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How Not to Get Lost When Reading the Lost Gospels (The President's Page)

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Larry L. Lichtenwalter

The best place to go for accounts of Jesus is and always has been the Bible. Recently though, a spate of so-called scholarship has been questioning not only the accuracy of the scriptural record about Jesus in particular, but also the integrity of the biblical witness as a whole. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and the National Geographic Society's publication of the long lost *Gospel of Judas* reflect both the diversity and subtle nature of such criticism. One purports to be a "fact-based" novel; the other, high-browed scholarship that eschews any notion of fabrication.

Novels rarely inspire controversy, but when they do, it's not the story itself that generates the stir; it's the ideas behind the story. Narrative can be a powerful tool. Brown's novel combines legends with history, art symbology, and cryptography to create a world in which his assertions about Scripture seem true. "The Bible is a product of man . . . not of God.

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 erad-

icate 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 ex-

ceeds 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.⁶

But our generation seems to be mirroring that of the second centu-

ry'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 choice in our media-happy society. With it most are more likely to seek theological clarity and their views of Jesus from friends, family, experiences and even media input than from diving into biblical texts.

The tragedy in all this is that most of those who are turning to fiction, movies, or friends are confused about the Bible. They read their novels, enter the theaters, draw from their peers essentially as biblical illit-

erates. Because of it, millions are vulnerable to the seductive religious arguments and agendas they propose. It is within such a vacuum of biblical knowledge and understanding that new concepts such as those proposed by *The Da Vinci Code* or *Gospel of Judas* gain a foothold in the minds and hearts 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 (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

¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: Special Illustrated Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), pp. 312, 313.

² *Ibid.*, p. 317.

³ David Van Biema, “A Kiss for Judas,” *Time* (February 27, 2006), p. 51; “Judas: Foe or Friend?” *Time* (April 17, 2006); David Gates, “Sealed With a Kiss,” *Newsweek* (April 17, 2006), pp. 48, 49.

⁴ Gates, p. 49.

⁵ Van Biema, p. 51.

⁶ Naomi Rose Rothstein, “When Fiction Is Stranger Than Truth: A Closer Look at *The Da Vinci Code*,” *Issues: A Messianic Jewish Perspective*, 15:6, p. 4.



