

6 I've heard there are many 'gospels' how can you be so sure you have the right ones?

I've heard there are many 'gospels' how can you be so sure you have the right ones? This question tests whether Christianity has got it right about Jesus. There's no simple answer.

It's absolutely true there are many gospels besides Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It's also true that led by the Holy Spirit the church landed with these as authoritative and rejected the rest. The choice of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is confirmed by second century writer Irenaeus, who says these four alone were accepted across the Christian world of his day.

Why did the church choose *these* four gospels? The question's being raised because in recent years many fragments of papyrus have been discovered that write about the life of Jesus in a way different to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Most of these are much later than these gospels which most scholars date between 30 and 70 years after Christ's death.

How many such 'gospels' are there? The authoritative 1977 *Nag Hammadi Library* lists a total of 45 titles. This library index shows how exaggerated are the claims of fiction writer Dan Brown. In his blockbuster *Da Vinci Code* Brown claimed Jesus' divinity was a lie invented by the church who suppressed 80 other gospel accounts in favour of the four in the bible today.

Most of the 45 gospels we're talking about are very much later than the four we know in the bible. They're also fairly obvious elaborations of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John trying to fill out the story of Jesus. In what's called the Cross Gospel Jesus is described as a Giant emerging from his tomb at the resurrection. He's followed by a talking Cross! Fanciful writings like this have never been taken seriously over 1500 years of history.

Some alternative gospel writers added to the original accounts of Jesus to satisfy curiosity about his childhood. One of these writers has a child bumping into the infant Jesus who gets so cross he makes the child drop dead! Joseph pulls Jesus by the ear and tells him off! Such a story makes the infancy accounts of Jesus in Matthew and Luke appear very restrained, despite their otherworldly aspects such as angel choirs and the visit of the wise men.

How can you be so sure we have the right gospels? Many of the stories of Jesus outside Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have a fanciful ring. They lack a moral framework.

In the four canonical gospels Jesus is seen many times ministering to women. Mary Magdalene is specially chosen to witness to his resurrection. Contrast the Gospel of Thomas, one of the so-called Gnostic gospels excluded from canonical scripture. There we read "every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven" v114. That's not very feminist!

Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* has a go at Christianity, accusing it of going against Jesus' feminism. The rival Gnostic gospels rejected by the church but commended by Dan Brown have appalling condemnation of women just for being women! He can't have it both ways!

Incidentally the word 'Gnostic' means "teaching secret knowledge". The early centuries of Christianity coincided, very much like today, with a multitude of cults who claimed to have the secret of life but made this secret available only to people they initiated into their secret society.

Fiction writers like Dan Brown delight in story lines with baffling codes. It's understandable how they pick up on the alternative gospels. At the same time if something's called a gospel it seems good enough to link it to so-called 'gospel truth' even if what it stands for is highly doubtful historically.

If there are indeed many 'gospels' how can Christians be so sure they have the right ones? If we hold the 45 accounts of Jesus from the early centuries side by side they make Matthew, Mark, Luke and John shine out for their discipline, matter of factness and open speaking about Jesus.

There's no talk of hidden teaching to be uncoded in a secret society. Far from it. These books record the public life and teaching of Jesus. They tell of his public death, his alleged resurrection and the promise of the Holy Spirit - not to a secret society but *to everyone* (Acts 2:39b).

Total 746 words - just over 4.5 minutes to read

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