the time of or after Constantine and the Council of Nicea in AD 325.

Earlier documentation, however, shows much the same: the Apostolic Constitutions (3rd/4th century), P45 (3rd century papyrus, with Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts),⁴⁶ Origen (AD 185–254), Irenaeus (c. AD 180, who refers specifically to our four canonical Gospels, among other gospels available), parchment 0212 (late second-century harmony of verses from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), Tatian's *Diatessaron* (c. AD 160, a harmonized treatment of the four canonical Gospels), and the Muratorian canon—a listing of a collection of biblical books found in the eighteenth century by a man named Muratori. There is some dispute about the date of the Muratorian canon, but even though some wish to put it in the fourth century, most scholars consider it a second century document.⁴⁷

Some further indirect support for the four canonical Gospels comes from unusual quarters. Marcion's canon (AD 140) only had Luke's Gospel, although he seems to have known others. The same can be said of Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis, cited in Eusebius (c. AD 120–130), who mentions Mark and Matthew. What is important to note here is that in these instances there is no indication that this is a complete list of the gospels that they knew, but there is no extra-canonical gospel mentioned either.

Some Greek manuscripts themselves show that the four Gospels were already linked during the second century.⁴⁸ Manuscripts P4, P64 and P67, which may well come from the same manuscript, have text from Matthew and Luke, and on one page there is the title “gospel according to Matthew.”⁴⁹ There has been controversy about the date of this manuscript, but many scholars put it squarely in the second century (some earlier). The evidence clearly indicates that though there were a variety of gospels that were present in the second century—most of them directly or indirectly inspired by the four New Testament

46. See Hengel, *Studies*, 67.

47. Including Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 241.

48. Dates vary regarding this, but Zahn argues for 100-120 and Harnack 120-140, according to Hengel, *Studies*, 65.

49. It is to be noted that the words “gospel according to Matthew” are written in a different hand. This would not be unusual, however.

Gospels—the gathering of the four canonical Gospels took place early on and was firmly in place long before Constantine. In fact, these four Gospels were already being gathered together in the second century.

e. *Two Notorious Cases*

To this point, the evidence seems clear. Constantine did not create the canon of “official” Gospels, but from the second century on, according to the outward attestation and manuscript evidence, the four canonical Gospels were already linked. But can we go back further in confirmation of the priority of the canonical Gospels in the first century? Indeed we can.

Two current works are often mentioned as possibly being as early as the canonical Gospels. They are often used to cast doubt upon the status of the canonical Gospels. These are the *Didache* and the *Gospel of Thomas*. Let me say something about each of these.

1. *The Didache*. No one argues that the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* is a gospel, but sometimes it is used to illustrate the kind of diversity found in early Christianity. Sometimes, however, this thought is both unnecessary and unhelpful. Elaine Pagels in her recent book, *Beyond Belief*,⁵⁰ turns to the *Didache* to postulate that early followers of Jesus did not think of themselves as Christians in the sense that we think of ourselves as Christians, that is, as separate from Jews. I cannot go into this here, but this notion itself is open to serious question, since the split between Judaism and Christianity started almost as soon as the missionary journeys of Paul and, so far as the Romans were concerned, was complete by the 60s.⁵¹ More to the point, twice on the same page (p. 15), Pagels makes sure that we know that she thinks that the *Didache* was written ten years before the New Testament Gospels of Matthew and Luke (she concedes that Mark was written earlier). What is the basis for her early dating of the *Didache*? Actually Pagels doesn't supply any. She simply cites an article by another scholar, and in her

50. E. Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

51. See S.E. Porter and B.W.R. Pearson, “Why the Split? Christians and Jews by the Fourth Century,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000), 82-119 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004).

footnote says that she accepts the dating of this scholar.⁵² I would agree that her contention is, indeed, beyond belief.

A few more substantive observations should be made. One is that there are certainly a few scholars who take a similarly early date for the *Didache*, but this is sometimes on the basis of a generally early date for the entire New Testament.⁵³ That would mean that even if one took an early date for the *Didache*, it is possible that Matthew and probably Luke, the two Gospels that the *Didache* arguably knows or reflects, were written earlier still. Many scholars, however, including three well-known ones that Pagels cites, see the *Didache* as dependent upon Matthew and probably Luke, although again Pagels rejects this by expressing her unsupported preference for another opinion.⁵⁴ Even though the *Didache* has some rough and unrefined characteristics, its level of institutional and ritualistic organization is so much more developed than Matthew's Gospel that it indicates a later date—for example, the formalized procedures for baptism (section 7), regulations for fasting (section 8), elaborate procedures for the Lord's supper (sections 9–10), and explicit and lengthy procedures for regulating performance of church offices, including itinerant teachers (sections 11–15).⁵⁵ Most New Testament scholars today, including the latest large-scale treatment of the *Didache*, would argue for a date around AD 100 (it might even be later).⁵⁶ It is worth noting that this date was proposed by one of the first

52. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 192 n. 25, citing J. Draper, "Torah and Troublesome Apostles in the *Didache* Community," in J. Draper (ed.), *The Didache in Modern Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 340-63.

53. E.g. J.A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 96-100, 322-27.

54. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 192-93 n. 28, citing H. Koester, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den Apostolischen Vätern* (Berlin: Evangelische, 1957), 159-241; B. Layton, "The Sources, Dating, and Transmission of the *Didache* 1:3b–2:4," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1963), 343-83; C. Tuckett, "Synoptic Tradition in *Didache*," in Draper (ed.), *Didache in Modern Research*, 92-128, esp. 128. Pagels prefers J. Draper, "Christian Self-Definition Against the 'Hypocrites' in *Didache* VIII," in Draper (ed.), *Didache in Modern Research*, 223-43; and Draper, "The Jesus Tradition in the *Didache*," in D. Wenham (ed.), *Gospel Perspectives V: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 269-89.

55. Note also that sections 1–6 are full of quotations and allusions from the New Testament, more typical of second-century writings.

56. See H. van de Sandt and D. Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 48-52.

editors of the *Didache*, the great church historian Philip Schaff (who claims AD 90–100), and is also promoted by Ehrman (AD 100–110).⁵⁷

2. *Gospel of Thomas*. The second work to note is the *Gospel of Thomas*. Ever since its discovery and publication in 1958, there has been discussion regarding the *Gospel of Thomas*. As noted above, three Greek fragments were first discovered, P.Oxy. 1, 654 and 655. When the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* was uncovered at Nag Hammadi, it was realized that these Greek fragments represented earlier Greek versions of the same document. The Greek fragments are dated to the second century AD. The *Gospel of Thomas* consists of a number of sayings of Jesus, without a surrounding narrative framework. For some, this collection of sayings without narrative resembles the hypothetical gospel source, notorious Q. On the basis of this evidence, there have been some scholars who have argued for the *Gospel of Thomas* being very early, quite possibly as early as AD 50 or around the time of the compilation of Q, and certainly as early as, if not earlier than, the canonical Gospels.⁵⁸ This supposedly provides evidence for early diversity in the available gospels, and has even raised the question in a few scholars' minds whether the canon should not be opened up again, with *Thomas* gaining a place in it. However, the vast majority of scholars do not accept this scenario, and for good reason.⁵⁹

There are a number of observations to make about the *Gospel of Thomas* and how it fits with the development of early Christianity.

57. The manuscript was discovered in 1873, and first published in 1883. See P. Schaff, *The Oldest Church Manual Called the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1885), 122; B.D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers* (2 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1.411.

58. See J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 427-34 (who also puts P.Egerton 2, P.Vindob. G 2325 [the Fayyum fragment], P.Oxy. 1224, the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, and the Cross Gospel from the *Gospel of Peter* in this category); R.W. Funk, R.W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 18.

59. See J.H. Charlesworth and C.A. Evans, "Jesus in the Agrapha and Apocryphal Gospels," in B. Chilton and C.A. Evans (eds.), *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 479-533, esp. 497-98 n. 41, who note that this formulation is essentially a Harvard-C Claremont axis, with most proponents students of Helmut Koester or James Robinson.

a. *Gospel of Thomas Must Be Used with Caution.* The first is that the *Gospel of Thomas* must be used with caution in establishing genuine diversity of opinion in the early church. Pagels herself, for example, says this:

In Thomas's gospel, then, as in John, Matthew, and Luke [I don't concede this point, but let it pass for now], we sometimes find sayings that seem to contradict each other. For example, both John and Thomas include some sayings suggesting that those who come to know God are very few—a chosen few. Such sayings echo traditional teaching about divine election, and teach that God chooses those who are able to know him; while the cluster of sayings I take as the key to interpreting Thomas suggest instead that everyone, in creation, receives an innate capacity to know God (p. 46).

What kind of an interpretive principle is this? I will accept the passages that I want and simply ignore or reject the ones that I don't? To my mind this vitiates much of what Pagels goes on to say regarding the *Gospel of Thomas*, as well as her comments on other parts of the New Testament, since her hermeneutical principle—rather than struggling with potentially competing texts and trying to find some way forward—simply rejects the part she doesn't like or agree with. She admits that there are such passages.

b. *Gospel of Thomas Has Difficulties.* More to the point is that the *Gospel of Thomas*, by Pagels's own concession, has some very difficult statements in it. In fact, there are some statements that are highly exclusivistic, as she acknowledges. For example, saying 8 speaks of saving the one fish and throwing back the rest; saying 10 has Jesus saying he is throwing fire on the world and watching it until it blazes; and saying 64 depicts certain people as not entering into the Father's presence. There are also clear indications of the *Gospel of Thomas* reflecting later developments, such as James the Just being the subsequent leader of the church (saying 12). Perhaps most problematic however is saying 114, which is not referred to in *The Da Vinci Code*. This is no surprise, since this saying seems to undermine the very hypothesis that Brown wishes to assert regarding the sacred feminine in the early church. Simon Peter says to his fellow disciples that Mary should go out from among them, because women are not worthy of the life. Jesus responds by saying that he will lead Mary, "so that I will make her male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who

makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.”⁶⁰ This is not the only saying in the *Gospel of Thomas* that has questionable gender connotations, however. Saying 22 concludes by stating:

When you make the two one, and when you make the inner as the outer and the outer as the inner and the above as the below, and when you make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male will not be male and the female not be female, when you make eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in the place of a hand, and a foot into the place of a foot, and an image in the place of an image, then shall you enter the Kingdom.⁶¹

Besides being a confused paraphrase of several places in Paul (to say nothing of possibly contradicting saying 114), this seems to eliminate gender, not promote the sacred feminine, in fact, a typical gnostic thought.

Pagels offers this interpretation—the only one she offers in her translation, by the way—of the problematic saying 114: “The words *female* and *male* are not to be taken literally (as if they referred to woman and man) but rather as characterizing respectively what is human and what is divine” (p. 242 *). She then refers to a book by Marv Meyer on the *Gospel of Thomas*, where he gives a lengthier defense of such an interpretation: “Often the transformation of the female into the male involves the transformation of all that is earthly, perishable, passive, and sense-perceptible into what is heavenly, imperishable, active, and rational.”⁶² In support, he cites parallel passages from Hippolytus (AD 170–236), Clement of Alexandria in his *Excerpta ex Theodoto* (AD 150–215), *First Apocalypse of James* (2nd/3rd century?), and Zostrianos (3rd century AD)—all authors from the second and third centuries.

What Meyer does not note is that such a conflict between Peter and Mary is typical in gnostic literature, for example, in the *Gospel of Mary* (2nd century AD), where Peter objects to mysteries being revealed to Mary in case the disciples have to follow her (17.18); or the *Pistis Sophia* (2nd/3rd century AD, probably 3rd century, one of the earliest discovered gnostic documents),⁶³ where Peter complains of Mary’s

60. A. Guillaumont et al., *The Gospel according to Thomas* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 57.

61. Guillaumont, *Gospel according to Thomas*, 17, 19 adapted.

62. M. Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 109.

63. G.R.S. Mead, *Pistis Sophia* (London: Watkins, 1947), xxix-xxxii.

talking too much (ch. 36). The notion of a woman becoming a man to enter the kingdom is a typically gnostic notion, found in such sources as the Pseudo-Clementines (*Hom.* 2.15.3; 3.23.2) (3rd century AD), and in a variety of Valentinian gnostic texts (some of them quoted by Clement in his *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 21.2, 3) (AD 150–215).⁶⁴ In the former, female is equated with the world, and the world to come with male. In the latter, the male is related to the angels and the Saviour, while the female is that which needs to be saved. All of these are very much later gnostic thoughts that disparage earthly and present existence and yearn for a non-gendered spiritual existence.

c. *Gospel of Thomas Is Derivative*. Rather than being contemporary with the New Testament, the *Gospel of Thomas* is clearly later and reflects later gnostic thought. More than that, one cannot help but note that the *Gospel of Thomas* quotes or alludes to at least Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 John and Revelation, as well as possibly other later sources.⁶⁵ In other words, it is clearly derivative. The general pattern is that the *Gospel of Thomas* reflects later development of synoptic material. This is clearly illustrated by many examples, including an example that Pagels herself provides (pp. 46-47). Pagels cites saying 13, where Jesus asks his disciples to tell him whom he is like. Peter says that he is like a “righteous messenger” and Matthew answers, “a wise philosopher.” She contends that “righteous messenger” may be an interpretation of the notion of Messiah, and “wise philosopher” an equivalent of rabbi. Pagels wants to contend that the *Gospel of Thomas* knows Mark’s Gospel but does not know Matthew’s, since in Matthew Jesus blesses Peter for his observation. However, here she shows that the *Gospel of Thomas* itself is almost certainly a much later interpretation. The Gospels of Mark and of Matthew, even though both written in Greek, as was the *Gospel of Thomas* originally, do not need to interpret the terms noted above in saying 13 for their audience, but they actually preserve the term Christ or Messiah. I also think that these interpretations in saying 13 are clearly

64. B. Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (London: Collins, 1961), 253-55.

65. Charlesworth and Evans, “Agrapha,” 497; cf. C.A. Evans, R.L. Webb and R.A. Wiebe, *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 88-144.

not made by one who understood the original terms—they are not equivalents, but later interpretations in the light of the gnostic environment of Nag Hammadi, where wisdom and being an intermediary messenger were important. This is reinforced by Thomas, when he is asked by Jesus, saying that he is unable to say what Jesus is like. Jesus then takes him aside and gives him some private knowledge that he cannot repeat to others. The later dependence of the *Gospel of Thomas* on the canonical Gospels is also further confirmed when it is noted that there are numerous parallels between the *Gospel of Thomas* and M material—material that is unique to Matthew—and L material—material that is unique to Luke—as well as the Gospel of John.⁶⁶

d. *Gospel of Thomas Authorship and Q*. Pagels raises a further issue regarding authorship of the *Gospel of Thomas*. It is often repeated that the *Gospel of Thomas* is like Q in that it is a sayings gospel without narrative. Pagels also says that “We know almost nothing about the person we call Thomas, except that, like the evangelists who wrote the gospels of the New Testament, he wrote in the name of a disciple, apparently intending to convey ‘the gospel’ as this disciple taught it” (p. 46). There are two points that must be clarified here.

(1) *Q Is Not a Gospel*. The first is that Q is not a gospel. Q is the designation—from the German word for “source,” *Quelle*—for the material that is shared between Matthew and Luke. It is true that an entire scholarly industry has grown up regarding this material, to the point of positing its written form, and various levels of editing of it, even to the point of writing its theology. Nevertheless, Q per se does not exist, except as a scholarly reconstruction. It is commonly known that the authors of the Gospels used sources. Luke says as much in his preface (Luke 1:1-4). We don’t know what these sources consisted of. One of those used by Matthew and Luke may well have been a written document that we now call Q, or one like Q. However, that does not make it a Gospel. Eusebius, in a well-known statement, refers to Papias, the early church writer of the second century (AD 120/130), who notes that Matthew collected the *logia* (oracles) of Jesus written in Aramaic (*Eccl.*

66. Charlesworth and Evans, “Agrapha,” 498-500. They note that there is clear evidence that the *Gospel of Thomas* knew Luke’s Gospel, since there is a passage where Luke changes Mark and this version is reflected in both the Greek *Gospel of Thomas* passage and in the Coptic translation (Luke 8:17 and P.Oxy. 655 saying 5).

Hist. 3.39.16). If these logia are what is equivalent to Q, as some have thought, it is worth noting that they are not referred to as a Gospel by Papias or Eusebius. The only significant source that we do know has been preserved independently by the Gospel authors is the Gospel of Mark. None of the canonical Gospels uses the term “gospel” as a title for a literary work within the gospel itself.

(2) *Term “Gospel.”* The use of the term “gospel” as a title for a literary work does not come until the second century where not only P4/64/67 has “gospel according to Matthew” but P66 (c. AD 200) has “gospel according to John,” and P75 (early 3rd century AD) has “gospel according to Luke” and “gospel according to John.” Both the Gospels and the *Gospel of Thomas* are labelled as gospels in later manuscripts, but these headings are not part of the original manuscripts for the Gospels and may not be for the *Gospel of Thomas* either (the fourth-century Coptic manuscript has “gospel according to Thomas” at the end, which may have been added relatively late).

Pagels makes a further serious mistake when she notes that Thomas wrote like the authors of the Gospels. None of the Gospels makes a claim to authorship as does the *Gospel of Thomas* (incipit). However, all scholars acknowledge that the *Gospel of Thomas* was not written by Thomas the Twin but is pseudonymous, that is, written under a recognizable person’s name but by someone else. The Gospels, however, are not pseudonymous—they are anonymous, no matter what one thinks of the later ascriptions. This is a significant difference. A more likely parallel to the pseudonymous *Gospel of Thomas* in the extant literature would be found with a variety of other sayings documents written in the second and third centuries. These would include the *Apocryphon of James* (so-called Jung Codex) and *Dialogue of the Savior*. On the basis of traditional dating of the Gospels, as well as other books of the New Testament, it is clear that the *Gospel of Thomas* cannot be any earlier than the turn of the first and second centuries, and may well be much later.

f. *Conclusion to This Section*

My conclusion is that in fact what we have, roughly speaking, in the development of the gospels is that the canonical Gospels were written first, sometime within the first century after the death of Jesus, and before the *Didache* (I could be more precise, but that is not necessary

for my task here).⁶⁷ It was the canonical Gospels that helped to create the great interest in and reflection upon Jesus that led to creation, especially near the end of the first century and certainly in the second century and beyond, of a number of other gospel-like documents.

Let me conclude this section with a quotation from the New Testament scholar John Meier:

Contrary to some scholars, I do not think that...the *agrapha*, the apocryphal gospels, and the Nag Hammadi codices (in particular the *Gospel of Thomas*) offer us reliable new information or authentic sayings that are independent of the NT. What we see in these later documents is rather the reaction to or reworking of NT writings by...imaginative Christians reflecting popular piety and legend, and gnostic Christians developing a mystic speculative system... It is not surprising that scholars have wanted to see reliable early traditions in some of these documents. Indeed, it is quite understandable. Once these documents are declared to be dependent, directly or indirectly, on the NT for their reliable information about Jesus, we are left alone—some would say forlorn—with the Four Gospels, plus scattered tidbits. It is only natural for scholars—to say nothing of popularizers—to want more, to want other access roads to the historical Jesus [and, I might add, to want to see a conspiracy behind the fact that we don't have more]. This understandable but not always critical desire is, I think, what has recently led to the high evaluation, in some quarters, of the apocryphal gospels and the Nag Hammadi codices as sources for the quest... But to call upon the *Gospel of Peter* or the *Gospel of Thomas* to supplement our Four Gospels is to broaden out our pool of sources from the difficult to the incredible.⁶⁸

4. *The Recent Discovery of the Holy Grail: The Great Chalice of Antioch*

In 1933, the so-called Great Chalice of Antioch, discovered in 1910, was published.⁶⁹ What the Great Chalice of Antioch consisted of was two artefacts. One was a simple, even crude, silver chalice and the other was a surrounding beautiful reliquary, decorated with numerous figures and filigree by the original silversmith. The chalice stands almost 8 inches

67. My own opinion is that the Gospels were written fairly early, with all of them probably before AD 65, except for John's Gospel, which was no later than AD 90.

68. J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. I. *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 140-41.

69. G. Eisen, *The Great Chalice of Antioch* (New York: Fahim Kouchakji, 1933).

high, with a small circular foot. When this was first published, even the author himself raised the question of whether this chalice was not the chalice itself—the Holy Grail. The scholar who published the piece dated it to the last third of the first century.⁷⁰ The scholar also noted that there were two legends of the grail.⁷¹ One took Joseph of Arimathea to Britain, which supposedly accounts for the origins of the legend with the Arthurian legends. The other legend kept the Holy Grail in the east, possibly in Crete or Cappadocia—nearer where the chalice was discovered. Subsequent scholarly discussion has revised the date for the chalice significantly, with various proposals arguing for a date from the second to the sixth century. Many today would argue that it should be dated to the fourth century,⁷² although to be honest some of the parallels that the original author cites have not probably been fully explained and the early date still has appeal.

Aha, you say. This is perhaps further evidence of the conspiratorial nature of the modern church with regard to the phenomena of the early church, evidenced in its wanting to deny or suppress uncomfortable elements of its heritage. Perhaps later revisionist scholars have dated the chalice later so as to mitigate its importance, especially if it were the real chalice. Two things are to be noted, however, in the light of Brown's novel. One is that the chalice is a chalice—it is not Mary Magdalene or anything other than a chalice. Another factor to note is that the reliquary, which is slightly later in date than the original chalice (the original scholar dated it to the last half of the first or the earliest years of the second century),⁷³ has a series of pictures on it. In fact it has a series of 12 portraits depicted in the midst of the filigree. Perhaps this piece of ancient art can solve the issue of who Jesus' closest followers were! These 12 portraits are all of men, including Jesus and his disciples. As if speaking to us from the ancient world, this chalice confirms that Brown's depiction of the rise of Christianity is better confined to a fiction book than to a history book.

70. Eisen, *Great Chalice*, 15.

71. Eisen, *Great Chalice*, 16.

72. B.M. Metzger, "Antioch-on-the-Orontes," *Biblical Archaeologist* 11.4 (1948), 69-88; repr. in D.N. Freedman and E.F. Campbell, Jr. (eds.), *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 313-30, here 328-29; F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Paul: Places They Knew* (London: Scripture Union, 1981), 79.

73. Eisen, *Great Chalice*, 15.

5. Conclusion

I don't think that I need to say anything more about conspiracy theories, *The Da Vinci Code*, or the supposed conspiratorial and repressive origins of the biblical canon. What I do want to say something about is how it is that this work of popular fiction can come to command so much attention in Christian circles when there is so little substance to what it contains. Even those who believe that there was more canonical and gospel turbulence in the early centuries do not posit the kind of reconstruction that Brown does. One of the things that has struck me is that there have always been Christian documents that have not been included in the Christian canon, and throughout Christian history there have been other documents that have come to light. Within the last 150 years or so, there have probably been more documents discovered than ever before. Especially in the first half of this period, they were widely publicized and promoted within Christian circles—to the point of some of them constituting material for sermon series. Why is it then that it comes as such a shock to some people today that there is this variety of documents, and that their presence seems in some way to pose a threat to the traditional view of the development of the canon?

I think that there are two reasons for this—one is simply ignorance. The other is a failure of the church to live up to the standards of education that it earlier set for itself. This must, I believe, begin with the study of the Bible itself. I would like to ask how many of those who sat down and read this fiction and were troubled by it followed it up by actually sitting down and re-reading—or perhaps reading for the first time—the entire New Testament? A conspiracy that I am interested in is the one that constantly conspires to cover up the truth of the Bible's claims by working to ensure that we don't ever open it. This conspiracy is unfortunately all too alive even in our churches. Once this biblical foundation is secure, only then can it extend to a variety of other topics and issues where an informed Christian theological perspective can be brought to bear. There was a time when the church saw itself as a major educational institution. As we know, most of the great universities of the western world were founded by clerics and in service of the church. For the longest time there was not thought to be an inherent contradiction between intelligent dialogue and Christian faith. Even though these days are now apparently gone, that does not mean that the church cannot continue its educational function. There was a time when clergy were thoroughly educated and up to date on the latest issues of the day,

including those of biblical criticism and interpretation, and some laity at least were interested in studying such issues. I cannot help but think that if *The Da Vinci Code* had been written a hundred years ago, it would not have even made it on the best-seller list, because the informed Christian public would have seen it for all that it is—and isn't.