

JESUS, JUDAS, DA VINCI...

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On the 20th July last, a text that one would hardly consider as light reading, that is *The Gospel of Judas*, appeared among the top ten bestsellers for the sixth week running. The sales of *The Da Vinci Code*, an entertaining novel and an unappealing film, are numerous. So is this an indication of their intrinsic value, of our insatiable curiosity or of the defencelessness and vulnerability of the average citizen in the face of a media blitz? In this booklet we will try to use the facts to come up with the answer.

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1. A LOOK AT THE APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS

1.1. What are the Apocryphal Gospels?

There are two main differences between the four New Testament Gospels and those works known as the Apocryphal Gospels. One is in relation to their date and the other, their content (thus turning the main differences that exist between the Gospels of the four evangelists into secondary ones). We will now take a brief look at this.

A) The word “*apocryphal*” means “hidden”. These Apocryphal writings are so-called because they appeared much later than the Gospels in the New Testament, and it was therefore necessary to point out that this was because they had been “hidden” for some time.

As far as the experts have been able to ascertain, the majority of the apocryphal gospels discovered up to now, appeared in their original language, that is Greek, towards the end of the second century but mainly during the third century (many of them also appeared in the fourth century or even later). The so-ca-

lled *Gospel of Judas* would have been written around the year 180 AD. In order to explain its delayed release, a fictitious explanation was put forward, suggesting that it had been “hidden” for some time. This was the general reason used to explain why these texts appeared so much later.

B) Another characteristic of the *Apocryphals* is that they did not focus on the *public* teaching of Jesus, like the Canonical Gospels, but instead focused on *private teachings*, that were more *esoteric* and *elitist*, teachings that Jesus would only have communicated to certain privileged individuals that he supposedly loved more than other people (and in this way, they were similar to the Gospel of John). This is offered as another reason as to why these texts did not come to light for so long, but we will be examining their contents later.

Attributing a text to a famous author (or *pseudonym*) was common practice in Biblical literature and in Jewish literature between the third century BC and the first century AD. This technique was

used in the Book of Daniel, and among the Jewish “Apocryphal” writings we have the *First Book of Enoch*¹, the *Second Book of Baruch*², and the *Fourth Book of Esdras*. The two latter books are Jewish “revelation” writings dating from around the same time as the Book of Revelations by John.

All the authors to whom the apocryphal “Gospels” are attributed were already familiar and significant names to Christians, through the writings of the four Canonical Gospels. They came across writings accredited to Mary Magdalene, or apostles such as Thomas, Peter, Matthew or Judas, and James the Less, leader of the mother Church of Jerusalem, whom Saint Paul in his letter to the Galatians 1:19 called “the brother of the Lord”.

The revelations of Jesus that each of these apocryphal gospels claim to hold, differ greatly from each other (if we disregard the apocryphal accounts of the Nativity). This clearly distinguishes them from the Canonical Gospels. But what is common to many of these apocryphal texts, or so-called *Gnostic Gospels*, is their preoccupation with spiritual knowledge, true knowledge of self, that Jesus helps one to discover and awaken in the very depths of one’s being. It is for this reason that Jesus is seen as the source of salvation, not because he gave up his life on the cross. Another common trait shared by the majority of these Gospels is this: their devaluation of Creation and of all physical matter.

If we look at the *Gospel of Judas* within the framework of the *Apocryphals*, its content and supposed revelations

contain nothing new, in this way going against what the sensationalist propaganda of the media would have us believe. For this reason, we should get to know these apocryphal texts in their totality.

1.2. When they appeared

According to the religious tradition of the Christian Church, the four Gospels of the New Testament were not the only so-called gospels in existence. Other “Gospels” also appeared, but the Church did not recognize these as being true to what we can historically know about Jesus of Nazareth.

The discovery of these apocryphal gospels is a historical fact, which allowed us to see very quickly that as with our experience of Christianity today, the Christian faith was just as diverse and controversial at that time. The existence of these texts had already been ascertained in critiques written by ecclesiastical authors in the early centuries of Christianity. However, the majority of them had not been found at that point, even in translation, in particular the Gospels described as “Gnostic Gospels”. Their discovery was relatively recent³.

In 1945, some Arab shepherds in Nag Hammadi (a desert area of Egypt), came across a whole library of Gnostic writings completely by chance that were hidden in amphorae. Some of them had sections missing and had become a little deteriorated, because the people that found them were not initially aware of their value. The *Gospel of Judas*, discovered at a later date, not far from

Nag Hammadi in Egypt, could well have formed part of this library. That would explain its similarities with some of the texts found at the site, which have since been published and translated into several languages⁴.

1.3. Two types of Apocryphal writings

The Apocryphal Gospels found over time have largely been of two distinct types. There have been the more popular texts that date from a later period, (with the exception of the *Protoevangelium of James*). Some of the more famous among them include *Apocryphals on the Nativity and Infancy of Jesus*. These have already been published and in circulation for some time⁵.

The other group that we have already mentioned is known as the *Gnostic Gospels*. These are more elitist, more intellectual and in general, more ancient than the previous group, although not as ancient as the four Canonical Gospels. “*Gnostic*” is a word of Greek origin, (which was the common language of the Early Church), meaning “those with knowledge”, because Gnostics believe that what will ultimately save humanity is “knowledge” (*Gnosis*). This name of Greek origin was kept, even though Christianity soon became part of other cultures and languages, such as Syrian, Armenian, Coptic and Latin.

These writings are very diverse in nature, but are usually similar in the way that they avoid recounting the life and public teachings of Jesus that led to his

death on the cross, and instead pass on “secret” words and teachings, not connected to his life, that Jesus would supposedly have communicated to certain privileged individuals. For this reason:

- 1) They do not value the commitment of Jesus to the poor and the Kingdom of God;
- 2) They do not value the Incarnation, which allowed Jesus to become truly human;
- 3) They do not value the true cross, an expression of his love for humanity that led him to give up his life in order to save mankind;
- 4) They do not value the ethical commitment made in choosing to follow Jesus.

It seems that Greek, which was the original language used in the four Canonical Gospels and throughout the New Testament, was also the language of the apocryphal writings (mostly written at the end of the second century and in the third century). Yet for the majority of these apocryphal writings, the original Greek text has not actually been found, and neither have earlier and more reliable copies of these texts been located, as was the case with the four Canonical Gospels. We have only found *later translations*, which are usually dated from the end of the third century to the beginning of the fourth century. This is also true of the *Gospel of Judas*, which was found in Coptic translation dating from this period, although its Greek original should have been written around the year 180 AD.

2. APOCRYPHAL WRITINGS ON THE BIRTH AND INFANCY OF JESUS

We have already talked about the popular nature of these apocryphal writings. In fact, many Christians today do not know that the origin of so many well-known Christian traditions did not come from the New Testament, but from these apocryphal writings instead.

2.1. General characteristics

Among these texts, three must be singled out due to the influence they had on popular piety: the *Protoevangelium of James* which, according to the references found in ancient ecclesiastical writings, was probably written in the second century AD, or at least no later than the fourth century AD, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, which probably dates from the middle of the sixth century AD, and the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*, which is a later text, because it follows on from the previous texts mentioned. The common trait of all three texts is their desire to fill the gap of information concerning the birth and in-

fancy of Mary and Jesus, which are omitted by the four Evangelists.

In fact, the Canonical Gospels make no mention of the infancy of Mary. Only Matthew and Luke speak of the birth of Jesus and remain very moderate and theological in the little information they do give. (Luke gives the account of a significant episode in Jesus' infancy, that of the child Jesus being lost and later found in the Temple, 2:39-52).

In the face of popular piety, this information was insufficient. People needed to know more. It was this *desire to find out more* (which we find fuelled by the media in relation to “celebrities” today) that the Apocryphal writings hoped

to satisfy. A common characteristic of them all, in contrast to the Canonical Gospels is their tendency, through their unaffected and popular style, of *highlighting the marvellous workings of God* (or of Jesus) at this stage of Jesus' childhood.

Their desire to talk about the infancy of Mary also stands out (highlighting to an almost incredible level its difference from all that which would make it appear to be normal), as well as the emphasis on her perpetual virginity. This is seen in the *Protoevangelium of James* (XX 1-4), which states that the midwife wanted to check with her hand if Mary was still a virgin after childbirth. On doing so, her hand became charred, but when the child Jesus took her hand afterwards, she was healed.

All these apocryphal writings stand out due to their highly creative imagination, which is eastern, unaffected and almost fantastical in nature, taking on the traits of marvellous legends. In this way, they are able to place more emphasis on the supernatural nature of God and Jesus. They also encourage a type of piety towards Mary which is not found in the New Testament, where Mary's image is a much more human one and simply underlines her great faith, (as seen in the portrayal of Mary offered by Luke).

If the Christian churches did not accept these writings as part of the New Testament, this was due to the fact that the majority of them were from a much later date, and above all because the image of God and Jesus they presented placed so much emphasis on their awe-

inspiring characteristics, (a tendency that is little in keeping with the fundamental humanity of Jesus), that they seemed to completely contradict the plan of God as presented to us by the four Canonical Gospels. In this sense, they present a false image, or at least a very incomplete image of God and His work in the world. This is why the Church did not recognize these texts as having been the result of divine inspiration.

On the other hand, these writings were very successful among groups that denied the fact that Jesus was really human. They also took advantage of ordinary people's ignorance (including members of the clergy), by presenting inaccurate portraits of Jesus and Mary that contradict those which were revealed by God.

2.2. Popular Gospels

It is interesting to note just how popular these writings were among ordinary people, because many accounts that can only be found in these writings and not in the Canonical Gospels, have remained part of popular Christian tradition.

For example: the names of Mary's parents (Joachim and Anne: see the *Protoevangelium* I-II), the tale of the ox and the mule beside the manger (*Pseudo-Matthew* XIV), the name of the three Magi: Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar, that are portrayed as Kings (*Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* V 10, a text which postdates the *Arab Gospel of the Infancy*), the feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple (*Protoevangelium* VII), or the legend

according to which Joseph was old and widowed, but on going to the Temple with other men to see who God would choose to be the husband of the Virgin Mary, a dove flew from the rod that he was carrying to show that he alone had been chosen to protect Mary's virginity. This account, as well as confirming the virginity of Mary before, during and after the birth of Jesus (an idea that is not found in the New Testament), would explain the fact, which to some appears scandalous, that in the New Testament the brothers and sisters of Jesus are mentioned. According to the apocryphal version of events then, these children

would not belong to Mary, but instead be the offspring from Joseph's first marriage (*Protoevangelium IX:1-2*).

Before closing this section, the quotes we have listed will help to understand why these "Gospels" were not considered to be the result of divine inspiration. They do not emphasise the humanity of Mary. They highlight excessively the miraculous and extraordinary events during the birth and infancy of Jesus, which are little in keeping with the real humanity of Christ, and they present a non-human image of Jesus, in his attitude towards other children during his childhood.

Concrete examples

The following extracts are enough to demonstrate the general attitude of these apocryphal writings in relation to the birth and infancy of Jesus. It is therefore clear why the Church could not accept them to be the result of divine inspiration:

"And Mary was held in admiration by all the people of Israel; and when she was three years old, she walked with a step so mature, she spoke so perfectly, and spent her time so assiduously in the praises of God, that all were astonished at her, and wondered; and she was not reckoned a young infant, but as it were a grown-up person of thirty years old. She was so constant in prayer, and her appearance was so beautiful and glorious, that scarcely any one could look into her face. (...) And this was the order that she had set for herself (at only three years of age!) From the morning to the third hour she remained in prayer; from the third to the ninth she was occupied with her weaving; and from the ninth she again applied herself to prayer. She did not retire from praying until there appeared to her the angel of the Lord, from whose hand she used to receive food" (*Pseudo-Matthew VI 1-2*).

"And Joseph, throwing away his axe, went out to meet them; and when they had assembled, they went away to the high priest, taking with them their rods. And he, taking the rods of all of them, entered into the temple, and prayed; and having ended his prayer, he took the rods and came out, and gave them to them: but there was no sign in them, and Joseph took his rod last; and, behold, a dove came out of the rod, and flew upon Joseph's head. And the priest said to Joseph, Thou hast been chosen by lot to take into thy keeping the virgin of the Lord. But Joseph refused, saying: I have children, and I am an old man,

and she is a young girl. I am afraid lest I become a laughing-stock to the sons of Israel.” (*Protoevangelium IX, 1*).

“And they stood in the place of the cave, (Joseph and the midwife) and behold a luminous cloud overshadowed the cave. And the midwife said: My soul has been magnified this day, because mine eyes have seen strange things –because salvation has been brought forth to Israel. And immediately the cloud disappeared out of the cave, and a great light shone in the cave, so that the eyes could not bear it. And in a little that light gradually decreased, until the infant appeared, and went and took the breast from His mother Mary. And the midwife cried out, and said: This is a great day to me, because I have seen this strange sight.” (*Protoevangelium XIX 2*).

In the flight to Egypt, “even the lions and leopards adored them and accompanied them through the desert. Wherever Mary and Joseph would walk, they would go ahead of them, showing them the way. And bowing their heads, they would worship Jesus” (*Pseudo-Matthew XIX 1*).

“And as the blessed Mary was sitting there, she looked up to the foliage of the palm, and saw it full of fruit, and said to Joseph: I wish it were possible to get some of the fruit of this palm. And Joseph said to her: I wonder that thou sayest this, when thou seest how high the palm tree is; and that thou thinkest of eating of its fruit. I am thinking more of the want of water, because the skins are now empty, and we have none wherewith to refresh ourselves and our cattle. Then the child Jesus, with a joyful countenance, reposing in the bosom of His mother, said to the palm: ‘O tree, bend thy branches, and refresh my mother with thy fruit’. And immediately at these words the palm bent its top down to the very feet of the blessed Mary; and they gathered from it fruit, with which they were all refreshed.” (*Pseudo-Matthew XX 1-2*).

“And it came to pass, after Jesus had returned out of Egypt, when He was in Galilee, and entering on the fourth year of His age, that on a Sabbath-day He was playing with some children at the bed of the Jordan. And as He sat there, Jesus made to Himself seven pools of clay, and to each of them He made passages, through which at His command He brought water from the torrent into the pool, and took it back again. Then one of those children, a son of the devil, moved with envy, shut the passages which supplied the pools with water, and overthrew what Jesus had built up. Then said Jesus to him: ‘Woe unto thee, thou son of death, thou son of Satan! Dost thou destroy the works which I have wrought?’ And immediately he who had done this died.” (*Pseudo-Matthew 16: 1*).

3. THE GNOSTIC GOSPELS OF NAG HAMMADI

The second group of Gnostic Gospels presents another type of spirituality, which is also very different from that of the Canonical Gospels. Their interest, like that of the *Gospel of Judas*, also lies in demonstrating how early Christianity was very diverse and that, alongside the mainstream Christian Church, there were also other Christian groups that proposed a different faith, because they did not agree with the faith of the Church or the faith that was taught in the Gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John*.

However, these texts are not entirely negative:

1) The excessively hierarchical nature of the Church, which was becoming more and more like the patriarchal structure of the Roman Empire.

2) The progressive marginalisation of women in the Church, which had already begun to appear in a later book of the New Testament (see 1 Timothy 2:11-15). The Gnostics, on the other hand, perhaps gaining their inspiration from the *Gospel of John* in which women possess a clear

theological and pastoral role, gave a great ecclesiastical role to women.

3) The superficial response to the problem of evil in the world. This is another positive aspect of these texts –although the solution they propose is inadequate. They at least show themselves to be concerned with this issue.

Unfortunately, the Church did not try and find the potential positive aspects of these texts on time, and neither did the supporters of these texts try and initiate a dialogue with the Church.

3.1. The main characteristics of Gnosis

Today, two concrete facts revive our interest in the study of Gnosticism, which originally flourished in the second and third centuries AD.

On the one hand, Gnostic tendencies are now becoming a subject of interest, as they were at the very start of Christianity. It is not just a question of an intellectual “fashion”, but rather, similar to what was happening almost 2000 years ago, it is a result of specific political, economic, social and religious circumstances. It is a way of trying to compensate for the difficulty of living in this world, of *finding consolation, without having to take on the transformation of a world that is filled with injustice.*

On the other hand, it is a way of reacting against the way in which the Christian Church represents faith today. What this type of movement fundamentally questions is the claim of the mainstream Church that only they possess unquestionable apostolic authority when it comes to interpreting and administering (Christian) religious experience and the legacy of the Lord Jesus, in this way undermining the role and co-responsibility of the whole Christian community. It is not merely by chance that *gnosis* and Christian Gnosticism are flourishing just when the hierarchical structure of the Church is strengthening its triple level leadership of Bishop/ priest/ deacon: because according to the Catholic Church, since these leaders are legitimised by their apostolic succession, they alone are responsible for remaining faithful to the original and founding tra-

dition of Christianity. Christian Gnostics considered “original creative invention to be the mark of anyone who becomes spiritually alive”, and that “whoever merely repeated his teacher’s words was considered immature”, so “whoever receives the spirit communicates directly with the divine” (E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York 1979, p. 19 and 20).

What is at stake then is *who interprets and adequately administers with authority the revelation of Jesus of Nazareth*, which initially came to us through his disciples. According to Pagels, the answer given by Valentinus (who was one of the great Gnostic thinkers, and who arrived in Rome in 140 AD) and his students is the following:

“They argued that only one’s own experience offers the ultimate criterion of truth, taking precedence over all second-hand testimony and all traditions – even Gnostic tradition! They celebrated every form of creative invention as evidence that a person has become spiritually alive. On this theory, the structure of authority can never be fixed into an institutional framework: it must remain spontaneous, charismatic, and open” (*The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 25).

This is why it was so important for these groups to highlight the value of creative knowledge, and this is why the movement was given the name of *Gnosis*. According to the ancient ecclesiastical writer Hippolytus, the name “Gnostic” that we have already mentioned, originated because a group known as “Naasenes” (or followers of the Serpent) “called themselves ‘Gnostics’, proclaiming themselves to be the only

ones possessing profound knowledge (*gnosis*)”.

Specific to “gnosis” is the belief that *salvation can be gained through knowledge*. But not through any type of knowledge, but rather through knowledge that is superior to the senses, reason and faith. This would be a type of knowledge that is not possessed by all mortals, but only those who have been blessed by a *spark of divine light* bestowed by God and enclosed within the prison of the body. This is why they call themselves “pneumatics” (“spirituals”: from the Greek word *Pneuma* meaning “spirit”). As M. Guerra⁶ points out, *Gnosis* consists of a religio-psychological introspection, which sometimes has “mystical” connotations, and which man usually comes to through his inner exploration of the threefold question: “Where did I come from, where am I now, and where am I going?” or: “Who was I, who am I, and who will I become?”.

This is why in ancient gnosticism, “revelation” is in fact a “message” from above, capable of “awakening” the “pneumatic, spiritual” self. For the Gnostic then, this would consist in the person becoming aware that the “spirit” is superior to matter, as it does not come from the inferior material world, but rather from the pleromatic or divine world, to which it must return. “Gnostic revelation” consists in “experiencing” the worth of one’s spiritual rather than one’s physical self: in other words, the importance of the “soul”, along with the sublime nature of its origin and destiny... For this reason, no importance is given to the *objective* nature of divine revelation. This is why gnosis speaks of a “sa-

ving knowledge” because this knowledge is capable of making the human soul aware of its transcendent destiny, and of freeing it from its current situation in the body and the world, as well as guiding it to its rightful destiny after death.

In a context of persecution, facilitated by a commitment to social justice that is seen in the New Testament Gospels, (particularly the Synoptic Gospels), one can see why some texts, like the Gnostic Gospels, easily gained support among those people who were reluctant to oppose the established authorities. Their spiritualism and secretive content meant that they avoided discovery, and thus avoided being denounced as politically dangerous material to the Roman Empire.

One of the issues that most concerned the “Gnostics” is incredibly serious, and continues to be an issue in today’s world. It is that of the existence of evil in the world. The Gnostic response to this implies a form of dualistic thought. For them, the Supreme Deity is transcendent, distant, impersonal and inactive (He goes by different names: Father, Transcendent One, Formless One, Abyss, Pre-Father etc.). He is not involved in the creation of matter or of the world, and neither is He involved in its government, in the life of human beings, or in the history of humanity. He does not intervene and neither can he intervene, because if He did, He would become contaminated and corrupted, and no longer be a divine entity, because all matter is inherently evil. This is how the Gnostics avoided blaming themselves for the presence of evil in the world.

How then do they explain the origin of the world? With slight variations, according to different groups, the general explanation is as follows: God, the Transcendent One, the Unknown One, through His own free will, decides to communicate Himself through divine grace. As a result of this decision, the descending emanation of “aeons” begins (periods of time in eternity): a generic name for the entities or personifications of the superior or pleromatic⁷ realm that emanates from God.

Each “aeon” comes from the divinity in sets of two (masculine-feminine): *God-Grace, Abyss-Silence, Understanding-Truth, Word-Life, Man-Church*, etc., until the “ogdoad” is complete, that is “four pairs of aeons” (or twelve pairs, according to other groups). These emanations can then go on to multiply themselves. Throughout this process, the feminine element of the pair – and more importantly, the “mother” – holds great importance. In some systems of thought, during this process of generating “aeons”, along with the Unnameable Father, the feminine mother element is called *Barbelo* (which can be identified with the Spirit).

According to this theory, the material world is not a work of God but rather of the Demiurge and of Wisdom and for this reason, it is evil. The Demiurge goes by different names according to different schools of thought (Archon, Yaldabaoth, Saklas, Samael) and is often identified with the God of the Old Testament, presented in opposition to the supreme “good God”, (the God of the New Testament, although according to this school of thought, this God

would not then have created us nor saved us through Jesus).

This explains therefore (as the *Gospel of Judas* emphasises), their negative perception of the human body and the reason behind their belief that salvation did not come through Jesus giving up his life on the cross. The New Testament asserts that it was through the cross that “God was reconciling the (sinful) world to himself” (2 Cor 5:17-21), because the human being, free from the slavery of sin, can do good works thanks to the gift of Jesus’ soul (Rom 8). But for Gnostics, *salvation is obtained through liberation from the body*, which is the prison of the soul, and freeing the divine spark that is trapped within. This can only be achieved by “he who knows, he who is *aware*”, as in the case of Judas, according to the Gospel that is attributed to him. In this version, given that matter is the source of all evil, Jesus asks Judas to help him liberate himself from his body, by delivering him to his enemies: because it cannot be good that Jesus is immersed in the world of matter in a physical body. That is why Gnostics believe that Jesus was not a true and complete incarnation of God.

Some even go as far as saying that Jesus’ body was only an illusion⁸. Others say that on the cross, the Christ, who was hidden in Jesus, left his body and laughed at those who believed he was being crucified. In a theory of this type, no real solidarity can exist between Jesus as a victim with other suffering victims in the world... And this is exactly the opposite of what is affirmed in the Canonical Gospels.

3.2. The Gospel of Thomas

There are many writings that different groups or Gnostic sects produced in order to defend their distorted doctrines. One of the most interesting and most ancient of these can also be found in the Nag Hammadi collection, and is called the *Gospel of Thomas*. It gathers together different common sayings that were attributed to Jesus, many of them similar to those we find in the Synoptic Gospels because at “a glance” (this is the meaning of the word “synoptic” in Greek), their common traits can be identified.

What distinguishes the *Gospel of Thomas* from the four Canonical Gospels is that it does not accept the Gospel model as put forward in Mark’s writings, that is: *situating the stories about Jesus within the framework of his life, which led to his death on the cross and the resurrection*. It limits itself to simply gathering together 114 “logia”, or *common sayings of Jesus*, totally outside the context of his life story.

Many of these sayings are formulated in such a way that they reflect Gnostic theology, as we will see later on, and have little in common with what we know about Jesus through the Canonical Gospels. The latter seem to pre-date the *Gospel of Thomas* (although it is possible that the *Gospel of Thomas* also used stories from the oral tradition, similar to those used in the Synoptic Gospels, but at the same time was not wholly dependent on them).

One single example in this Gospel (whose text we will look at later on) is the parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7 or Mt 18:10-14), although this Gospel states that the shepherd went to look for this sheep because *it was the largest* and that is why he loved it more than the others. Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, say that he went looking for the sheep simply because *it was lost* and God does not want anyone to lose their way. Let’s have a look at some other examples.

Concrete examples

“Jesus said: If those who lead you say, ‘See, the Kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty” (*Saying 3*).

“Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to His disciples, ‘These infants being suckled are like those who enter the Kingdom’. They said to Him, ‘Shall we then, as children, enter the Kingdom?’ Jesus said to them, ‘When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter [the Kingdom]’” (*Saying 22*).

“Jesus said: If they say to you, ‘Where did you come from?’, say to them, ‘We came from the light, the place where the light came into being on its own accord and established [itself] and became manifest through their image.’ If they say to you, ‘Is it you?’, say, ‘We are its children, we are the elect of the Living Father.’ If they ask you, ‘What is the sign of your father in you?’ say to them, ‘It is movement and repose.” (Saying 50).

“Jesus said: The Kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them, the largest, went astray. He left the ninety-nine sheep and looked for that one until he found it. When he had gone to such trouble, he said to the sheep, ‘I care for you more than the ninety-nine.” (Saying 107).

“Simon Peter said to Him, ‘Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life’. Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (Saying 114)

3.3. The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]

Due to the interest awakened by *The Da Vinci Code*, with its assertions that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had a son with her, we will have a brief look at the Gnostic Gospels of Mary and Philip, since Brown, the novel’s author, states that his novel is historically based on these two Gospels.

We will start with the *Gospel of Mary*, whose original Greek text was probably written in the second half of the second century. Nowhere in this Gospel does it say that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus, or that she had a son by him. It does indicate however that Mary Magdalene was the preferred disciple of Jesus. In this way it is similar to the other Gnostic Gospels who in giving “authenticity” to their writings, attribute them to an Apostle that was allegedly preferred by the Lord.

In common with the other Gnostic tendencies already mentioned, this text tries to undermine the authority given to

Peter in favour of an alternative figure—in this case, Mary Magdalene—who would be the preferred disciple of the Lord and therefore the receiver of his privileged revelations. This is what the following extract affirms, which comes after Mary has told about some of her visions:

“When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Saviour had spoken with her. But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, ‘Say what you (wish to) say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Saviour said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas’. Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Saviour: ‘Did He really speak with a woman without our knowledge (and) not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did He prefer her to us?’. Then Mary wept and said to Peter, ‘My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying

about the Saviour? Levi answered and said to Peter, Peter, you have always been hot – tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Saviour made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why He loved her more than us” (*Gospel of Mary*, 17-18).

In this extract Mary is not presented as being the wife of Jesus, but rather, as in the case of the “beloved disciple” (in John’s Gospel), or as with Judas (in the Gospel of Judas), she is presented as being a follower that was loved more than the others. This is why he gave her the privilege of telling her secret revelations (and this is what she is defending in this extract) that are supposedly superior to the public revelations that we find in the Canonical Gospels. Elsewhere in the Gospel of Mary we find no text that gives weight to the theory that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus.

3.4. The Gospel of Philip

This is the other text that Brown uses for his novel to assert that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus. According to researchers, this is a text that clearly reflects the Gnostic thought system. As with all the Gnostic Gospels, it was written to give historical and theological foundations to those doctrines that were not accepted by the mainstream Christian Church. It would therefore be wrong to suppose from a serious scientific point of view that these Gnostic texts represent reliable historical fact, particularly because they are not as ancient as the Canonical Gospels.

We should add that nothing in the text supports the theory that this could have been written by the Apostle Philip. It was probably written in Greek (although we do not have access to the original text), somewhere between the second half of the second century and the first half of the third century, and its theology is greatly influenced by the Gnostic thinker Valentinus.

Let’s have a look at the texts that Brown uses to support his theory that this Gospel proves that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus and had a child by him. The first extract is as follows:

“Three women always walked with the master: Mary his mother, [...] sister, and Mary of Magdala, who is called his companion. For ‘Mary’ is the name of his sister, his mother and his companion” (*Gospel of Philip*, 59).

Given that Mary is called “the companion” of Jesus here, Brown deduces that this means she is his wife. And in order to prove it, Teabing (who is presented as an historian in the novel) states: “As any student of Aramaic will tell you, the word *companion*, in those days, literally meant *spouse*”.

But this argument has one serious flaw: the Gospel was written in Greek, not Aramaic, and for this reason, the Aramaic meaning of the word is irrelevant. The Greek word that is used (*koinonós*), could mean “spouse”, although it is not the word that is commonly used to indicate spouse in Greek. But it could also mean “sister” (in a spiritual sense) or “colleague”, as in work associate. It is the same word used by Luke 5:10 in order to indicate that James and John

were companions, who had joined with Simon to go fishing in the lake of Galilee. No one would understand by this word that James and John were anything more than friends of Peter or Jesus. Therefore this single word is not enough to prove that the Gospel wants to present Mary Magdalene as the actual wife of Jesus.

But there is another text that the author of *The Da Vinci Code* uses to give weight to his theory that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus, and it is the following:

“The Wisdom thought to be ‘sterile’ is the mother [of the] angels. And the companion of the [Lord] is Mary Magdalene. The [Lord] loved her more than all the other disciples, and often kissed her on the [mouth]. The other [disciples] [approached her to ask]. They said to him: “Why do you love her more than all of us?” The Lord answered: “Why do I not love you like her?” (*Gospel of Philip*, 63-64).

The text we have access to, written in Coptic, has been altered in several areas. The words in brackets indicate the words that were reconstructed as closely as possible by specialists. The most surprising phrase is that which states that Jesus “kissed Mary Magdalene on the mouth”. It is this extract that also causes Brown to believe she was his wife.

However, according to researchers, the word “mouth” does not definitely appear in the original text. In note 81 from p. 35 of the edition of the Gnostic Gospels that I have used, (and quoted earlier in my note 4), it is indicated that this word had to be reconstructed, and

that in its place, there could have been another word such as “cheek” or “face”.

In the Jewish world, if a woman left a house with her husband she would have to walk behind him and not beside him, so it is very difficult to imagine Jesus publicly kissing Mary on the mouth, even if she was his wife: this of course fits in with twentieth century Hollywood, but not in first century Galilee. However, even if the original text did use the word “mouth”, it would still not prove that Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ wife: in the Gnostic world there was a certain tendency towards symbolic imagery, and many of their writings had sexual connotations without actually having this literal significance, especially not in the case of Jesus. It could merely be a way of symbolically expressing the close relationship and profound spiritual knowledge that existed between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

There are other examples that show that this type of language was not unusual in Gnostic writings. In another manuscript that seems to show the beginnings of Gnostic tendencies (the apocryphal text known as the *Odes of Solomon*), this type of imagery is also used, although it does not seem inappropriate to us when it is used to express the profound spiritual connection between the author and God. The text, which is a collection of Christian hymns from the start of the second century, has a similar language to that which we find in the Gospel of John, and contains the following paragraph:

“A cup of milk was offered to me: and I drank it in the sweetness of the de-

light of the Lord. The Son is the cup and He who was milked is the Father: And the Holy Spirit milked Him: because His breasts were full, and it was necessary for Him that His milk should be sufficiently released; And the Holy Spirit opened His bosom and mingled the milk from the two breasts of the Father and gave the mixture to the world without their knowing: And they who receive in its fullness are the ones on the right hand.” (*Ode* 19,1-5).

It is reasonable then to conclude that Gnostic language cannot be taken literally, and that it has a radically different tone to that which is used in the Canonical Gospels.

Neither does it make Dan Brown’s statement that Jesus “had to be married” very convincing. At least this is what his character Robert Langdon says in the novel, a man who is presented as a Professor of Religious Symbology at Harvard University:

“Jesus was a Jew and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned. (...) If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible’s gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood”.

What value does this argument have? What truth lies in it? It is unfortunate that sometimes a half-truth is worse than an outright lie. It is true that marriage would have been the norm in the Jewish world, thus fulfilling the commandment in Genesis 1:28 (in fact it actually facilitated the coming of the Messiah). A man would not be eligible

to become a Rabbi if he were not married (but Jesus was not an ordained Rabbi!). However, although marriage was the done thing, it is not true that celibacy was seen as something unnatural, or looked down upon to such an extent that the Gospels would have had to justify why Jesus was not married. In fact, the important prophet Jeremiah was not married. And neither was John the Baptist. And neither were the majority of Essenes at the time of Jesus, and they did not provoke criticism from their contemporaries. In fact, according to Philon of Alexandria, they were admired for it.

So marriage was not considered obligatory at the time of Jesus. And as Jesus was a wandering prophet without his own home, the Canonical Gospels did not need to point out that he was unmarried. On the other hand, it is a fact that the Canonical Gospels speak freely about Jesus’ family (parents and siblings). So then they would have no reason to deliberately hide the fact if Jesus were married, particularly when you consider that in those days the early Christian Church had nothing against sex. In fact, Peter and the other apostles were married.

So it doesn’t seem then that this Gospel supports the theory put forward in *The Da Vinci Code*.

3.5. The Gospel of Judas

We will look at the *Gospel of Judas*⁹ in the same context as the other apocryphal writings. Although the original text has not been found, we know of its existence through the writings of Saint

Irenaeus around the year 180 AD in his work *Against Heresies*. The fact of it being an authentic text only means that it actually belongs to the ancient era to which it claims.

Let us remember that this “gospel” was only found by chance by some peasants in El Minya, Egypt, in 1978, in a place near to Nag Hammadi, and was illegally taken out of the country. In 1984 it was left in a bank in New York. The fact that it had not been properly preserved for so long meant that the manuscript had deteriorated and part of the text was lost. For this reason, specialists had to reconstruct the missing part as best they could. As often happens in these cases, the gospel does not carry the name of Judas as its author, but through its content it can be deduced that this is in fact the *Gospel of Judas* thanks to the critique written by Saint Irenaeus, in whose work we read: “They say that Judas the Traitor was thoroughly acquainted with all these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal... They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas”.

3.5.1. Content

The book begins with the following words: “The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week, three days before he celebrated Passover”. So we are dealing with a revelation that was exclusively passed on to Judas, who would therefore be the preferred disciple of Jesus. This revelation sets him

apart from the other disciples, as Jesus indicates in another extract:

“Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the Kingdom. It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal. For someone else will replace you, [a reference to the election of Matthew in Acts 1:15-26], in order that the twelve disciples may again come to completion with their God, [who clearly according to this gospel, is not the true God]”.

But Jesus tells him that although he will be cursed by many, he will go on to be part of the holy [generation]:

“Jesus answered and said, ‘You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations –and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation]’”.

On Jesus, the Gospel states:

“He began to speak with them about the mysteries beyond the world and what would take place at the end. Often he did not appear to his disciples as himself, but he was found among them as a child”.

“One day he was with his disciples in Judea, and he found them gathered together and seated in pious observance. When he [approached] his disciples, gathered together and seated and offering a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread, [he] laughed. The disciples said to [him], ‘Master, why are you laughing at [our] prayer of thanksgiving? We have done what is right’. He answered and said to them, ‘I am not laughing at you. You are not doing this because of your own will but because it is through this that your god [will be] praised’. They

said, 'Master, you are [...] the son of our god'. Jesus said to them, 'How do you know me? Truly [I] say to you, no generation of the people that are among you will know me'.

When his disciples heard this, they started getting angry and infuriated and began blaspheming against him in their hearts. When Jesus observed their lack of [understanding, he said] to them, 'Why has this agitation led you to anger? Your god who is within you and [...] has provoked you to anger [within] your souls. [Let] any one of you who is [strong enough] among human beings bring out the perfect human and stand before my face'. They all said, 'We have the strength'. But their spirits did not dare to stand before [him], except for Judas Iscariot. He was able to stand before him, but he could not look him in the eyes, and he turned his face away. Judas [said] to him, 'I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you'. Knowing that Judas was reflecting upon something that was exalted, Jesus said to him, 'Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom. It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal'".

In this context, a different version of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas is told: in this Gospel he delivers Jesus to his enemies because Jesus wanted to be free of the burden of his physical body which was an encumbrance to him (it is seen as something negative and not created by God. As we have already seen, according to the Gnostics, one should stri-

ve to become free from the physical world in order to obtain salvation). This is why Jesus asks Judas to deliver him into the hands of his enemies (the motive of money, which accompanies the traditional tale, is only mentioned in passing at the end):

"Their high priests murmured because [he] had gone into the guest room for his prayer. But some scribes were there watching carefully in order to arrest him during the prayer, for they were afraid of the people, since he was regarded by all as a prophet. They approached Judas and said to him, 'What are you doing here? You are Jesus' disciple'. Judas answered them as they wished. And he received some money and handed him over to them".

3.5.2. *The historical credibility of the Gospel of Judas*

The fact that we are dealing with an authentic text, that is, a text that is as original and as ancient as it claims to be, does not necessarily mean that it is truthful or that it recounts actual historical facts that were not known before. It could merely be a result of the imagination of its author or written in the interests of the group that wanted to present their particular view of Jesus through this text. If this is the case, and in order to give it more authority in relation to the other Canonical Gospels, its authors would have attributed the text to Judas, who, in their view, would have been the preferred disciple of Jesus and therefore the one that knew him best. In this book, they would have be-

en trying to defend their doctrines that would have been new and distinct from the doctrines of the mainstream Church at the time.

From what we know about this period, a Gnostic sect, known as the Cainites, could have written this Gospel. This group was in opposition to the mainstream Church. They, like other similar sects, believed that the Old Testament was inspired by Yahweh, an evil god, and therefore venerated *all those characters who were presented as evil in the Old Testament*: the Serpent, Cain, the Sodomites, Esau and then naturally, the New Testament figure of Judas. Using these examples they justified a way of life that was significantly different from that preached by the mainstream Church.

This “Gospel”, like the majority of Gnostic writings, appeared at a time when an elitist and spiritual form of Christianity was flourishing, ‘spiritual’ in the negative sense of the word, in that it undermined the value of creation, which they believed was the work of an evil god. For this reason, many of these groups identified the evil god with the god of the Old Testament.

And if all creation is evil, then so is the human body. Following on from Platonism, the body is seen as the pri-

son of the soul. Salvation consists in becoming aware of this fact and as a result, becoming liberated from the body so that the hidden light of God, which had remained imprisoned in the body, can once more rise to God and enjoy complete happiness, hence the use of the Greek word *gnosis* (“knowledge”). This is why for all these groups that did not favour a Jesuanic form of morality, the notion of one’s Christian duty to the poor, and involving oneself in the transformation and humanization of the world, was not only unappealing, but also seen as counter-productive.

One can therefore understand why for Gnostics, if the God revealed in the Old Testament is evil, and if they wanted to oppose the practices of the mainstream Church, they would venerate those people in the Bible who are described as evil: the serpent, Cain or Judas. One can also see why, in order to defend their contempt of the human body, they would state that Judas delivered Jesus because he knew of the evil inherent in being in a human body, and so by betraying him to his enemies, he was actually freeing him from that which oppressed him. Therefore this Gospel cannot be relied on to present historical truth. Instead it puts forward a watered-down and elitist form of Christianity.

4. CONTRASTS

4.1. Emergence of the Gospel as a “literary type”

While the apostles and the first followers of Jesus were alive, it would not have been difficult to find out with some certainty what Jesus had said and done because Jesus’ disciples could have been asked directly. The problem arose when these people began to die, most of them as martyrs, and this problem worsened as communities that were further and further away began to believe in Jesus. How could loyalty to the true Jesus be assured, if communication between missionaries and Churches was so difficult?¹⁰

4.2. The great contribution of Mark

The brilliant disciple who found a way of guaranteeing faithfulness to Jesus is called Mark by tradition, and is believed to be a disciple of Peter, although his theology is more Pauline in content. He gave his work the title of *Gospel* (Mk 1:1): a Greek word that means “Good News”. Thus he became the inventor of a *literary type* of writing, which following on from his work, came to be known as *Gospels*.

Around the year 70 AD, Mark realized that if he simply quoted the words of Jesus, (as the Gnostic Gospels would go on to do), they could easily be falsified. This is because “a text, out of its context, can easily become used as a

pretext”. This is why he *situated everything that Jesus said and did in the context of his life and how it led to the cross and resurrection*. So here we have a fundamental point of reference, based on the real story of Jesus of Nazareth, in order to prevent anyone else from attributing words or deeds to Jesus that had never actually taken place.

At the start of his work, Mark presents Jesus’ plan as being an announcement of the coming of God’s Kingdom, which requires us to change our lives (see Mk 1:14-15). For a Jew at the time, “God reigns” when justice is given to the poor and when a world is created where peace and justice reign¹¹. The God that Jesus proclaims will work for the good of humanity whom he places above even the most sacred Sabbath (Mk 2:23-28 and 3:1-6). For Jesus, love of God and love of one’s neighbour are inseparable, and the worship that God hopes to inspire is inseparable from the notion of justice and should therefore automatically lead to it. These characteristics, which can be examined in much greater detail, explain the controversial nature of Jesus and why he was crucified¹².

4.3. The contribution of Matthew

The author of the Gospel that is attributed to Matthew is probably passing on the message of the Church at Antioch where Peter played an important role.

The author must have been influenced by Mark because he uses several extracts from his work, which seem to show that he was remaining faithful to the apostolic tradition. Yet he also had his own traditions (in particular, speeches of Jesus such as the Sermon on the Mount) and he also wanted to underline two important points for his particular community: one refers to the relationship of Jesus' teaching with Judaism – Jesus did not come to attack Judaism, but rather to bring it to its fullness. This did not mean a fundamentalist fulfilment of Scripture but instead highlighted his second point, that of bringing about a radical change in regards to loving one's neighbour (see Mt 7:12). Consequently, after Jesus' resurrection, the claim of being "God's people" was extended to all people on Earth (Mt 28:18-20). Matthew also highlights even more than Mark the importance of this great love for one's poorest neighbour, making this a decisive criteria for encountering God in our lives (Mt 25:31ff).

4.4. The contribution of Luke

Luke also uses this model of the Gospel that is put forward by Mark. But like Matthew, he has his own traditions too: the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan show that compassion and forgiveness should always be part of one's relationship with God, in contrast to the Pharisaic idea of "fulfilment" without the need for compassion.

This compassion which can be found throughout Luke's Gospel finds its roots in two fundamental passages: in his first public work, Jesus goes to the synagogue in Nazareth and states that

"today is fulfilled" a passage from Isaiah which offers a description of the Kingdom of God: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me: because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord"* (Lk 4:16-21). A little later in the "Sermon on the Plain" Jesus announces the Beatitudes, which are even more radical than those found in Matthew's Gospel, because they do not simply praise different types of behaviour but also exalt those in situations of poverty, weeping, hunger and persecution (Lk 6:20-23): they are like a confirmation of the view of God that Luke put into the mouth of Mary even before Jesus' birth: a God who brings the powerful down from their thrones and exalts "those of low degree" (1:51,53).

So the radical nature of Jesus' criticisms of the rich in this Gospel or those who idolise material wealth, which occurs more frequently here than in the other Gospels, should not seem out of character: no one can serve two Gods (16:13). According to Luke, this message was clearly understood by the Early Church in Jerusalem: there were no poor people because everyone shared what they had (Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35).

4.5. The contribution of John

With the fourth Gospel we are now approaching the date of the appearance of the apocryphal gospels. Yet the author still retains the style found in the other Synoptic Gospels. He also underlines the humanity of Jesus and his commitment

to mankind. The “only Son” of God really took on *flesh in our history* (Jn 1:14). And in the first part of his Gospel, John points out that Jesus acted as the defender of those whose lives were threatened, and those who were sick, a stance that brought Jesus into conflict with the religious powers of Israel (Jn 5 and Jn 9).

This reason is not developed as much as it is in the other Synoptic Gospels, because the aim of this author, whom the fourth Gospel describes as being ‘the beloved disciple’ of Jesus, was in discovering the depth of the meaning of Jesus’ mission. He is not only the Messiah and the long-awaited prophet, but in reality His presence has a much deeper significance. Whoever sees him, sees the Father (see Jn 14:9). This great revelation by the fourth evangelist regarding the divinity of Jesus, was implied but not made explicit in the Synoptic Gospels, and therefore made John want to expound upon it in his Gospel, both implicitly and explicitly, and thus explore this great mystery of the person Jesus. Other aspects of Jesus’ ministry, which were already well known through the Synoptic Gospels, were not emphasised as much in his Gospel.

But this is not the reason why they were glossed over: no other Gospel refers to Jesus as a “man” so many times. And keeping to the framework given in Mark’s Gospel, and continued in the other Gospels, John inserts his theology into the life story of Jesus to defend Christianity against dangerous sects; he therefore recounts a life that is devoted to humanity and undermines heresies by culminating with Jesus’ death on the cross (2:13-22). The testimony of Jesus

just before he faces death makes very clear what Jesus was most concerned about as well as how he wanted his disciples to continue working for him after his death: “A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another, even as I have loved you...By this all men will know that you are my disciples: if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

4.6. The portrayal of Judas in the Canonical Gospels

The four Gospels agree on the fact that Judas betrayed Jesus and received money in exchange, and they make it clear that this betrayal was a decisive factor that led to Jesus’ murder. This could be taken as a warning to Christians that were facing persecution at the time, to deter them from informing on their fellow brethren. However, the evangelists do not agree on the reasons for this betrayal. Mark (written around 70 AD) only states that Judas betrayed Jesus after he was anointed with oil in Bethany and that the High Priests “were glad and promised to give him money” (Mk 14:1-11).

Matthew on the other hand (written in the early part of the decade beginning 80 AD), specifically cites money as being a *motive*: “What will you give me if I deliver him to you?” (26:14-16). Luke (written towards the end of the same decade) does not mention money as being a motive and instead states that “Satan entered into Judas”, who then went to look for the chief priests and officers to see how he could deliver Jesus into their hands, and that “they were glad and engaged to give him money” (22:1-6). The allusion to Satan could hark back

to what was said following Jesus' temptations in the desert: that Satan left Jesus "until an opportune time" (4:13). And John (written around the year 100 AD), again points to money as being a motive but adds more information than Matthew's version. He agrees with Mark on situating the betrayal after Jesus was anointed in Bethany and explains that Judas did not understand the symbolic meaning of the event (in fact, a woman is the first person to realize the meaning of Jesus' future death!), instead thinking about the money that could have been obtained for the ointment and "given to the poor". John goes on to clarify here that Judas was not actually concerned for the poor, but was a thief who stole from the money box he was in put in charge of (12:1-8).

This common element of Judas' betrayal, without looking at the motives, has led some scholars examining the story of Jesus to a hypothesis that has already been discussed and that looks at the roots of Judas' last name: "Iscariot".

According to Hebrew etymology, the word could mean "man of the dagger", alluding to the hired assassins that carried daggers (*sicca* in Latin) which they used to kill the Romans¹³.

According to this theory, (which is favoured in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*), Judas is presented as a political revolutionary, and does not understand Jesus' passive stance in the face of the Roman occupation. It is true that it was hard for the disciples to understand how Jesus was revealing the Kingdom of God through such radical love for mankind that it ultimately led him to death on a cross (see Mk 8:27-33). The surprise for Judas was not in the fact then that Jesus did not come down from the cross, as his enemies goaded him to (Mk 15:20-32), but that he actually died on it: this would explain his desperation on seeing the disastrous and unexpected outcome of his actions, according to Matthew's version Mt 27:3-10 and the version presented in Acts 1:15-19.

Appendix

At this point, it would be useful to take a quick look at the route by which the majority of the early Church, following a long and laborious process of dialogue, came to consider the four Canonical Gospels as being the only Gospels truly "inspired by God" (in the sense of 2 Tim 3:16). This is where the word "canonical" came from: the Greek term *canon* originally means rule or standard, and is also something that can be used to take measurements.

To reach their conclusion, the early Church developed a series of *fundamental criteria*: these depended on the closeness in both content and time to the apostolic testimony on the life and teachings of Jesus, (the writings incorporated into the Canon had to have been written by the first half of the second century at the latest). Furthermore: the texts should have been found to be of benefit when read during the liturgies of the churches in the early centuries of Christianity, and all needed to express the same faith received from the apostles.

In the second century, when titles had to be given to the gospels that were being exchanged between churches (texts that had originally been anonymous), they were therefore attributed to an Apostle or to one of his disciples, in order to highlight their apostolic origin. We have already pointed out the common practice of using a *pseudonym*. The problem was that the Gnostic Gospels al-

so copied this tradition. For this reason, the fact that a Gospel was attributed to a particular Apostle did not necessarily mean that it was an authentic text.

There were two unorthodox movements in particular that made it necessary to decide which Gospels should be considered as part of the Canon. Two movements that:

a. Limited the number of books that were read and considered as part of the liturgy of the Early Church. (Marcion, at the end of the second century rejected the entire Old Testament as being false and decided that only Luke's Gospel and 10 letters of Paul were genuine), and

b. Added new books, as was done by the group known as the Montanists, (Montanus appeared in the second half of the second century), who believed they had received new revelations from the Spirit.

It took some time to reach their decision as communication was not easy in a time before the internet, telephones, or planes, and in an atmosphere of persecution. Furthermore, since one of the fundamental criteria was that the content of the books needed to accurately reflect the common apostolic faith, every community needed to be given the opportunity to present their own opinion.

There was a unanimous verdict among the Early Church in the first half of the second century on the Canonical Gospels and the letters of St. Paul. However, the complete list of New Testament books was not *definitively* agreed upon until the fourth century, when the persecution had ended. Since that time, the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church and the Orthodox Church have kept the 27 books that we now find in the New Testament. However, provisional lists were already in circulation by the second century (the so-called *Canon de Muratori*), and mentioned by other authors prior to the fourth century.

A few texts were still under discussion for some time because not all the churches believed that their content was truly apostolic in nature. In some cases, the delay occurred because the text was difficult to understand: (such as the *Letter to the Hebrews and Revelations*) or because the text was used by groups that had separated themselves from the mainstream Church (this happened briefly with the fourth Gospel, which was preferred by some groups that had deviated from mainstream Christianity in the second and third century, groups that eventually became Gnostic sects. This obviously made some churches doubt certain texts, until the first letter of John helped people to see that this Gospel did in fact remain faithful to what the churches knew about the apostolic faith).

In the Council of Nicea (325 AD), the complete list of books to be included in the Canon of the New Testament that we have today was debated, and definitively ratified in the Council of Carthage (397 AD). The decision to "canonise" the four Gospels was not imposed by Constantine on the bishops that attended Nicene. According to the author of *The Da Vinci Code*, due to political reasons Constantine was forced to remove elements of these Gospels that showed the humanity of Jesus and instead focus on the idea of Jesus' hidden divinity from that point onwards. Yet we have already seen how the Canonical Gospels (unlike the Gnostic writings) underline the value of Jesus' humanity, and that of the real cross on which he died, thus giving him solidarity with all the victims of history, as well as highlighting Jesus' genuine commitment to all mankind. The issue which did concern the Emperor was the equality of the three persons in one God (the notion of their being "consubstantial") because this meant that the Supreme Power ("the Monarchy" as it was known at the time) did not have absolute dominion, but instead shared equality: it is interesting to note that almost all subsequent Emperors were followers of Arius.

CONCLUSIONS

Let us now have a look at the conclusions that can be drawn from our discussion in reverse order of our presentation.

1. The portrayal of Judas presented by the four evangelists agrees on the point that Judas delivered Jesus to his enemies, therefore helping them in their aim of killing Jesus. Without clarifying the reason for this betrayal, they underline the evil inherent in this behaviour in order to warn Christians, who were at the time facing persecution from the Roman Empire and from the dominant religion of the day, of the negative consequences of betrayal. A way of highlighting the evil nature of Judas' betrayal was by linking it with the money he subsequently received. For the evangelists, the actual historical reason for Judas' betrayal was not important, it was the dreadful nature of the act itself.

2. The four Canonical Gospels were not the only ones to be written in the early centuries of Christianity. However, they are the most ancient (written between the years 70 and 100 AD, while the apocryphal gospels were only written from the second half of the second century onwards). With their appearance, the different Christian churches had to decide which texts recounted what had happened with the most historical accuracy, and told the story in a way that truthfully reflected the apos-

tolitic faith of the Church. This is why they developed two fundamental criteria: whether the text was written around the time that the apostolic tradition was being formed, and also, if the texts had been read as part of the Early Church liturgy and whether they were of benefit to and adequately reflected the apostolic tradition that was being practised by the early Christian communities. These writings meant that any later churches would be able to have a direct link with the founding tradition of the first Church. The finalizing of this Canon needed time and was not completed until the end of the fourth century, once Christianity had been accepted by the Roman Empire. But already in the second century we find references to New Testament texts that had been "canonised". The New Testament Canon was therefore not a result of Constantine's manipulation.

3. We saw how the first Gospel (Mark) came about, and why it was so successful in a Christian world where, from that time onwards, anyone that wrote a "Gospel" based it on his great theological contribution: *that of situating traditions about Jesus in the context of his life, because for Jesus, concern for the good of humanity was a decisive criteria in becoming aware of the will of God, and this ultimately led to his death on the cross.* Yet the cross

was not God's last word on Jesus' life: the Resurrection showed that God was giving Jesus the ultimate victory over his executioners, in this way revealing that life will eventually triumph over death.

If we want to examine the history closer, *we need to start at the cross, because this is undoubtedly the most historic fact that we know about Jesus.* We can therefore suppose that the Gospel that best explains why Jesus had to die on the cross is probably the Gospel that reflects most accurately what happened at the time.

We have already intimated that the Gospel that most faithfully recounts Jesus' death on the cross is that of Mark, although at the same time he gives us the theological meaning of the story he relates too. Jesus was killed because he put his concern for humanity and for the marginalized above everything else, as well as denouncing all types of injustice. And as John explains, this is because his love of others was so great (Jn 13:1-3), that he put himself at their service (Jn 13:1-20; Mk 10:42-45) and freely gave up his life on the cross out of love for them, and in order to reveal the depths of the Father's infinite love (see Jn 15:13-17; and 3:16).

Mark's theological intuition was clearly acknowledged by the fact that the meaning of the cross was to become of decisive significance for the early Church. We have testimony of this from the most ancient Christian author whose writings were preserved: Paul of Tarsus. He wrote his letters in the decade commencing 50 AD. For Paul, the cross, and not merely human wisdom, is at the he-

art of Christian preaching, and should be the decisive criteria used to decide if what is being said about Jesus represents the authentic Christian faith (see 1 Cor 1:17-31). This would confirm the reliability of Mark's Gospel regarding the life and death of Jesus (as well as that of the rest of the Canonical Gospels).

4. The apocryphal gospels are not as ancient as the Canonical Gospels, and they have a tendency to stray far from what we know about the actual life of Jesus. With the exception of some points of interest, they are generally characterized by their *emphasis on fantastical elements, as well as their focus on the concept of gaining salvation through knowledge.* They also stand out in their contempt for the human body and for all of creation (their writings are aimed at an elitist audience). If Jesus were of the spiritual essence that they attribute to him, he would not have ended up on the cross, condemned by the political, economic and religious powers that ruled the world at the time, which like the ruling authorities today, were characterised by their injustice.

From this context, it is clear that the Gnostic Gospels undermine the value of the Creator God of the Old Testament. Unlike the mainstream Church of the time, they regard figures that are presented in a negative light in both the Old and New Testament as heroes. For them, salvation is not a consequence of the Incarnation of the Word (Jn 1:14), or a result of the great love of Jesus who gives up his life for us on the cross (Jn 3:16; Rom 3:21-26), and neither does it involve a moral obligation to one's neighbour in need. Instead it is seen as

the fruit of the knowledge that is imparted to a privileged group of people. The Gnostics see this group of people as being represented by one particular figure in the New Testament, who would supposedly have received this secret and hidden revelation from Jesus of Nazareth. They then attribute the work (or “gospel”) to this person (whether it be Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Judas or anyone else), and use the text as a basis for their doctrines that differ greatly from the faith of the mainstream Christian Church.

5. It is from within this context that we have been able to see the lack of historical and theological credibility of the *Gospel of Judas*, in relation to both the character of Judas and the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. The same is true of the claims of Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* in relation to the historical figures of Mary Magdalene and Jesus of Nazareth. It is not for us to judge whether this distortion of fact and misinformation is due to ignorance or ill will. Only the authors themselves can answer that.

NOTES

1. Or Ethiopian Enoch, because it was found translated into this language.
2. Or Syrian Baruch, because it was found in this language.
3. The discovery of the writings of the Koran is also relatively recent.
4. In Castilian Spanish, the most complete edition is that published by Trotta in three volumes, with an introduction and notes by A. Piñero, J. Montserrat Torrents and F. García Bazán: *Textos gnósticos. Biblioteca de Nag Hammadi: Vol I: Tratados filosóficos y cosmológicos; Vol. II: Evangelios, hechos, cartas; Vol. III: Apocalipsis y otros escritos*.
5. In Castilian Spanish, by A. de Santos Otero, *Los Evangelios Apócrifos*. Bilingual edition with critique, Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos 10, 1999 (It also provides an introduction and notes).
6. El gnosticismo antiguo y moderno, *Biblia y Fe* 22 (1996) 220.
7. The word comes from the Greek pléroma, meaning Fullness.
8. The so-called *docetists*, a word that comes from the Greek verb *dokéo*, meaning “to seem”.
9. The text was edited with a commentary by F. García Bazán, *El Evangelio de Judas*, Madrid: Trotta 2006.
10. For more information on this, refer to my article: “Testimonios literarios de los orígenes del movimiento cristiano. Una introducción breve al Nuevo Testamento”, *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 21 (2004) 99-119 (abridged in *Selecciones de Teología* 44 [2005] 255-268).
11. See Psalm 72 that is directed at the King, seen as God’s deputy on Earth. See also Psalm 145.
12. Refer to my articles: “Marcos o la corrección de una ideología triunfalista” (in *Memoria subversiva y esperanza para los crucificados*, Madrid 2003); and *Los responsables de la muerte de Jesús*, RLT 40 (2003) 39-65.
13. According to the etymology, this could also mean “man of Kariot” (a small town north of Judea).