



Noncanonical Texts: *The Da Vinci Code* and Beyond

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Noncanonical texts (especially gospels) have experienced a renaissance in the past 150 years that almost no one would have predicted. More people are reading and studying these texts now than at any point since the fifth century, when most of them were suppressed and many of them were lost. This resurgence in interest owes itself to three main factors: archeology, theology, and popular culture.

The archeological factor has to do with the modern rediscovery and preservation of many of these noncanonical texts. With the advent of modern biblical criticism, particularly textual criticism, a mad search began in the 1800s for ancient documents, particularly manuscripts that contained canonical Old and New Testament texts that might be used to help establish the original text of the Bible. But along with the early copies of the Bible many noncanonical texts, previously thought to be lost, were discovered as well. For example, the first (and only) copy of the *Gospel of Peter* was found in 1886. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945 yielded a rich trove of gnostic gospels that were previously unknown or only partially available prior to this time, including the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Philip*. The year 1958 saw the hotly disputed “discovery” of the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, and the *Gospel of Judas Iscariot* was published for the first time in 2006.

The discovery or invention of previously unknown early Christian documents has produced debates and squabbles in the academic community and considerable furor in popular culture. An overview of the issues will help readers find their way through these controversies.

The theological and academic climate has also contributed to the seriousness with which these discoveries have been received. The canons of historical criticism, newly applied to early Christianity starting in the eighteenth century, dictate that a historian should seek reliable information wherever it can be found, so certain texts cannot be privileged for theological reasons, nor can others be excluded. Thus, the canonical, “orthodox” texts lost their privileged status as the only sources for the reconstruction of the life and teachings of Jesus, and the noncanonical “heretical” texts were no longer dismissed out of hand. Many modern scholars are now willing at least to entertain the proposition that noncanonical gospels might contain information that is as authentic or ideas that are as theologically useful as the canonical texts.

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None of this would have made its way out of the scholarly journals and university classrooms and into the popular consciousness, though, if it had not been for some hugely influential works of popular culture. The 1999 film *Stigmata* was one of the earlier examples of this phenomenon. The film’s premise is that the Catholic Church is engaged in an ongoing conspiracy to suppress the *Gospel of Thomas*, because it reveals the truth that Jesus did not want churches built to worship God. The premise is based on a completely fictitious (and anti-Catholic) account of the discovery and publication of the gospel, and a very fanciful interpretation of *Thomas Logion 3* (“The Kingdom of God is within you and all around you”) to mean that people should be free to worship however they please, rather than being restricted to the confines of organized religion with its rules and buildings.

This trickle of questions about noncanonical texts became a downpour with the 2003 publication of Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code*,¹ which was made into a successful motion picture in 2006. The book is estimated to have sold eighty million copies worldwide, making it one of the best-selling novels of all time. The story revolves around the search for the Holy Grail, which Brown asserts is not the chalice used at the Last Supper but the “receptacle” for Jesus’ holy and royal bloodline, namely, his wife Mary Magdalene, the child she bore to him, and subsequent generations of Jesus’ descendants. Brown argues in his book that noncanonical gospels—which are actually earlier and more reliable than their canonical counterparts—contain this explosive information. The degree to which Brown asserts that these claims are historically accurate is a matter of debate. But what is not debatable is that many people, both Christians and non-Christians, have accepted

¹Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

them as fact, and this in turn has created something of a cottage industry among scholars and pseudoscholars, who alternately defend or refute Brown's historical assertions.

Although the *Da Vinci Code* craze has diminished recently, noncanonical gospels remained in the news with the 2006 publication of the *Gospel of Judas Iscariot*. There was a National Geographic television special—seen by more than seven million people—that documented the authentication, preservation, and translation of the manuscript, which was apparently discovered in the 1970s but not recognized for what it was until very recently.

The landscape with respect to the study and use of noncanonical texts is complex, and the work of scholarship on and appropriation of these documents is proceeding on multiple fronts. In some cases, the hopes raised by the various textual discoveries have not been realized, and at least some scholars have become more cautious about asserting that noncanonical gospels fundamentally change the contours of a field of study. An example would be those involved in the “quest for the historical Jesus.” In the heady days of the Jesus Seminar, the group published *The Complete Gospels*, which included all or parts of sixteen gospels (extant or reconstructed) in addition to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Editor Robert Miller wrote that “all of the...extracanonical texts in this volume are witnesses to early Jesus traditions. All of them contain traditions independent of the New Testament gospels.”² John Dominic Crossan suggested that readers would need every one of these gospels to empower their own quest for the historical Jesus. But few today would share that enthusiasm. Mark Alan Powell recently wrote that the non-canonical gospels “seem to have worn out their welcome among many scholars who think that their significance for historical reconstruction was exaggerated.” Powell adds, “With the possible exception of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the apocryphal works are almost unanimously viewed as late and all but void of historically reliable material independent of what can be found in canonical writings.”³

Yet in other cases the study of these texts and the examination of their possible value to modern Christianity continue with great enthusiasm. This essay aims to provide an overview of the most useful, most recent, and most contentious issues in the field today.

THE DA VINCI CODE AND THE GOSPEL OF PHILIP

Anyone familiar with Dan Brown's book *The Da Vinci Code* knows that he presents a radical alternative to the standard narrative of the origins of Christianity. Brown indicates that Jesus was a prophet who was married and fathered a child. This “human” side of Jesus was preserved in the noncanonical gospels but covered

²*The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, ed. Robert J. Miller (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1994) 3.

³Mark Allan Powell, “‘Things that Matter’: Historical Jesus Studies in the New Millennium,” *Word & World* 29/2 (2009) 123–124. For a book-length treatment of the argument that the noncanonical gospels are essentially much ado about nothing, the product of liberal-minded scholars and a scandal-obsessed press, see Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

up by the orthodox church, who altered four gospels to reflect a fully divine Jesus and then enshrined their trumped-up gospels in the canon. This version of events has come under attack, not only by Christian apologists but also by scholars and historians with no particular axe to grind. Some defenders of Brown argue that the book is “just a novel,” whose goal is to entertain and not to educate. These claims, they say, were never meant to be taken seriously. But other readers disagree, and believe that Brown’s characters might be fictional, but that he is in deadly earnest in his claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the church, and the gospels (among other things). So the question is: Does Dan Brown claim factual status for his version of early Christian history?

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I am among those who believe that the author consistently claims that this aspect of the book is more “historical” than “fiction.” The front matter of the book contains the author’s guarantee that the historical documents and organizations mentioned in the book all exist. The characters in the novel who are the source of the historical claims are all depicted as reliable experts. One is Harvard professor Robert Langdon, and another is Leigh Teabing, an expert in religious history from Oxford. Each character is shown to lend credibility to his historical claims with quotations from ancient texts, references to (real) concurring scholarly works, and testimony to the popularity of the views expressed among other experts. Brown himself has defended the historical accuracy of the book on numerous occasions and on his website.

This controversy touches directly on the study of the noncanonical gospels, because when Leigh Teabing, the character who is a religious historian, tries to prove to Sophie Neveau that Jesus was married and had a child, he offers evidence from a real noncanonical gospel: a quote from the *Gospel of Philip*. As Teabing quotes the passage, it reads: “And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth.” Sophie is shocked, but points out that the passage says nothing of marriage.⁴ Responding to her, Teabing says, “Au contraire. As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word *companion*, in those days, literally meant *spouse*.” Langdon then nods his agreement.

Leaving aside for a moment Brown’s false claims that the noncanonical gospels are earlier than their canonical counterparts and that they are “unaltered,” while only the four biblical gospels were substantially rewritten, the further ques-

⁴She might have added that the passage says nothing of children. For that claim, Brown cannot even muster a single piece of ancient evidence.

tion is whether he is even reading the *Gospel of Philip* correctly here. The *Gospel of Philip* does say something like what Dan Brown says it does,⁵ although Brown leaves out the disciples' jealous reaction to the fact that Jesus loves Mary more than them, as well as Jesus' explanation that his preference for her is based on her spiritual superiority, not physical love. Moreover, Brown adds at least one key word to his quotation that is not found in the original text: the word "mouth." Only one copy of the *Gospel of Philip* survives, and this copy is damaged. The word indicating where Jesus often kissed Mary Magdalene is missing as a result of this damage, as are some other words. Most responsible translations then present this verse in the following fashion: "And the companion of the S[avior...] Mary Magdalene [...loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [...]" (*Gos. Phil.* 63:34). Brown and his predecessors essentially have to supply the word "mouth" in order to guarantee that people will draw the desired conclusion, namely, that the verse suggests a romantic/sexual relationship between the two. In other words, the verse does not conclusively state one way or the other the nature of Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene; one would need evidence from elsewhere to draw any kind of definitive conclusion. Such evidence is lacking, however. Indeed, even if Jesus did kiss Mary Magdalene on the mouth, this would not necessarily imply a sexual connotation.

The best scholarly discussion of this passage in the *Gospel of Philip* is by Antti Marjanen. He points out that kissing can have both sexual and nonsexual implications, but there are several reasons why the sexual interpretation of kissing is not very likely in the context of the *Gospel of Philip*. "First, in the only other passage [in the *Gospel of Philip*] where kissing is referred to (58,30–59,6) it is used without concrete sexual implications as a metaphor of spiritual nourishment which leads to spiritual procreation. Second, in other contemporary religious writings there are plenty of examples where kissing functions as a metaphor for transmitting a special spiritual power....Third, the altercation between the disciples and the Savior in *Gos. Phil.* 63,37–64,9 suggests that kissing is not to be understood as an expression of sexual love."⁶ To restate this last point, a "sexual" interpretation of the kissing of Mary Magdalene would require us to believe that the jealous disciples are expressing their desire that Jesus would kiss them on the mouth rather than Mary Magdalene.

I should point out further that kissing, even between a man and a woman, did not always have erotic implications in the ancient world, especially in the context of Judaism and Christianity. Kisses could indicate kinship and were also used as an outward sign of reconciliation. The Apostle Paul enjoins Christians on numerous

⁵Although I am holding Brown responsible for having popularized many of these views, he is not in fact responsible for creating them. For that, the blame lies primarily with a group of British television producers (Michael Biagent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln) and a 1982 book of pseudoscholarship written by them entitled *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (originally published by Jonathan Cape in London as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*).

⁶Antti Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996) 158–159.

occasions (for example, 1 Thess 5:6) to “greet one another with a holy kiss,” and there are instances of this where it is clear that the addressees would be kissing members of the opposite sex as well as of the same sex (Rom 16:16).

Moreover, the author of the *Gospel of Philip*, like many other gnostics, seems to be an advocate of what is called encratism, which involves a rejection of marriage, procreation, and sexual activity of any sort. It is the ultimate irony that Brown is trying to rescue a healthy, positive view of human sexuality (by suggesting that Jesus endorsed and practiced marriage and procreation) but does so by misreading a text that does just the opposite.

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Finally, with respect to Leigh Teabing’s comment that “as any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word *companion*, in those days, literally meant *spouse*,” it is sufficient to point out that the *Gospel of Philip* was not written in Aramaic. The only surviving manuscript is written in Coptic. It is widely believed that the Coptic version is a translation of an original Greek work. The same equation of “companion” and “spouse” does not apply in Coptic or Greek. The Coptic word KOINONOC is clearly derived from the Greek word *koinonos*. This Greek word could assume a wide range of meanings. Basically, it denotes a person engaged in fellowship or sharing with someone or in something. What a *koinonos* can share with his or her partner can take many forms, ranging from a common enterprise or experience to a shared business. In the Bible, for example, *koinonos* can be used to denote a marriage partner (Mal 2:14 LXX), a companion in faith (Phlm 17), a coworker in proclaiming the gospel (2 Cor 8:23), or a business associate (Luke 5:10). Interestingly, all of the New Testament uses are of nonmarital relationships; the only text that uses the term to denote a marital relationship is from the Greek version of the Old Testament. According to Antti Marjanen, “the decisive argument against the assumption that the word KOINONOC is ‘wife’ is the fact that in all the other instances where the Gospel of Philip speaks about someone’s wife it uses the usual word CSIME (65:20; 70:19; 76:7; 82:1). The word KOINONOC is clearly reserved for a more specific usage in the writing.”⁷ On my website “What’s Wrong with *The Da Vinci Code*?”⁸ I joke that Marjanen should re-release this work under the title, *The Book Dan Brown Should Have Read*.

⁷Ibid., 151–152.

⁸David Landry, “What’s Wrong with *The Da Vinci Code*?” <http://personal1.stthomas.edu/dtlandry/davinci/davincicode.htm> (accessed 15 July 2009). This website quotes all of the historically erroneous passages from Brown’s book that pertain to early Christianity, with hyperlinked information about what exactly is wrong with them.

Some might think that all of this *Da Vinci Code*-bashing is getting old and tired, but one needs to remember that some eighty million people have read this book, and only a tiny fraction of that number will ever hear the counterarguments. Once the genie is out of the bottle, it is very difficult to put it back. This is a theme to which we will return in our next two sections.

THE PROBLEM OF FORGERY: THE *SECRET GOSPEL OF MARK*

Forgery was epidemic in ancient Christianity. All pseudonymous texts are forgeries, at least in a sense, in that they falsely claim authorship by an important and well-known figure from the past and hence attempt to increase the reader's sense of the antiquity, authority, and reliability of the text. Most noncanonical gospels are pseudonymous; the only ones that are not are those that do not identify their author. Of course, even some canonical texts (such as the deutero-Pauline letters and most if not all of the Catholic Epistles) are pseudonymous as well.

But some forgeries are more egregious than others. The deutero-Pauline letters may not have been written by Paul, but they were probably written by close associates of Paul who were intimately familiar with his teachings. The same cannot be said of *The Greater Questions of Mary*, which was forged in order to slander and discredit its supposed authors. The existence of *The Greater Questions of Mary* was "revealed" by a fourth-century heresy hunter named Epiphanius, who shocked his readers with tales of the cannibalism and deviant sexual practices of a group of gnostics called the Phibionites, to whom this gospel belonged. The problem is that this gospel apparently existed only in Epiphanius's imagination. He invented lurid tales of their reprobate conduct in order to repulse his readers and frighten them away from this heresy.

The Greater Questions of Mary is an ancient forgery, but there are modern forgeries as well. Unfortunately, it appears as if the *Secret Gospel of Mark* falls into this category. This previously unknown version of the Gospel of Mark, with "secret" passages not found in the canonical text, was allegedly discovered in 1958 by Columbia University professor Morton Smith. While cataloguing the contents of the library of the ancient monastery at Mar Saba, Smith said that he found a seventeenth-century book that had some Greek writing in its endpapers. The Greek writing turned out to be a previously unknown letter by the well-known church father Clement of Alexandria, addressed to a certain Theodore, a portion of which a monk had apparently copied into the book's blank end pages. The letter mentions a heretical group called the Carpocratians who had been boasting knowledge of a *Secret Gospel of Mark*. Clement tells Theodore that their claims about the gospel's contents are false, but that the gospel does exist and was written by Mark, the author of the "public" version of the gospel, for those in Alexandria who were advanced enough to have been initiated into the great mysteries.

To correct his opponents, Clement's letter to Theodore quotes two passages from *Secret Mark*. One of the passages describes the raising of a young man from

the dead (reminiscent of the raising of Lazarus in John). After his resurrection, the youth becomes a follower of Jesus, and Jesus stays at his house. Clement quotes the *Secret Mark* as follows: “And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God.” Later, Clement indicates, the *Secret Mark* reveals that “the sister of the youth whom Jesus loved and his mother and Salome were there, and Jesus did not receive them.” There are some rather obvious homoerotic overtones to these two passages, given the fact that Jesus “loved” a young man whose body was “naked” under his linen cloth, with whom Jesus spent the night, and to whom he taught “the mystery of the kingdom of God.” Then Jesus refuses to receive the three women, apparently indicating his preference for the company of men. Needless to say, the *Secret Gospel of Mark* caused something of a sensation.

But from the beginning there were doubts about the authenticity of both the letter to Theodore and *Secret Mark*. Smith took photographs of the text and left the book in the Mar Saba library. He sent copies of the photographs to various colleagues, asking them to authenticate the text. With some reservations, they agreed that the Greek handwriting appeared to date from the eighteenth century, which suggests at least that Smith himself did not write it. However, generally speaking, a document can only be said to have been truly authenticated if the *original* is produced, not a photograph, so that the ink and the fiber of the paper can be examined as well as the handwriting. But the book was subsequently moved from the Mar Saba monastery to a library in Jerusalem and then lost. A physical examination was never done.

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Despite this problem, many scholars accepted the Theodore letter as a genuine letter of Clement. Philological and literary analyses were done comparing this letter to the known writings of Clement, and the writing and thinking proved to be very “Clementine.” But to some the letter appeared to be a little *too* Clementine for their comfort. The letter uses an exceptionally high number of Clement’s favorite words, as if the author may have been using a modern tool such as a concordance to help him imitate Clement’s style.

Other scholars pointed to suspicious parallels between Smith’s discovery and work on Theodore and some other famous scholarly hoaxes. But such parallels are not proof of forgery. It appeared that Smith’s doubters lacked a “smoking gun,” and hence the authenticity of *Secret Mark* was grudgingly accepted for several decades.

The stalemate was broken in 2005 by a brilliant little book by Stephen Carl-

son.⁹ At the time, Carlson was a practicing attorney who dabbled in serious biblical scholarship, and he used his forensic expertise and facility with biblical scholarship to construct a rock-solid case against the authenticity of the letter to Theodore and *Secret Mark*. Carlson further concluded that the forger in all likelihood was Smith himself. Familiar with the techniques used by law enforcement to identify forged signatures on checks, Carlson found many of the tell-tale signs of forgery in the handwriting of Theodore.

Generally speaking, these signs have to do with the quality of the line strokes. When a person is imitating the handwriting of another, or attempting to write in an unfamiliar handwriting style, the tendency is to “draw” the letters instead of “writing” them. A forger writes much more slowly and carefully than one does normally, and this leaves a number of unusual and identifiable traces. For example, when the forger writes slowly and deliberately, it is more difficult to form smooth lines, because the hand tends to shake. “Forger’s tremor,” squiggly and uneven lines where normally the lines are straight, is hence one of the indicators of a fake signature or manuscript. Also, when a person writes normally (and quickly), the pen remains on the page throughout the formation of the word and is lifted rapidly from the page at the conclusion of a word, producing a line that quickly tapers off, a “flying end.” When a forger is writing, he tends to pause both during and at the end of a word. A pause in the middle of a word, presumably to rest and examine the quality of the reproduction thus far, is called a “pen lift.” It is evident because, when the forger resumes writing the word at the point where he left off, an ink splotch is formed by the overlapping lines. A pause at the end of a word produces a solidly ending line instead of the tapering line usually found in authentic documents and signatures. Finally, people writing normally do not usually correct minor errors in their penmanship. But forgers want to make sure that the style of writing imitates that of their exemplar as closely as possible, so they make small corrections, called “retouching,” that are evident to a trained eye.

Carlson finds abundant evidence of all of these phenomena—forger’s tremor, pen lifts, absence of flying ends, and retouching—throughout the photographed handwriting of the Mar Saba manuscript. Finally, forgers sometimes grow fatigued after a while and begin forming letters in their own handwriting rather than that of the style they are imitating. Carlson finds examples of these more unconsciously formed letters and compares them to Morton Smith’s own Greek handwriting. Not surprisingly, there are striking resemblances. Theodore appears to be a modern forgery, invented by none other than Morton Smith.

Carlson provides numerous additional pieces of evidence in favor of Smith’s invention of Theodore and *Secret Mark*. Besides the handwriting, there are several indications in the content of the letter that the author was a modern person and not an ancient one. For example, one of the statements in the Theodore letter

⁹Stephen Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

speaks of salt as if it is a free-flowing substance that can be mixed with an adulterant and lose its flavor. But free-flowing salt was not invented until the twentieth century; prior to that time salt was clumpy and could not be mixed with an adulterant. There are also a number of indications that Smith may have hidden in the forged document a number of subtle clues that he himself was the author, perhaps to amuse himself or to leave traces of his cleverness to the generation that finally uncovered his fake.

Carlson's case against *Secret Mark* is devastating, and it appears unlikely that the gospel will be included in future editions of books like *The Complete Gospels*. Some have attacked Carlson for his supposed lack of expertise (he is now enrolled in the PhD program in New Testament at Duke University), but others counter that his knowledge of early Christianity is not insubstantial and moreover that it was precisely his legal expertise that enabled him to see what biblical scholars had not. Some of Smith's old colleagues have come forward to defend Smith on the basis of their confidence in his personal and scholarly integrity, but this is only to be expected and does not carry a great deal of weight in comparison with the overwhelming evidence of forgery. The only sustained scholarly defense of *Secret Mark's* authenticity has come from a series of articles by Scott G. Brown.¹⁰ But Brown's arguments are shrill and unpersuasive, besides which one must bear in mind that his dissertation on *Secret Mark* (the first ever on the dicey subject) was written on the assumption that it was authentic, and that hence his entire career depends on Stephen Carlson being wrong. The verdict is not yet in, but the jury is leaning strongly in the direction of Carlson. The end result of the controversy over the *Secret Gospel of Mark* is that we can probably scratch one gospel from the list of noncanonical texts.

THE LATEST DISCOVERY: THE *GOSPEL OF JUDAS ISCARIOT*

The *Gospel of Judas Iscariot* was revealed to the world with great fanfare in 2006. The group of scholars that initially examined, translated, and interpreted the *Gospel of Judas* were part of a "dream team" put together by National Geographic, among whom were Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels, and Marvin Meyer. Their translation and interpretation suggested that the text took a very positive view of Judas.

The consensus opinion that emerged was that the gospel presented Judas as the only disciple who truly understood the (gnostic) teachings of Jesus and that, as a consequence, Judas became Jesus' trusted friend and confidant. The gospel records numerous dialogues in which Judas's superiority to the other disciples is emphasized—in some cases by his more accurate understanding of Jesus' divine origin and identity—and also includes conversations between Jesus and Judas to

¹⁰See Allan J. Pantuck and Scott G. Brown, "Morton Smith as M. Madiotes: Stephen Carlson's Attribution of Secret Mark to a Bald Swindler," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6/1 (2008) 106–125; Scott G. Brown, "Factualizing the Folklore: Stephen Carlson's Case against Morton Smith," *Harvard Theological Review* 99 (2006) 291–397; idem, "Reply to Stephen Carlson," *Expository Times* 117/4 (2006) 144–149; idem, "The Question of Motive in the Case against Morton Smith," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006) 351–383.

which the other disciples are not privy. In the end, Judas is not blamed for betraying Jesus, rather he is entrusted with handing Jesus over, so that—following common gnostic teaching—Jesus can escape his mortal body and return to his heavenly home. In this line of interpretation, the *Gospel of Judas Iscariot* becomes an important and valuable text, because it says something that no other ancient gospel does (that Judas was a hero) and hence contributes to the understanding of the incredible diversity of early Christianity.

the positive view of the Gospel of Judas has come under sharp criticism, however, most notably from biblical scholar April DeConick

This view has come under sharp criticism, however, most notably from Rice University biblical scholar April DeConick.¹¹ DeConick argues that the National Geographic consensus was a result of sloppy translation, selective interpretation, and wishful thinking. The claim that Judas's betrayal of Jesus is praiseworthy is rather obviously undercut, she points out, by the fact that Judas's motive in the text is not to release Jesus' spirit to the heavenly realm but rather to sacrifice him to the demon god Saklas. Nor is Jesus always complimentary toward Judas. In fact, he is frequently singled out as the worst of an ignorant group whose members are all clearly excluded from salvation. At one point in the text, Jesus refers to Judas as the "thirteenth *daimon*." The National Geographic team (clearly led in matters of translation by Marvin Meyer) translates *daimon* as "spirit" and sees this as a compliment. But DeConick points out the almost inexplicable mistake here. In Christian literature the word *daimon* almost always has a negative connotation and is translated "demon." Moreover, the number thirteen in gnostic literature almost unmistakably refers to the realm ruled over by the evil god Ialdabaoth. The identification of Judas as a demon also mitigates any credit he might be given for knowing Jesus' true, divine identity. In the Gospel of Mark, the demons know who Jesus is, but that does not make them heroes.

In another passage, DeConick points out that the National Geographic team leaves out a negative, so that instead of saying that Judas "would ascend to the holy generation," in fact the text says that he "would *not* ascend to the holy generation." Or again, when Meyer argues that Jesus has "separated [Judas] for the holy generation," DeConick points out that the Coptic necessitates the sense of "separated from" rather than "separated for." Bart Ehrman argues that the key line in the entire gospel is Jesus' final verdict on Judas, "But you will exceed all of them [the other disciples]. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me."¹² DeConick insists

¹¹April D. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007). For access to DeConick's articles on this topic, see <http://www.aprildeconick.com/gospelofjudas.html> (accessed 14 August 2009).

¹²Bart D. Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 96.

that the proper translation is, “But you will do worse than all of them. For the man that clothes me, you will sacrifice him.” Although Ehrman’s interpretation is reasonable in one respect, in that the release of Jesus’ spirit from the prison of his body might be cause for rejoicing in Gnosticism, he apparently forgets for a moment that the whole notion of sacrifice is anathema to gnostics. Gnosticism understood sacrifice as a form of worship demanded by the bloodthirsty, wicked gods of the physical universe, those who were responsible for the creation of the evil, material world. In point of fact, by his betrayal, Judas was serving the evil god Ialdabaoth by ridding the world of the saving *gnosis* (knowledge) that was provided by Jesus, *gnosis* that would have led the wise to abandon the worship of Ialdabaoth and his ilk.

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How could the National Geographic project, overseen by a “dream team” of prominent scholars, have gone so terribly wrong? In a widely disseminated op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, DeConick raises the question of whether the National Geographic scholars were so eager to help produce a sensational National Geographic special—and to cash in with their own books exploiting the resulting publicity—that they blinded themselves to gaping flaws in their translation and interpretation. Some of the errors are so egregious that DeConick wonders if they were, in fact, accidental.

This accusation brought howls of protest, especially from Marvin Meyer, and the ensuing drama played out on the pages of the *New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as in tension-filled scholarly meetings. Seldom has the guild of biblical scholars seen such an ugly public squabble, especially among such prominent figures and featuring such high stakes. But the weight of scholarly opinion has come down clearly on the side of the underdog, April DeConick. Meyer has tried to defend his translation, for example, by using a much later Christian text that uses the word *daimon* as he believes the *Gospel of Judas* does, but the response of John D. Turner in the *Chronicle*—“That’s a bunch of crap”—was shared by many. Some other members of the National Geographic team have retracted some of their earlier statements (for example, Elaine Pagels) or expressed regret that they were misled by Meyer (for example, Craig A. Evans). Bart Ehrman has said little, but he has voiced almost solitary support for Meyer’s refutation of DeConick’s criticism. He has also objected to the accusation that he was the leading cheerleader for the now-discredited “Judas as gnostic hero” theory, claiming that this is a small part of his assessment of the gospel.¹³ But his book provides a wealth of ammunition for his critics. Ehrman refers to Judas as Jesus’ “beloved” disciple and even claims that the document’s title (*The Gospel of Judas* rather than *The Gos-*

¹³For details about the aftermath of DeConick’s evisceration of the National Geographic translation and interpretation, see Thomas Bartlett, “The Betrayal of Judas,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, 30 May 2008.

pel according to Judas) is a deliberate indication that it does not concern the good news about Jesus but rather the good news about Judas himself. “Judas, even more than Jesus, is the hero of this account.”¹⁴ In the face of this evidence, Ehrman’s denials ring somewhat hollow. The last word on this riveting scholarly controversy has not yet been heard, but it is fair to say that some scholarly reputations are going to emerge with permanent damage.

MORE TO COME?

Will there be still more gospels rediscovered in the future? The chances are fairly good. The number of gospels that are still “lost” remains substantial. We know these gospels existed at one point because other ancient authors quote or refer to them. There are at least thirteen gospels whose existence is well attested in the ancient literature,¹⁵ and many more that are mentioned in passing.

Philip Jenkins believes the most likely candidate for the next discovery is the *Gospel of Matthias*, judging from the frequency of ancient references to it. “Foretelling such discoveries,” he argues, “is not a matter of mystical or apocalyptic prophecy, but rather a logical extrapolation from the history of archaeology and New Testament research over the last century or so. Major finds have occurred quite regularly, and there is no reason to believe that the two most famous manuscript hoards [Qumran and Nag Hammadi] were the only ones of their kind.”¹⁶ Whether the next find will have the earth-shattering significance that will probably be claimed for it is another matter altogether. Hopefully scholars will learn from the mistakes of the past, and avoid making overblown claims about the significance of the new discovery, at least until the dust has had time to settle. ⊕

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¹⁴Ehrman, *Lost Gospel*, 98.

¹⁵For information on these still-lost gospels, including evidence of their existence, see *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 3–25.

¹⁶Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, 215.