

Gnostic Gospels

"Teabing located a huge book and pulled it toward him across the table ... The cover read: *The Gnostic Gospels*. ... 'These are photocopies of the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea scrolls, which I mentioned earlier,' ... 'The earliest Christian records. Troublingly, they do not match up with the gospels in the Bible.'" p. 330-331

What does the Da Vinci Code say?

The Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea Scrolls provide us with information about Christianity which is earlier and more reliable than that found in the Bible. Three examples are mentioned; The Gospels of Philip, Thomas and Mary.

What are the facts?

This poster focuses only on the Nag Hammadi documents. The Dead Sea scrolls provide us with interesting information but make no mention of Christianity (see the Bible poster).

Nag Hammadi

Nag Hammadi is a city in upper Egypt. Nearby in 1946, Muhammad and Khalifa Ali found some documents sealed in clay jars while they were digging at the base of Jabal al-Tarif.

The Documents of Nag Hammadi

The codices (books) are Coptic translations of Greek works. Through an examination of both the writing and the papyri used to thicken the covers of the works, the documents are tentatively dated to the early to late fourth century. The composition of the Greek originals varies. One document is a translation of Plato. Some of the gnostic works are known from other sources (the writings of the church fathers who opposed them) to have been in circulation, and most likely composed in the second century AD. This is well after the time of the composition of even the latest New Testament books, and significantly later than the letters of Paul, known to have been written between 50 AD and 68 AD. They hardly qualify as the 'earliest Christian records.'

Gospels?

A number of the works in the Nag Hammadi library are labelled 'gospels'; the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of the Egyptians and the Gospel of Mary. These gospels are not like the gospels of our New Testament. As the Editor says in introducing the gospel of Truth: "*Despite its title, this work is not a gospel of the sort found in the New Testament, since it does not offer a continuous narration of the deeds, teachings, passion and resurrection of Jesus.*" Robinson p. 38. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of the 'sayings' of Jesus with no narrative framework. The Gospel of the Egyptians, also called The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, is an esoteric (secret, privileged) writing which promotes a gnostic salvation history.

It is plain that sharing the name 'gospel' is no indication that the works so named give us any information about Jesus' life, nor, like the canonical gospels, eyewitness testimony to his teaching.

Philip and Mary Magdalene.

The Gospel of Philip contains seventeen 'sayings' of Jesus, "*nine of which are citations and interpretations of Jesus' words already found in the canonical gospels.*" It is not a gospel like the New Testament gospels, and there is no kind of narrative framework. To get a feel of its content, listen to the answer to the question with which Teabing finishes his quote on page 331.

"Why do you love her [Mary] more than all of us?" The saviour answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in the darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness." p. 148

The gospel of Mary is a very short and incomplete manuscript. In it Mary is the possessor of a special revelation given to her in a vision and private dialogue with the Saviour. "The text belongs to the genre of gnostic dialogue" in which Mary stands for and represents the validity of esoteric revelation in the face of the opposition of the orthodox. It thus argues for the superiority of the gnostic position (in the person of Mary). It, again, is not a gospel in the canonical sense and gives us no reliable knowledge of the ministry and teaching of Jesus. It does give insight into the struggles between gnostic believers and the orthodox in the latter half of the second century and beyond.

Conclusion:

There is no basis for the claim that these are the earliest Christian records, nor for the suggestion that they represent an alternative stream of testimony to Jesus than that represented in the canonical gospels. They come from another time and are written to further the gnostic agenda in the context of second century debates about gnosticism by bolstering the gnostic claim that the secret knowledge they have, unknown to most of the apostles and the believers who followed them, is from Jesus.

Further Reading:

The Nag Hammadi Library in English, revised edition. James M. Robinson, General Editor 1978 (HarperCollins 1990)
Is the New Testament History. Revised edition. Paul Barnett, Aquila, 2003

*For more details, check out the posters on Gnosticism, the Bible and Jesus.
All page references to "The Da Vinci Code" are from the Corgi Books paperback.*



"The Nag Hammadi library consists of twelve books, plus eight leaves removed from a thirteenth book ... each of the books, except the tenth, consists of a collection of relatively brief works. Thus there is a total of fifty-two tractates." Robinson p. 10.
(Picture from wikipedia.org)