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Jesus

The Unauthorised Version

Ancient accounts of the unknown Christ

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Extract

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Introduction



In December 1945, Muhammad Ali, an Egyptian peasant, was gathering *sabakh*, a rich soil that he spread over his fields, near the town of Nag Hammadi, in upper Egypt. Digging at the foot of a huge cliff, the Jabal al-Tarif, he came across a large boulder, and, buried beneath it, an old earthenware jar. His anxiety that the jar might contain a *jinn* – or spirit – was exceeded by his hope that it was filled with gold, for an ancient burial site was nearby. Ali smashed open the jar – and found over a dozen old books, bound in shrivelled brown leather. He carried them home, and dumped them in the courtyard of his house. Days later his mother tore pages from some of the books and used them to light a fire.

Other pages were ripped out and sold to Ali's neighbours, or bartered for cigarettes. But eventually the books wound up in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo. Here, experts established that the books, thirteen of them, contained ancient sheets of papyrus. The papyrus bindings were dated to

around AD 350, but the fifty-two different writings that lay within the books, written in Coptic, were even older. All had been translated from Greek, the language in which the books of the New Testament were written.

When scholars started to study the books found by Ali, they were amazed to find that they were reading lost gospels from the earliest years of the Church. Not all the texts were Christian; the books also contained, for example, a copy of Plato's *Republic*. But here, among many others, were the Gospels of Thomas and Philip – or so they claimed to be – and also the compellingly titled Gospel of Truth, alongside the 'Secret Books' of James and John. No less than the evangelists of the New Testament, the writers of the texts found near Nag Hammadi claimed to be inspired by Jesus and to tell the truth. Yet the message – or rather messages – offered by these books was very different from the teachings of the Bible. Here were sayings of Jesus that had never been heard before – some of them bewilderingly enigmatic. God was described in unfamiliar, female terms and one gospel purported to have been written by Jesus's 'twin brother'.

Then there were the portrayals of Mary Magdalene. In the Bible, she says very little; in

the Nag Hammadi books, she is a commanding, authoritative woman, clever and articulate, and invariably a step ahead of Jesus's male disciples. More than once, she is described outsmarting Peter, whom the Roman Catholic Church regards as the spiritual forebear to its popes. And, unlike in any of the gospels in the Bible, she is described, in The Gospel of Philip, as 'the companion of the Saviour', a reference upon which the plot of Dan Brown's best-selling *The Da Vinci Code* turns. Perhaps most remarkably, in some of the new-found texts the death and resurrection of Jesus are not mentioned at all, while in others these most fundamental of Christian doctrines are roundly dismissed as untrue, naïve and simplistic.

The Nag Hammadi Library, as the collection of books became known, was not translated into English, or made widely available, until the 1970s. When they finally emerged to a wider audience, people were amazed by what they read. Here were books, written by self-confessed Christians, in the earliest years of Christianity, which bore little resemblance to the texts contained in the Bible.

But these books called themselves gospels and claimed to transmit the sayings and the teachings of Jesus. Why, then, were their contents so dramatically

different from the familiar four gospels of the Bible? Did these books hold truths that had been lost – or concealed – from Christians for hundreds of years? Did, in fact, the discovery of these lost gospels threaten the rigid beliefs that had been held by Christians for two millennia?



Theologians had always known that there were disagreements in the early Church about the events of Jesus's life and death, and what Christians should make of them. Jesus left behind him no writings, and nothing resembling a recitable creed. He had wandered preaching through the fishing villages on the Sea of Galilee in northern Palestine for only two or three years before he was crucified. No record of him survived in any diary or letter composed during his lifetime. Three decades after his death, still no one had sat down to write his life story; or if they had, their writings have not survived.

And yet, within one hundred years of Jesus's death, a new religion, founded on belief in Jesus as God, had spread from fishing villages in a region on the margins of the Roman Empire to Rome itself. Within 300 years of his death, it had been adopted as the religion of the empire. During

those centuries, the early Christians had succeeded in organising themselves despite some staggeringly tough obstacles. They were persecuted, most viciously in Rome, where many were martyred. Meanwhile, they cut and pasted many disparate and contradictory versions of Jesus's story, omitting some, including others, into a uniform and disciplined Christian religion.

That they achieved any success at all can be largely attributed to Paul, the first known Christian writer. A Jew from Tarsus in eastern Turkey, Paul – then named Saul – was travelling to Damascus, or so the Bible tells us, when he was struck down by a vision of Jesus that temporarily blinded him and permanently converted him to a life of tireless proselytising. He travelled throughout the Roman Empire, networking furiously, planting churches and insisting that the Gentiles had as much claim to membership of God's people as the Jews – thereby ensuring that Christianity became much more than a Jewish sect. And everywhere he went, Paul preached the importance of unity in the face of 'strife, seditions, heresies' (Galatians 5:19–21).

Paul produced the first known Christian writings in around AD 50. According to his letters – without which little would be known about the earliest years

of Christianity – Jesus was already being worshipped as divine. They opened the floodgates: after Paul's letters, there was an outpouring of literature as the early Christians started to record the memories of Jesus that had circulated among them for years.

Among the earliest accounts of Jesus's life were the four gospels that would later become part of the New Testament. First was the Gospel of Mark – an unknown figure believed to have been a follower of a follower of Jesus – in around AD 65–70. A book written by an anonymous Christian later named Matthew, and the Gospel of Luke, who may or may not have been a physician, were written between fifteen and twenty years later. These books drew heavily on the story told by Mark. The Gospel of John is often attributed to the disciple of that name, though it was probably not finished much before AD 110, when John would have been long dead. At the time when these books were written, it was common practice to write under another person's name. Indeed, some theologians now think Paul may have written only seven of his thirteen supposed letters.

If these were the earliest – or, at least, among the earliest – accounts of Jesus's life and teachings, a torrent of alternative versions soon followed. Indeed,

Luke, who is also believed to be the author of Acts, in which he describes his missionary journeys with Paul, seems to nod to some of the authors of these alternative versions at the beginning of his gospel. 'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,' he writes, 'just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.'

If there were numerous gospels from this time, why were only four embraced by the Church? Some of these 'accounts' must have contradicted Christianity's emerging orthodox (from the Greek *orthos* and *doxa*, literally 'straight thinking') beliefs. In fact, it could hardly have been otherwise. In the first centuries AD, confusion raged about who, or rather what, Jesus was. How could he be, as Paul had implied, both God and man? If he was God, what, then, was his relationship with his father, who was also God? By the end of the first century, many Christians believed that Jesus was a divine spirit who merely adopted a human form for his ministry. Later, others were to teach that he was not actually, or not completely, divine. Pending the emergence of an efficient means of settling these questions, the early Church contained very different, even radically

opposed, beliefs. One of the earliest examples of its efforts to achieve consensus was the last testament of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, written shortly before he was torn apart by animals in the Colosseum in Rome between AD 107 and 117. On his way to his martyrdom, Ignatius wrote a series of letters to churches in Asia Minor and Rome. Jesus, he wrote in one of them, 'was truly born and ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate [and] was truly raised from the dead'. Perhaps his own looming fate gave strength to this conviction; for a man anticipating an excruciating death, the belief that Jesus had also suffered as a man must have offered some comfort. As Christianity spread, and persecution against Christians rose, it became increasingly important for Christians to formulate a definitive doctrine of Jesus as God incarnate.

And so they did. The intellectuals of the early Church drew on the Greek philosophical tradition and the gospels, particularly John's, to formulate the doctrine of Jesus that Christians proclaim today: that Jesus was both God and man and of the 'same being' as the father. In the process, they intensified the insistency with which they claimed that the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were the only true accounts of the life of Jesus.

One of the earliest and most explicit endorsements of these four – and only these four – gospels was made by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, in Gaul, now France. In his book, *Against Heresies*, in AD 180, Irenaeus wrote that 'the gospels could not possibly be more or less in number than they are' because they could be traced back to the disciples. But Irenaeus was less interested in proving this connection – something few modern theologians would attempt – than in denigrating the alternative gospels. Some Christians, he wrote, 'boast that they have more gospels than there really are … but really they have no gospel which is not full of blasphemy'. One of the gospels that he singled out for scorn was a text that caught the eye of the first scholars to see the Nag Hammadi texts: The Gospel of Truth.

After two thousand years of Christianity, it is easy to define heresy as whatever contradicts Church doctrine. But in the early years, when doctrinal battles were still being fought, this was a vexed distinction. Originally, 'heresy', from the Greek word for 'choice' (or 'difference'), simply meant a 'sect' or 'faction'. Irenaeus might have condemned

certain teachings as heretical, but he did so with force only because they had gained some ground among Christians. Indeed, the 'heretic' to whom Irenaeus attributed The Gospel of Truth, Valentinus, was a Christian leader who very nearly became the Bishop of Rome.

Few of Valentinus's writings have survived, but we know that he was educated in Alexandria, an important centre of Hellenistic and Christian thought. His followers claimed he was a follower of Theudas, a Christian teacher who was said to be a disciple of Paul. In around AD 136, Valentinus went to Rome, where, according to one contemporary writer – no follower of his, but an orthodox Church leader called Tertullian – he narrowly missed getting what was to become the top job. Had he done so, one of the earliest and most virulent heresies of the early Church, known as Gnosticism, might have been enshrined as orthodox Christianity.

Valentinus was no fifth columnist of the early Church. He considered himself a devoted – and no doubt orthodox – Christian. Valentinus had many followers, who also called themselves Christians. The Gospel of Truth, which he may indeed have written, is a lyrical meditation on the love of God. Yet this text rests on beliefs very different from

those now associated with the earliest followers of Jesus.

Valentinus was one of the foremost proponents of a mystical belief in the possibility of salvation through attainment of a divine message, or special knowledge. This belief was later called Gnosticism – after the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning 'knowledge' – and was less a religious movement than an approach adopted by a number of sects which proliferated around the Mediterranean Sea and in Central Asia during the first centuries AD.

Most Gnostics, including Valentinus, believed in the existence of a pure spirit world, and a corrupt material world – from which man, though originally divine, had become separated. Gnostic Christians like Valentinus believed that Jesus had been sent from the spirit world to impart the knowledge – gnosis – which would enable men to return to their spiritual home. In descending to the world of flesh, Jesus had a divine precedent: an ethereal power, or aeon, called Sophia ('wisdom' in Greek), whose separation from the spirit world had brought the material world into being. Key to this belief – so unlike Christian orthodoxy – was its stress on initiation and exclusivity: only a select few could reach the high world, the *pleroma* (or 'fullness' in Greek).