

## THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

### *New Testament Survey – Lesson 3*

We began this section of our New Testament studies considering the arguments in three popular books bestselling writer Bart Ehrman recently wrote. Ehrman's books all contain a consistent logical assertion with which we have taken issue. He tells the reader that there are only two options when it comes to the Bible. For Ehrman, it is either a human book or a divine book. Ehrman spends his books showing the human elements, and lets that justify his dismissal of the Bible's divine origins.

Ehrman's focus is too limited. Whether by negligence or intent, Ehrman has failed to consider all the possibilities by claiming there are only two options, neither of which is Biblical! The Biblical claim is that the Bible is both a divine work and a human work. God has spoken through his prophets, and his Holy Spirit has worked through apostles and others to bring us the Scriptures we have today. In past lessons, we saw that with the way God entrusted the Old Testament to the Jews (Rom. 3:2 – “they were *entrusted* with the *oracles* of God”). We also saw it with the way God worked to produce his word to the church in the New Testament text, then ensuring his message was secured through scholarship and translation, even as human copying errors crept in. This week, we see it with the placement of the canon.

This subject has captured scholastic interest, and a number of really good solid works are available for those who wish to study it in depth. A number of these are cited in the footnotes throughout parts one and two of this lesson. These works are much more highly commended than Ehrman's popular works that seem to be written where shock value trumps scholastic fairness. In other words, if one wishes to study this subject more, then do so with the academic works available rather than those that seem to be written with a set agenda, written in tabloid-ese and missing genuine academic fairness.

#### “CANON”

“Canon” is not related to a big gun! The word derives from an Ancient Near Eastern (Semitic) word for a reed. Reeds were useful as straight, flat (in a triangular sense), readily available (in certain places), and long lasting measuring rods. They were the precursor to the modern ruler or yardstick! Over time, the word evolved into a word for a measuring ruler, then for a list, and finally, by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, for the closed collection of documents regarded as Holy Scripture. In that sense, the “canon” of Scripture is the closed set of writings by which the church measures

## HUMAN AND DIVINE

As mentioned in the introduction, the collection of Scriptures was never a production of God done in isolation from humanity. In our automated age, we are prone to expecting God to run a universe where he dispenses all matters the way computers output information. If we were God, then we might have simply produced a Table of Contents out of thin air and told everyone to make sure his or her Bible followed it precisely. Perhaps we expect that God should have taken a person, possessed him or her in such a way that the person wrote out a Table of Contents while in some trance. In fact, we often seek God to act in that way in many aspects of life, not only in the production of Scripture. We often want a God who treats people like puppets, who pulls strings and produces results where the person has no choice in the matter.

Both Scripture and experience teach that, as a general rule, God does not work that way! That might seem like what we would do, but God is much greater than we are, his thoughts are beyond ours, and his ways are not our ways. One aspect of God's greatness is the way he is able to work through us, through our actions, and through our minds to effectuate his will, even as he lets us make choices. In this sense, Paul wrote of God at work in the "renewal of your mind" where *we*, by "testing," are able to "discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). He doesn't turn us into machines; he turns us into mature and thoughtful *believers* who trust him to work in us and through us for his good pleasure *while we* are working out our salvation:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

This is the human and divine working in tandem. This is what Ehrman misses.

A gold star example of this is the church's recognition of the canon, those writings that are not mere musings of man, not a collection of fairy tales or writings that support a power structure or economic agenda, but those writings that are divine revelation. These are the writings that convey God's will, which God has worked through humans to produce for the direction and edification of the church. While at times they are "hard to understand" and some who are "ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction," these are the Holy Writings that are able to make those who believe, "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:16-18).

Consider the challenge facing the early church over whether Gentiles had to first become Jews in order to become Christians. This was no small matter; it was a

monumental issue. The implications were deep and long lasting. They would determine whether Christianity was limited to a sect of Judaism or whether it was beyond that, whether it was a kingdom available to all peoples. This was an issue of great importance that God could have resolved with a little handwriting on the wall. God could have miraculously arranged the letters in a bowl of alphabet soup to produce the answer (granted, they may not have had alphabet soup at the time, but the point is the same!). However, God did not. Luke recorded the arduous decision-making process in Acts 15.

The story started when Paul and Barnabas “had no small dissension and debate” with missionaries who were teaching the necessity of Jewish conversion before Christian conversion. Paul, Barnabas, and others went to Jerusalem to take the question to the church’s elders and apostles. The church was excited to greet Paul and the others, but when some Pharisees in the church heard the stories and issues, they sided with those who required circumcision and adherence to the law for the Gentiles. The apostles and elders gathered together “*to consider this matter*” (Acts 15:6). As important as this was and as high as the tension ran on the issue, it was still not something where the answer was dispensed in a magic manner from on high. Instead, there was “much debate” (Acts 15:7). The church engaged their mind, no doubt prayerfully, and did very much what Paul would later write to the Romans to do, “by testing determine what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect,” as referenced above.

At the Jerusalem conference, Peter ended the debate by reminding everyone what God had indicated through his prior work in the church. Paul and Barnabas added their experiences in the mission field, and James then turned to Scripture to add the “words of the prophets” (Acts 15:15). From this debate, discussion, examination of experience, and Scripture, James then announced his conclusion, that there were a few things that were important for the Gentiles, but not the requirement of becoming Jewish in circumcision and following all Jewish ceremonial law.

At this point, the Scripture is most illuminating in how God worked with his apostles in the early church to ensure that his word was properly set out for the church to follow. The process continued with the “renewed” minds at work! Luke tells us that “it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church” to choose certain people to send with Paul and Barnabas back to the mission field. The Jerusalem conference also produced a letter for the church, setting out their position. The letter was from “the brothers, both the apostles and the elders” of the Jerusalem church. In the letter, the church did not run from the active involvement and united decision of the individuals. Neither did they see the individual dissension, debate, and ultimate conclusions something done merely by human effort. The letter makes the bold affirmation that the conclusions were

those that “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). This is God at work in man. Not “divine or human” but “divine *and* human!”

This is a strong illustration of the premise that Ehrman misses. Scripture, even the selection of the canon, is not *either* divine or human – it is *both*! It is the prayerful church dissenting, debating, reasoning, examining experience and Scripture, and finally finding agreement by those authorized and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. An amazing way that God Almighty is able to work in and through humanity!

### **CHALLENGES TO THE CANON: THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS**

In a lesson this size, we cannot address every challenge to the canon. Over time, the challenges are exposed and scholarship responds to each. We will choose to focus, therefore, not on the older challenges, but on the more recent. Every few years, the media parades in the latest incarnation challenging the Christian canon, often headlining “the end of Scripture as we know it.” Just in the last decade, we have seen *The Da Vinci Code* top the bestseller list. This fictional work intertwines the legend of the Holy Grail, asserting that the grail was not a real chalice holding the blood (Last Supper wine) of Christ, but rather a figurative chalice holding the truth that Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ wife, pregnant at the time of the crucifixion, and that the “blood” of Christ was the bloodline or lineage of Christ. Brown gets his title from artistic works of Leonardo Da Vinci that he claimed gave key hints and clues to this secret past, including the Last Supper painting as well as the Mona Lisa. Brown’s novel has the church suppressing this truth for two thousand years. The book was released in 40 languages, made into a very successful movie, and made Brown a very wealthy man. Critically, the movie did not fare so well. It had no basis in fact, and was decried by scholars. It was also not well received by literary critics, with many making assessments not much different from Salmon Rushdie’s:

"Do not start me on 'The Da Vinci Code,' a novel so bad that it gives bad novels a bad name."<sup>1</sup>

Most recognized the fiction as fiction, and no real scholars supported the idea that Brown’s fiction was true.

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<sup>1</sup> Speech on October 7, 2005, as reported by Sofia Maines, in LJWorld. See Internet publication at: [http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2005/oct/07/famed\\_author\\_takes\\_kansas/?city\\_local](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2005/oct/07/famed_author_takes_kansas/?city_local).

Another headline grabber in the last decade was the Gospel of Judas. In 2006, the National Geographic published a translation of this work into English. The publication was met with great fanfare in the press. Headlines like:

Forbidden gospel 'will show Judas was acting for God'<sup>2</sup>

and,

Was Judas really a good guy?: A new 'gospel' challenges AGE-OLD beliefs<sup>3</sup>

were startling to many people, even though they were dismally short of the truth.

Scholars generally date the gospel of Judas to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. Citing the carbon dating on the papyrus as well as the ink dating by electron microscopy, both of which place the time frame within a window of 280AD, give or take 60 years (with a 90% reliability), Cambridge scholar Simon Gathercole computes the actual composition time around 140-220AD.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the text was originally written 110 to 190 years after the death of Christ.

Bart Ehrman termed the Gospel of Judas, “without a doubt the most important archaeological discovery of the past sixty years.”<sup>5</sup> We leave aside the truth of Ehrman’s bold archaeological assertion. (Ehrman is clearly not an archaeologist! There have been *many* incredible finds in the last sixty years.) We add Ehrman’s hyperbole because it shows the need to address the issue of the Gospel of Judas’s significance. Ehrman published his statement at a time he was already well known for the tabloid grabbing book titles *Lost Scriptures: Books that did not make it into the New Testament* and *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scriptures and the Faiths We Never Knew*.<sup>6</sup> Ehrman asserts that the Bible is not a God-inspired collection of writings (which he as an agnostic does not believe exists). Rather, it is the collection of writings that was put together by those who had the political power and opportunity to seize control of early Christianity and force out any who disagreed with what became the orthodox position. Hence he is able to term those

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<sup>2</sup> *The Telegraph*, Jan. 13, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 9, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Gathercole, Simon, *The Gospel of Judas* (Oxford 2007), at 8, 140.

<sup>5</sup> Ehrman, Bart, “Christianity Turned on its Head,” in Kasser, Rudolphe, *The Gospel of Judas*, (National Geographic 2006), at 79.

<sup>6</sup> Ehrman, Bart, *Lost Scriptures: Books that did not make it into the New Testament*, (Oxford 2003); *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scriptures and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford 2003).

writings that had claims on some interpretation or aspect of Jesus as “Scriptures” and “Christianities” that had equal validity (or lack thereof).

Only one set of early Christian beliefs emerged as victorious in the heated disputes over what to believe and how to live that were raging in the early centuries of the Christian movement. These beliefs, and the group who promoted them, came to be thought of as “orthodox”...and alternative views—such as the view that there are two gods, or that the true God did not create the world, or that Jesus was not actually human or not actually divine, etc.—came to be labeled “heresy”... Moreover, the victors in the struggles to establish Christian orthodoxy not only won their theological battles, they also rewrote the history of the conflict; later readers, then, naturally assumed that the victorious views had been embraced by the vast majority of Christians from the very beginning, all the way back to Jesus and his closest followers, the apostles.<sup>7</sup>

Already committed to this view, Ehrman’s approach to the Gospel of Judas (which came out three years after Ehrman published the above referenced books) is not totally surprising, nor are his shortcuts on ensuring scholastic accuracy.<sup>8</sup> Ehrman believed the Gospel of Judas:

...portrays Judas quite differently from anything we previously knew. Here he is not the evil, corrupt, devil-inspired follower of Jesus who betrayed his master by handing him over to his enemies. He is instead Jesus’ closest intimate and friend, the one who understood Jesus better than anyone else, who turned Jesus over to authorities because Jesus *wanted* him to do so. In handing him over, Judas performed the greatest service imaginable. According to this gospel, Jesus wanted to escape this material world that stands opposed to God and return to his heavenly home.<sup>9</sup>

Later in the same chapter, Ehrman added the reason for the demise of the Gospel of Judas and other writings he considers “lost Scriptures”:

In brief, one of the competing groups in Christianity succeeded in overwhelming all the others. This group gained more converts than its opponents and managed to relegate all its competitors to the margins. This group decided what the Church’s organizational structure would be. It

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<sup>7</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, at 2.

<sup>8</sup> Gathercole does a solid, well-documented job of revealing a number of Ehrman’s errors. See Gathercole, especially at 116ff.

<sup>9</sup> Kasser, at 80.

decided which creeds Christians would recite. And it decided which books would be accepted.<sup>10</sup>

We clarify two different issues at play here. First, what do we do with the Gospel of Judas. But even more overarching, is whether Ehrman's claims about the Gospel of Judas and about the formation of Scripture are factual, opinions disguised as facts, or simply book-selling ideas that fall short of rigorous investigation, analysis and logic.

Stripping away all the conclusory statements and stark headlines, reveals core facts that deny the Gospel of Judas the substance of many of those claims:

**FACT:** Neither the Gospel of Judas nor its portrayal of Judas was “unknown” before its publication in 2006. The early Christian writer St. Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-c.202) wrote of a “fabricated book” called the “Gospel of Judas.” While it is unclear whether the book was the precise same book discussed above (published in translation in 2006), it is clear that such was around by the time Irenaeus was writing roughly in 180AD. Furthermore, Irenaeus called Judas “the betrayer” as he is called in Scripture, in citing that the Gospel of Judas claimed Judas alone had the secret knowledge of truth and from this secret knowledge he “accomplished the mystery of the betrayal.”<sup>11</sup> So already in 180AD, Irenaeus used the canonical gospel terms decrying the heresy in the Gospel of Judas.

**FACT:** The Gospel of Judas was was not some writing or position that held the same antiquity as the New Testament gospels. No published scholar, even Bart Ehrman, suggests that the Gospel of Judas was composed as early as the New Testament gospels. The consensus of scholarship dates all four New Testament gospels in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. No one places the Gospel of Judas that early. In the New Testament gospels, we have accounts of the life of Christ, as well as the deeds of Judas the betrayer, written at a time when people were still alive who lived through the events. The Gospel of Judas is much too late for such eyewitness validation.

**FACT:** The Gospel of Judas mocks the apostolic church. It does not claim to compete with it or faithfully adhere to it. The apostolic church is mocked in the gospel of Judas for its observances of the Lord's Supper, for

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, at 119.

<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.1

its following of God as set forth in the Old Testament, for its holiness, and for its following of the original apostles.<sup>12</sup>

**FACT:** The Gospel of Judas, at least as we have its copy, does not refer to the resurrection and its teaching runs contrary to the idea of a physical resurrection (Jesus wanted to die to escape his physical body). This was not an “early competitive view of the church” if you measure it against the apostolic church. The earliest writings we have in the New Testament are likely those of the apostle Paul. In his early letters to the Galatians and to the Corinthians, he was emphatic not only on the resurrection, but also on its centrality in the gospel message. Paul challenged the Galatians asking,

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified (Gal. 3:1).

That challenge followed Paul’s personal identification as “an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who *raised him from the dead*” (Gal. 1:1). Jesus was crucified, and raised from the dead. This was not only Paul’s message, but also the authority for Paul’s message. It was *the* good news (or gospel) that Paul shared. To the Corinthians, Paul wrote similarly:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor. 15:1-8).

**FACT:** It was Paul first, not later revisers of history, who challenged any other perspective of what merited the caption “gospel” or “good news” related to Jesus. In the Galatian letter, written perhaps as early as 48-50AD, but in no event later than 60 AD, Paul was blunt:

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<sup>12</sup> See the text generally, also the analysis of Gathercole at 68ff, 80ff, 105ff.



I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9).

The church that Ehrman claims was “picking the Scriptures” is the church holding to the writings and gospels of the apostles, the church mocked by the Gospel of Judas. To assert that the Gospel of Judas had equal right to claim itself as the original Christian faith, is to make a claim with no proof whatsoever. There is nothing in any apostolic document to substantiate such a claim. This is true even if you consider only those New Testament books that Ehrman and other skeptics acknowledge as authentic in authorship and time (like Galatians and 1 Corinthians).

**FACT:** As we will discuss in more detail in part two of this lesson, the early church recognized the four gospels as apostolic in origin. The early church recognized Paul’s letters as apostolic in authority. These are quoted repeatedly in the early church authors, starting with the first generation after the apostles. The advent of the new “Christianities,” as Ehrman likes to call them, was never with apostolic authority. There were false teachers that Paul and others opposed, but that was within the purview of apostolic authority. Ehrman’s ideas only work if you have Ehrman’s presuppositions, namely that there is no known God, Jesus was not divine, Jesus was not resurrected, there is no Holy Spirit, and the apostles had no divine directive or authority. If, like Ehrman, you consider all beliefs equally invalid, then certainly there were other invalid beliefs that did not bear the test of time. You can cite the cause for their demise as politics, culture, lack of appeal, or any number of things, but if you do not believe in the Divine, then you will never be able to cite the demise as “heresy.” For without Divinity, there is no truth separated from heresy.

### **CHALLENGES TO THE CANON: “JESUS’ WIFE?”**

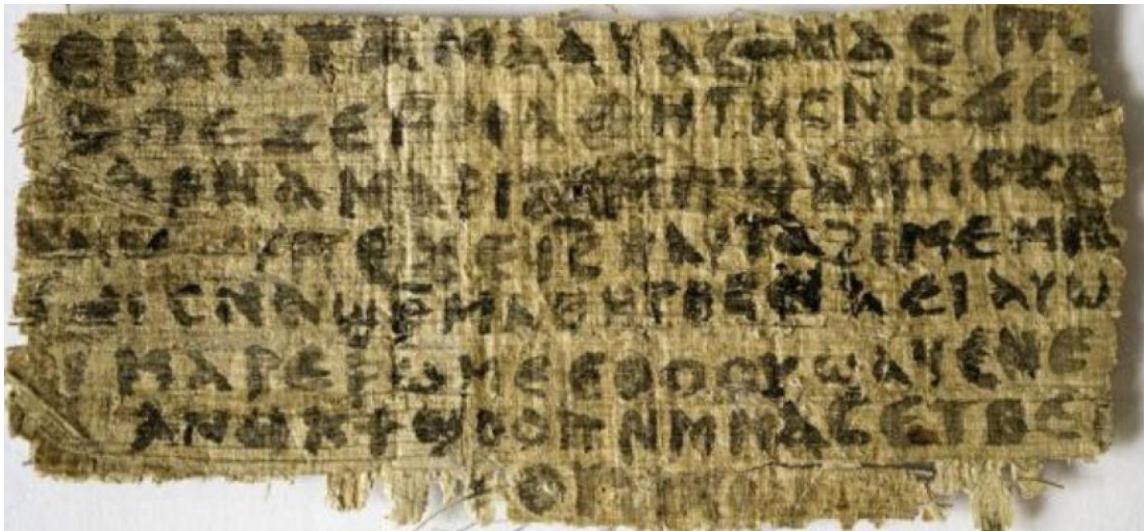
At the start of the last section, we noted that every few years the media ushers in bold new headlines that make outlandish claims about the effects of some new discovery on the validity of the New Testament. This has reoccurred just this past week with the headlines shouting:

Was Jesus married? Papyrus may give clue<sup>13</sup>

Ancient papyrus fragment refers to Jesus' 'wife'<sup>14</sup>

This latest barrage reported about the recently translated papyrus fragment allegedly found in Egypt a few decades ago, but not translated until just recently. Reading the newspapers challenges the long-held tradition that Jesus was not married. While this may not seem to challenge the New Testament canon directly, its challenge is there nonetheless. First, we should focus on what is actually being discussed.

On Tuesday, September 18, 2012, at the International Congress of Coptic Studies meeting in Rome, Harvard professor Karen King presented a paper that analyzed and translated a piece of papyrus she believed dated from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Her analysis of the fragment is the subject of an article slated to be published in the Harvard Theological Review. The papyrus has unknown origins. As King relates it, she got it from an anonymous man (to us, not to her), who bought it in 1997 from H. U. Laukamp, a German-American collector who claimed to have acquired it in Communist East Germany in the 1960's. Laukamp died in 2001, so no one has been able to talk to him further about how he came into possession of it. The fragment is about the size of a business card with writing on both the front and back, fairly readable on one side, but little is legible on the other side. The writing is in Greek letters, but the language is not Greek. It is Sahidic Coptic, which was an Egyptian language written in Greek letters starting around 300AD.



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<sup>13</sup> Houston Chronicle, September 19, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> USA Today, September 18, 2012.

Simon Gathercole has both transcribed and translated the text as follows<sup>15</sup>:

1	ⲐⲈ ⲁⲛ ⲧⲁⲛⲁⲗ ⲁϥ ⲛⲁⲉⲓ ⲛⲟⲩⲛⲉ	] not. My mother has given me [life
2	ⲓⲉ ⲛⲉⲗⲉ ⲛⲙⲁⲑⲏⲧⲏϥ ⲛⲓⲉ ϫⲉ ϥ [	] The disciples said to Jesus, [
3	ⲓⲣⲁⲣⲏⲁ ⲛⲁⲣⲓⲁ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩⲁ ⲛⲓⲙⲟϥ ⲁ [	] deny. Mary is worthy of it [
3	ⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲁⲗ ⲛⲉⲗⲉ ⲓⲉ ⲛⲁⲗ ⲧⲁⲗⲓⲛⲉ ⲛⲏⲓ [	] Jesus said to them, "My wife... [
4	ⲓⲉⲓ ⲉⲛⲁⲟⲩⲣⲙⲁⲑⲏⲧⲏϥ ⲛⲁⲉⲓ ⲁⲗⲟⲩ [	] She will be able to be a disciple to me, and [
5	ⲓ ⲛⲁⲣⲉ ⲣⲟⲩⲛⲉ ⲉⲑⲟⲟⲩ ⲟⲩⲁⲩⲉⲛⲉ [	] Let evil man ??? [...
6	ⲓ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲧⲟⲟⲟⲓ ⲛⲓⲙⲁϥ ⲉⲧⲃⲉ [	] As for me, I am with her because [
7	ⲓ ⲟⲩⲗⲓⲕⲟⲛ [	] an image [

His translation is not tremendously different from King's except in line 6 where Gathercole translates "I am with her because..." and King translates "I dwell with her in order to...." The key phrase trumpeted in the headlines is Jesus saying, "My wife." If Jesus were in fact married, then it would be news for a variety of reasons. First, nothing in the New Testament suggests that Jesus was married. Second, the Catholic Church uses Jesus as a model for the priesthood not being open to married men or women. Third, this fuels the fires made popular by Brown's *Da Vinci Code* that Jesus was married and the church worked to hide that fact. In truth, however, those conclusions do not bear up under scrutiny. Before examining the conclusions, we should first consider the issues associated with the fragment's authenticity.

Before presenting her paper, King showed the papyrus to two papyrologists, recognized experts in such issues. One was Anne Marie Luijendijk, at Princeton University. She has been quoted as saying "It would be impossible to forge" the fragment.<sup>16</sup> The other was Roger Bagnall, Director of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at N.Y.U. Both of those scholars determined that the fragment was likely authentic, Bagnall claiming that he looked at it with a number of other experts in his living room who all concurred. Subsequent to the furor that arose from its publication, the views of Luijendijk and Bagnall were echoed by Ariel Shisha-Halevy, a Coptic linguist at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who based her opinion on the language and grammar of the text.

In opposition to those believing its authenticity are a number of detractors. One detractor is unnamed, but came to the issue because the Harvard Theological Review is "peer-reviewed" (This means that before an article such as this is published, it is given to three anonymous authorities charged with determining whether it meets publishing criteria). This unidentified scholar was critical of the

<sup>15</sup> In personal correspondence with this author, September 19, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> New York Times, September 18, 2012.

fragment's authenticity. The scholar believed the fragment was fraught with grammatical irregularities and that the way the ink showed on the page pointed to a forgery. Because of this, before Harvard will publish the article, King will have to offer greater proof of authenticity. A non-invasive test on the ink should help determine whether its formula is consistent with the formulas used in 4<sup>th</sup> Century inks.

Joining the unnamed reviewer in questioning the authenticity are a number of other scholars. Stephen Emmel, a professor of Coptology at the University of Muenster is quoted as saying,

There's something about this fragment in its appearance and also in the grammar of the Coptic that strikes me as being not completely convincing somehow.<sup>17</sup>

Alin Suciu, a papyrologist at the University of Hamburg was more blunt:

I would say it's a forgery. The script doesn't look authentic [compared to other fourth century Coptic works].<sup>18</sup>

The noted Coptic linguist Wolf-Peter Funk, who is the co-director of the project editing the large trove of Coptic Christian writings uncovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945, also went on record expressing doubts about the authenticity adding that the fragment's form is "suspicious."<sup>19</sup>

Another detractor is David Gill, a professor of archaeological heritage at the University Campus Suffolk. Gill is quoted as saying,

There are all sorts of really dodgy things about this... This looks to me as if any sensible, responsible, academic would keep their distance from it.<sup>20</sup>

Without a definitive answer on its authenticity, we can still ask the question, what if it is authentic? If it turns out to be a forgery, then it is irrelevant. But if it seems

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<sup>17</sup> "Ancient Papyrus Suggests Some Early Christians Thought Jesus Was Married," PBS, September 20, 2012. Emmel was one of the scholars who worked for National Geographic examining the Gospel of Judas for authenticity.

<sup>18</sup> "Harvard Journal: Jesus 'Wife' Papyrus Unverified," Jay Lindsay (AP) September 21, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> "Doubts Over Harvard Claim of 'Jesus' Wife' Papyrus," Nicole Winfield (AP) September 19, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

authentic, then we turn to the importance of such a find. Here again, there are a few key facts that we should bear in mind in this regard.

**FACT:** This is no support whatsoever for Dan Brown’s assertions in the *Da Vinci Code*. Repeatedly, King has made it abundantly clear, “At least don’t say this proves Dan Brown right.”<sup>21</sup>

**FACT:** This does not mean that Jesus was in fact married. As New Testament scholar David Chapman pointed out in a Lanier Theological Library panel discussion on non-canonical gospels, the time period between the death of Christ and the authorship of even the early non-canonical gospels (including this fragment) is roughly the same as the death of Abraham Lincoln and the recently released movie, *Abraham Lincoln – Vampire Slayer*. Should someone unearth that movie in two thousand years, they would be making a grave miscalculation to assume that Abraham Lincoln was in fact a vampire slayer. King has been careful in this regard to emphasize this point. She “repeatedly cautioned that this fragment should not be taken as proof that Jesus, the historical person, was actually married.”<sup>22</sup>

**FACT:** The text is not historically reliable in the sense that it was not written during the lifetime of eyewitnesses, like the New Testament gospels. This Coptic fragment, if authentic, is likely the translation of a Greek text. Obviously, that means the Greek text predates even the fourth century. King believes the Greek text would go back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, but then she readily accedes that, “the text was probably written centuries after Jesus lived, and all other early, historically reliable Christian literature is silent on the question.”<sup>23</sup>

**FACT:** There were heresies that existed in the church early on. As already noted, Paul placed a curse on such in the Galatian letter. While we know that the post apostolic generation of leaders continued to cite the four New Testament gospels as well as Paul’s writings for authorities on belief and behavior, still new beliefs were spawned as newer generations sought to incorporate their other beliefs into the Christian system. It is not odd that a group might argue on the issue of marriage and the role of women. We know from other writings those issues existed in the early church, just as

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<sup>21</sup> “A Faded Piece of Papyrus Refers to Jesus Wife,” Laurie Goodstein, *The New York Times*, September 18, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

they do in branches of Christendom today. So writings that tried to say that Jesus had substantial relationships with women are not really new. Since the Nag Hammadi writings discovered in Egypt in 1945 were finally translated and published in the 1970's, scholars had a fuller glimpse into the heresies common in Egypt in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Many of these texts prominently featured women or feminine figures in the cosmic order of things. All readily accede, that the fragment that King has published, if it is authentic, would have come from Egypt in that same time period.

If the fragment does not serve any basis for believing that Jesus had a wife, and if the fragment is not historically reliable, then why does it merit headlines, and why is it important to the consideration of the canon? The headlines answer is easiest. The fragment gets headlines because reporters do not always do their jobs and it is easy to write pabulum that draws attention to an article. Add to this the fact that many reporters are paid, in part, on how many publications pick up their article, and the motivation is there for sensationalism. King is well known for her critique of what she calls “the myth of origins.” King is referencing the idea that there is a chain between the events of the New Testament, including the life of Christ, and the writings of the New Testament, which was then passed down through church fathers to the church today. She labels that a myth, believing that early Christianity was incredibly diverse and,

The line between true believer and heretic hardened in the fourth century, when the Roman emperor Constantine converted to—and legalized—Christianity. To impose order on its factions, he summoned some 300 bishops to Nicaea. This council issued a statement of Christian doctrine, the Nicene Creed, that affirmed a model of the faith still taken as orthodoxy.<sup>24</sup>

In this sense, she sees this fragment important. She thinks it bears witness to the multi-faceted beliefs of the early church that were eventually stamped out and erased as heretical. We see that even in her title of the work. King calls the source of this fragment, “The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife”! There is an argument that could be made that as it recites Jesus and his sayings, it could be called a “gospel.” But why it is called “The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” when it also speaks of his mother, of Mary (whom King thinks *is the* wife) of wicked people and more? But labeling it as she has, places it into the camp that Ehrman continually trumpets without merit as “other Scriptures.”

The chain King takes issue with is important. What King labels “the myth of origins” is what we believe the evidence proves. King, Ehrman, and others are

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<sup>24</sup> “The Inside Story of a Controversial New Text About Jesus,” Ariel Sabar, Smithsonian.com, September 18, 2012.

quick to note the absence of a completed canon until the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, but that does not mean that certain books were not accepted as authoritative much earlier. Just because the Western Church may not have fully accepted the Revelation of John, or the Book of Hebrews (or another book) until much later, does not mean that the much earlier acceptance of the four gospels, Paul's letters, and Acts, did not set a standard for orthodoxy. These issues are the subject of part two in this lesson on the canon, where we consider the evidence of how the canon developed.

## CONCLUSION

We have much more to say on this next week, but the amazing thing to consider as we prepare to finish this lesson is where we started with Acts 15. The process of canon, the process of determining what God is saying to the church, what is authentic and what is not, is a process that is both divine and human. God is at work in his church now, and has been at work in his church since it was established on Pentecost. His involvement is what secures the chain, and the canon. The councils and considerations of church leaders were not done in a vacuum. They were manifestations of God at work. That is the Biblical claim, which is nonsense to those who do not ascribe to the Bible. But for those who do, those claims are rock solid, even in the face of Ehrman and his ilk, as we will see next week.

## POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared....”* (1 Cor. 15:1-3).

This was of first importance to Paul. Elsewhere in his Corinthian correspondence, he underscored that he resolved to know nothing among the Corinthians except Christ crucified. Paul changed everything in his life, dumping all his luxurious lifestyle and opportunities for a shortened life of hardship and turmoil. He counted all his earthly assets as rubbish compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ “and the power of his resurrection” (Phil. 3:10). This was Paul's life and message. It was not the creation of the church in the 100's, 200's, 300's, or even today. This was not a new fangled theology knit back onto an ancient text. It was the message of the apostle who lived a martyr's life and died a martyr's death, convicted of the truth he experienced. Paul's gospel was not sourced from

Paul. It is what Paul received. We can take it from Paul backward to Christ himself, the sacrificed “Lamb of God.”

2. *“...there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”* (Gal. 1:7-8).

There was heresy in the church in the time of Paul, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, all the way up to and including today. This was not something new. It was not something that was stamped out in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century so that orthodoxy could be established. Orthodoxy was established in Scriptures that were all written in the first century. Those Scriptures had the imprimatur of the apostles, men who Jesus had promised would come under the power of the Holy Spirit who would teach them, remind them, and give them words. It is not surprising, then, that Paul had harsh words for *anyone* who preached a different gospel. This is no less true today.

3. *“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.”* (Acts 15:28).

It is amazing that God can work through people. He can use others to teach us, and use us to teach others. The Holy Spirit works in the church to bring renewal, fruit, and life to the body and the world. We need to pray not only that God’s kingdom will come and his will be done on earth, but also directly through and in our lives! May we live for his kingdom and shine his light into the lives of others. Let us watch him continue to renew our minds and draw us closer to him as he draws others closer, working through us!