

Hillside Free Methodist Church
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Da Vinci Decoded #2. Why the Lost Gospels Lost Out

“The Bible is the product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book.” So says a Sir Leigh Teabing in the Da Vinci Code. Teabing is the character in the book that provides most of what Dan Brown indicates to be the truth about Jesus, the church and the Bible.

Brown also says that 300 years after the life of Jesus, the Roman emperor Constantine needed to unify his empire, and chose to do so through Christianity. He convened a special meeting to decide what would constitute the Holy Bible called the council of Nicea in 325 AD, in which he hand picked the contents of the Bible. To quote, “More than 80 gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relatively few were chosen for inclusion. . . . The Bible as we know it today was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great (309).”

So, if the Bible didn't fall out of the clouds, how did we get it?

Were there really other gospels being considered part of the Scripture?

Did the pagan Roman emperor Constantine really choose which books were to be the Bible?

Today we look at part 2 of four in a series we call “Da Vinci Decoded.” Pastor Maiya said it well last week when she pointed out that the book is fiction and that all the Christian responses to the book and film may simply hype up an overrated story. By the way, I liked the book, I like mysteries and fiction, and historical fiction.

Truth be told, I am happy that we get an excuse to talk about the Bible. Most Christians really are not aware of what the Bible actually says about gender issues – and Maiya did a great job with this topic last week. Most Christians haven't though seriously about where the Bible came from or how we arrive at our view of Jesus. But whether it's through the Da Vinci Code or the perennial “Truth About Christianity” T.V. specials that pop up ever Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Pope's birthday – there are frequently half-truths about our history that cloud the truth. And a lot of people do have itching questions that deserve a knowledgeable response.

So then, what about the Bible?

Did it fall out of the sky? Let me a show of hands for those that believe it did.

I don't know anyone, not even the most devoted King James only fundamentalist who believes this. Most Christians who ever attended Sunday School know that the Christian Bible is a collection of books that took about 1,500 years to put together. It contains some of the oldest existing texts on the planet. It didn't just pop up yesterday, nor under Constantine's nose. It is a collection that can be divided into to sections – the Old and New Testament. The Old Covenant, Genesis through Malachi, can also be termed the Hebrew Scriptures, and constitute what Jews around the world believe to their Bible. Some of the chapters and verse notations are different, but it's the same Bible. The second section is called the New Covenant, which is a phrase referred to in the Old Covenant by the prophet Jeremiah, which Jesus adopted as a theme for what he introduced to the world. So, there are two sections to the Bible, the Old and New

Covenant. The Old Covenant is made up of 39 separate and distinct books, and the New Testament is made up of 27 distinct books – letters, gospels, historical narratives, etc. Many different authors contributed to this book we call the Bible, over three different continents, three different languages, multiple cultures, paupers and kings, prophets and lawyers, and they all provide a consistent and unified story of who God is and who Jesus is and what that means to us. Actually, that alone is a miraculous enough evidence to tell me something special went into the making the Bible.

We know how long it took to write, we know an awful lot about how it was compiled, we know it's message. We know it remains the best selling book in the world, and it remains the most banned book in the world. It is against the law to own or read the Bible in many countries, and it remains punishable by death to share the gospel in many different parts of the world. It is a dangerous book with a message that remains a significant threat to any one any where that seeks to oppress the poor, to oppress women, to keep people locked into materialism or superstition. It is a blue print for liberation, as Maiya pointed out last week.

But then, in light of the Da Vinci Code's claims, were other alternative versions of the gospels, other alternative versions of Christianity considered to part of the Bible?

The answer is yes and no.

Yes, alternative views of Christianity and alternative versions of the gospel did – and still today do – exist. They always have. They always will. The more things change the more they stay the same.

Today there are numerous competing versions of Christianity. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses alike claim to be Christian but have created their own versions of sacred texts and teach doctrines that are adamantly opposed to that we see in the Bible you hold you in your hand. So, there are cults and competing versions of Christianity and gospel stories today. It was no different back in the day.

Even when Jesus walked, breathed and talked people had different views of who we was. Jesus asked his followers one day, "What's the word on the street about me?" The answers ran the gamut.

Mark 8:27-29 Jesus ... asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ."

Reading the four Biblical gospels we see many points of view regarding Jesus that were put forth. Some believed him to be a reincarnation of Elijah or John the Baptist, or a prophet. The Romans who crucified him believed he was a leader of a political revolt – the charge against him was sedition (Mark 15:26). Some of the pharisees believed he was possessed by a demon (Mark 3:22). So even the Bible itself tells us that people had different ideas about who Jesus was and what his message was all about.

So how do we know the truth? Which stories of Jesus do we listen to? People watching Jesus from afar thought he was anything from a political revolutionary to a magician, but those who actually met him, who talked to him, who learned from him, believed he was the Son of the God, the Christ, the crucified Savior who rose from the dead. They believed this so strongly they were willing to die for there own eyes had seen and hands had touched than to save their lives and say they were just making it up.

These eyewitnesses to Jesus were the primary sources of the gospels we have today. That is why we listen to the Bible.

To be fair, though, the Bible as we have it was not written down until between 50 and 90 AD. That is to say some of the earliest books were written in the early 50's and some of the latest books were written in the 90's - remember there are 27 books in the New Testament.

So, about 20-60 years passed between the time the Bible was written and Jesus was crucified and resurrected. And to be fair, the apostles and those who wrote Scripture did so to particular places across and in particular times throughout the Roman Empire. Some of the texts were originally written and distributed in Palestine, in Rome, in what is modern day Turkey – throughout the Mediterranean region, and North Africa.

Between the years 30 AD and about 60AD, the Christian story was shared from mouth to mouth. Corrections to errors about this story were made by the apostles, usually verbally. It was not long before letters began to be written and sent, however, and written gospels about Jesus began to be written, so that different churches around the known world could have what amounts to an apostolic witness of Jesus even if the apostles were not able to be directly available.

The book written before any other in our New Testament, is probably Galatians. There are many scholars, both very liberal and very conservative and all in between that have picked the Bible apart six ways to Sunday - even so, the vast majority agree that Galatians was actually written by the actual Saint Paul to the actual church in Galatia, and this occurred between 55-60 AD.

What is Galatians? It is an apostolic letter that is written to combat a false view of the gospel that had arisen. Paul begins, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all! Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ...(1:6-8).”

Here is an example of a book of the Bible that in fact was written by an apostle and that began to combat false – so called alternative – Christianities. Constantine would not be born for another 300 years. Paul wrote many letters to churches, some were written to strengthen and inform churches regarding good doctrine - such as the Epistle to the Romans and to the Philippians, some were written to correct serious errors that had crept into the early churches – such as 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians; some were written to provide a sense of order and administration as the churches grew, such as the letters to Timothy and Titus.

Peter, the apostle, wrote also. In fact, while the gospel of Mark has no actual author's name attached to it, the earliest Christians retained a story that it was Peter who dictated his memoirs of Jesus to a young man named John Mark. So, to some degree, you could say that gospel of Mark is really the gospel of Peter. There are two letters in the Bible that are attributed to Simon Peter, the apostle of Christ. I find it interesting that in 2 Peter, the very issue of the origin of the Bible and what books belong to it is addressed.

He writes, probably from Rome where he was executed, “I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put aside...” (1:13). In other words, I'm going to die soon and so you will need this letter to keep alive the truth you have already learned from me. And what is that truth?

“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory saying ‘This is my son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred

mountain.” (16-18)

Peter reminds his readers that his stories about Jesus were not hearsay, he was an eyewitness. He goes on to say, “Above all you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation, for prophesy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (20,21). The view of the apostle Peter, anyway, was that the Bible – and the gospels of Jesus – were the inspired word of God. Now, this letter from Peter was written probably in 67 AD – the year he was executed for his faith in Jesus. Yet, even at this early date, Peter views the letters of Saint Paul, such as Galatians and Romans, to already be Scripture. He writes in 2:15-16, “Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures – to their own destruction.”

Peter, upon whose leadership Jesus Christ promised to build his church, makes it clear that not only is the Hebrew Scripture to be regarded as inspired by God and holy writ for Christians, but so are the eye-witness gospel accounts of the apostles and so are the letters of Saint Paul. He also points out that people are twisting them and distorting them, and Christians must make every effort not to do so. The more things change the more they stay the same.

Again, 300 years before Constantine was born, the Bible begins to emerge. The early Bible consists of the writings of the early apostles and of the gospels of Jesus Christ that were produced by eyewitnesses.

For what it’s worth, though, the Roman Empire was a big place and in a day when there were no phones, faxes or copy machines, no world wide web or email, the word did not spread from one place to another as quickly as it does today. Of course, that’s an understatement. It is not likely that Christians in Palestine had Paul’s letter to the Romans right away. It’s not likely that Christians reading the Gospel of John in Alexandria Egypt would have had immediate access to James letter which probably circulated around Palestine.

Now, for what it’s worth, there is very good evidence that all of the gospels we have in the New Testament were written before 90 AD, the latest being the Gospel of John and book of Revelation, both of which appear to have been written in the 90s. In fact, one of the earliest fragments of the New Testament archeologists have uncovered is called the John Ryland’s Papyrus. It is a piece of the gospel of John which found in Alexandria, Egypt and dates to AD 130 AD. Even the most liberal scholars concede that the copying and transmission process of early manuscripts place the writing of the original gospel of John to about 90 AD.

Most conservative scholars date the letters of Paul and the gospels to a range between 50-70 AD. A common mis-perception is that conservatives and liberals differ widely on the dating of the New Testament. Well, they did before the 1940s, but archeology has narrowed that gap. Today, most liberal schools of scholarship date the letters of Paul and the gospels between 50-100 AD. It is a difference of decades, not centuries, so whether you are a wild-eyed fundamentalist or a bespectacled college professor, every scholar agrees that the books we call the New Testament were all written within the 1st century. That is to say – during the lifetime of Jesus’ apostles, during the lifetime of the eyewitnesses of Christ’s life, teachings, death and resurrection.

Picking up a gospel of Mark fresh off the press in 60 AD would give you about the same level of reliability as picking up the memoirs of Jimmy Carter today. If he were to write, or if his

kids were to write, or his friends were to write, a synopsis of his life, it would be within the same time frame as the books of the New Testament in relation to Jesus Christ. Likewise, there are many opinions about the kind of President Jimmy Carter had been, but if anyone were to write bald-faced lies at least there are people alive today who could clearly provide a counter-balance to this. Just as the Apostles wrote in their letters, counterbalances to errors about Jesus that had begun to spread.

So again, even in the earliest of times, there have been alternative Christianities – and in fact that is part of the reason the Bible formed. The apostles wanted to correct misunderstandings and set the record straight about Jesus Christ. But, as I said, not every Christian community had the same books of the Bible early on. And after the first generation of apostles died, there arose a second generation of Christians and thinkers who began to interpret the message of Christ for their generation.

In fact, from the second to fourth century, there were many different stories about Jesus and the apostles that were written. Some were viewed as just plain fun. For example, around 160 AD, a book called the Acts of Paul was written – it was understood by early church fathers, such as Eusebius, to be a fictionalized account but worth the read, much like we would encourage people to watch the 1981 Movie, “Peter and Paul.” It’s not the Bible, but it’s a fun way to think about the Bible. There were many such morality tales written about the apostles and Jesus.

Dan Brown, and much popular hype these days, tend to lend more credence to these books than they do the Bible. Pseudo-gospels, apocryphal books, gnostic gospels – all very interesting, are novel revelations for many of us in the 20th century. And since we’ve all heard of the Gospel of Mark, and familiarity breeds contempt, when we hear a new gospel, called the Gospel of Thomas has been found, we want to pay attention. There are many such. Here’s a short list of better preserved gnostic gospels:

The Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel to the Egyptians, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Perfect Mind, the Testimony of Truth.

More recently, we have been introduced the Gospel of Judas, which has been known to us since the 2nd Century, but which just made headlines two months ago when the National Geographic Society purchased a well-preserved manuscript of this ancient text.

Well, it’s a new gospel. At least to most of us. So when the ABC News Anchor tells us that this is supposed to shed new light on Jesus, we take notice. We mistakenly think that it must be an earlier and better version of the Bible than the one we have, the one Constantine created in the 4th century. But the truth is, none of the gnostic gospels, none of the pseudo-gospels, none of the apocryphal books are from the first century, none of them were written by eye-witnesses, and none of them were accepted considered as Scripture by any but a very few of the earliest Christians. Look, the gospel of Judas, for example, was written in about 180 AD, the manuscript now owned by National Geographic has been carbon dated to 220 AD. Several of the early church fathers refer to it, it’s even detailed by the 4th Century church historian Eusebius – and all who refer to it reject it as a false gospel.

The Gospel of Judas has Judas as the main hero. It’s message is that the other disciples had not grasped the true meaning of Jesus, a secret meaning that was available only to Judas. This book was written by a sect of gnostic Christians called Sethians, who believed they were following the Biblical son of Adam, the one named Seth. To quote, “The first is Seth, who is

called Christ” – this group equated Seth with Christ, and they made as their heroes the figures of the Bible that challenged Yahweh’s authority because they believed – as did many gnostic Christians, that the God of the Old Testament was in fact evil, and that Christ came to overthrow this false God. Such themes as these run through the so called alternative Christianities, all of which arose as challenges to the core truth about Jesus, related to us by eyewitnesses.

So, yes, there were alternative gospels. But they never were considered by the vast majority of early Christian leaders to be part of the true word of God. The early Christian leaders, those who lived in the second and third centuries after Christ, did indeed have copies of the most ancient texts – the four gospels we have, the letters of Paul, John, Peter, James, Hebrews – the 27 books we call the New Testament. These were together and compiled and used and preached from as Scripture long before Constantine was born – 200 years before, and long before the gospel of Mary or the gospel of Judas were written.

But when and how were all the books of what we know as the Bible? When did these books become officially recognized as the ones that were scripture as opposed to others that were either merely useful or perhaps dangerously heretical? The question is that of canonicity. A canon means a rule. There is a canon of the writings of Shakespeare, for example. Why do we accept this as our canon, and not the gospel texts? How was the decision made?

By the second century AD, Christians had become a problem for Rome. They refused to do their duty of bowing to the Caesar as a divine Lord. As a result, they often suffered persecution. Often, Roman officials would seek to destroy the sacred texts of the Christians. Christians that would turn over copies of their sacred texts were considered traitors to the cause of Christ, but if they refused to do so they could well be killed by the Romans. This put people into a tough situation – which books can I give away to be destroyed in good conscience, and which books am I willing to die to preserve? Around 90 AD, for example, the Emperor Domitian ordered a brutal persecution of Christians which included the destruction of sacred texts. Many such persecutions broke out. One of the worse was by the Emperor Diocletian, who in 303 AD called for the destruction of the sacred books of the Christians.

Trying to discern which books were the true Scripture and which were not became not just a matter of theological concern for debate over coffee at the Jerusalem Starbucks, but a matter of life or death. When the Roman guards come by and demand my gospel collection, what do I give them? Mark, Matthew, Luke, Thomas, the Acts of Peter?

During times of persecution and a period of deep and careful discernment of which books were authentically part of the Bible, general consensus among the churches of the known world began to evolve. Lists of which books were authentic and should be viewed as Scripture, which books were useful and good to read but not Scripture, and which books were downright heretical or even dangerous began to emerge.

Different church leaders in different parts of the world, between 150 and 330 put together different lists. In this regard, Dan Brown is right, though Constantine had nothing to do with it. There were different lists early on. Many different texts were considered, but what is striking is not how wide-ranging they were, but how similar they are. Tertulian, writing in 150 AD, lists all four of the gospels we have, the book of Acts, all of the letters of Paul we have, Hebrews, 1 John and the Book of Revelation. He doesn’t list Peter, Jude or James or 1,2 John. He also does not list any of the disputed gospels such as Thomas or Mary – because they hadn’t been written yet.

In 1945, a collection of fifty two ancient texts were discovered in Nag Hamadi, Egypt. These are the gnostic texts. The earliest was written 120 years after Jesus. Among these texts is

a book called the “Gospel of Truth” by a man named Valentinus. Though it clearly is not Christian insofar as it was a gnostic heresy, it is interesting that it quotes Matthew, Luke, John, 10 of Paul’s letters, 1 John, Revelation, Hebrews and Jude as Scripture, and though a gnostic text itself does not list any of the gnostic gospels as Scripture.

The fact is, when Dan Brown asserts that the pagan Roman emperor Constantine made up the list of the books of the Bible in the council of Nicea in 323 AD in order to solidify his power, he missed almost every mark he could miss. Long before 323 AD, the core of the Bible had been identified by Christians all over the known world. Even most of the heretics recognized the canonical books as true Scripture. These Christians were well aware of the false gospels, and as we pointed out, much of the earliest Bible texts were written to combat the beginnings of such false beliefs and misrepresentation of Jesus.

Constantine was the first emperor to be converted to Christianity, and for the first time in 300 years, Christians were legally permitted to meet in public without fear of opposition or persecution from the official government. Now, Constantine did call for a council to meet in the city of Nicea, in 323 AD, but it was not to fix the canon or list of approved texts. More on this next week as talk about the true nature of Jesus.

But Constantine did do something very interesting. He asked around and discovered that the most respected Christian leader in his empire was a man named Eusebius. He contracted with Eusebius to do something that had never been done before. Make 50 copies of the Christian sacred text to be distributed throughout the empire. Which books made it into this copy of the Bible? We don’t have any existing copies of these books, which is a real shame. But lists that reflect the content of the book contain all 27 of our New Testament books, and no other additions. That means that the Bible had come to be accepted by the universal church well before Constantine stepped into the scene.

The first actual universal affirmation by a group of Christian leaders regarding the canon of Scripture was not made at Nicea, it was made 70 years late in Hippo, Africa. At the Synod of Hippo, the “Church council listed the twenty seven books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity” (FF Bruce).

That doesn’t mean that some fringe groups still argued that the secret gospels of Jesus were of more worth. That’s till what people are doing today. Nothing has changed in 2000 years. Whether it is the 3rd Century Sethians saying that the truth is found in Judas Iscariot and all those who fight against God, or Dan Brown who says the same thing today, the arguments are just rehashed and more of the same.

Well, this is how you got your New Testament.

It is the memoirs of the Apostles, or those closely associated with Apostles, who were eye-witnesses of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit in the first Christians. Unlike the fictitious gnostic gospels, which as Saint Paul in Galatians reminds us are “no gospel at all” – every book you hold in your hand was written within 30 years of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Almost every one of the texts Dan Brown refers to as more valid were written no less than 100 years after the resurrection of Jesus and most were written even later than that. They were rejected by all serious thinkers in the ancient world, and should be today as well. That the Bible is the creation of Constantine and power grubbing churchmen bent on stomping out the true story of Jesus is simply fiction. But then, I guess I did pick this buy book in the fiction section.

As 2 Peter reminds us: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you

about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”