

The Truth About "THE FIFTH GOSPEL"

When an Egyptian farmer uncovered new "sayings" of Jesus, Christians asked, "Do they challenge the Bible or confirm it?" Only now do we have a clue to the answer

By the Rev. DON CLEVELAND NORMAN

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DIGGING on a cliffside for fertilizer one day in 1945, an Egyptian farmer uncovered an ancient tomb and, inside it, several leather-bound papyrus volumes. Today, his discovery is stirring the Christian world from its Biblical scholars to the layman with little knowledge of the Book's history.

Do these musty manuscripts contain a fifth Gospel? Did the Apostle, Didymus Judas Thomas—"Doubting Thomas"—compile 114 sayings and parables of Jesus, some of which are not covered by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John?

Only recently has the layman been able to evaluate these questions. Last fall, Harper & Brothers published "The Gospel According to Thomas," containing 114 sayings. And in February, Doubleday & Co., Inc., published "The Secret Sayings of Jesus," an independent translation and analysis by Robert Grant of the University of Chicago.

Biblical scholars, however, have been debating the questions of "the fifth Gospel" since the original volumes worked their way into the antiquities market more than a decade ago.

The farmer who had uncovered the manuscripts along the Upper Nile, near the Egyptian village of Nag Hamadi, reportedly had burned one to warm his tea. He sold 13 others to a village merchant for three Egyptian pounds—later, one volume reportedly brought \$10,000!

Since the manuscripts were written in Coptic, an Egyptian-Greek language in common use 2,000 years ago, 12 volumes found their way into the Coptic Museum in Cairo. The other was purchased for the Jung Institute in Switzerland by Gilles Quispel with a gift donation.

With Henri-Charles Peuch, A. Guillaumont, Walter Till, and 'Ard Al Masih, Quispel began translating—and, with the "sayings of Jesus," exploding a bomb in the normally staid community of Biblical experts!

Why call these 114 disconnected "sayings" of Jesus a Gospel? they demanded. What about the sayings that conflicted with the teachings of Jesus in the four Gospels accepted by Christendom? And why are the sayings so mystical and obscure?

Only now are cool-headed answers coming to these indignant questions. First of all, whatever

these 114 sayings are, they are *not* a Gospel. In the early days of Christianity, there were many writings which purported to be "Gospels." Church councils, after long study, admitted only 27 books to the New Testament. Those not admitted were considered "apochryphal," meaning not of the inspired apostolic age and secondary in church literature.

A study of the "Gospel according to Thomas" indicated that it was a Coptic adaptation of such a writing attributed to Thomas about 140 A.D.

Then how did contradictory sayings get into the Coptic Thomas? The scholars know that the "lost manuscripts" were written by the Gnostic sect which flourished from the 2nd to 4th centuries and was considered heretical by the church. The Gnostics believed in a redeemer-deity and personal salvation and, therefore, saw in Jesus' life and teachings much that paralleled their own beliefs. Evidently, they adopted the Thomas sayings which fitted these beliefs and invented others for ideas foreign to Christianity.

AND THE curious, almost unintelligible style in which Jesus "speaks" in the Gnostic gospel? That, too, traces back to Gnostic beliefs—and indicates why they were considered heretical. While believing in a Christ figure, they also believed salvation was reserved for a select few who were literally "in the know"—"Gnostic" coming from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge. To preserve their secret of salvation, they veiled their writings in obscure language.

With such a history behind it, the "Gospel according to Thomas" would seem worthless, perhaps even dangerous to Christianity. But many scholars believe just the opposite.

The Coptic Thomas, says Professor Oscar Cullman, a leading Swiss theologian, is of greater significance to scholars than the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls because it helps prove again that "our four canonical Gospels are the only ones on which we can rely. Again and again, we must marvel at the fact that from the large number of primitive Christian writings only those were accepted as canonical which really came from the oldest time and which were free from heretical tendencies."



Dr. Pahor Lahib, the director of the Coptic Museum in Cairo, examines one of the fragile papyrus pages from the ancient manuscript discovered in an Egyptian cave.

And Gilles Quispel, the dedicated scholar who spent years helping translate the sayings, sums up their contribution to Christianity by saying:

"We may now have an independent Gospel tradition which . . . in its broad outlines of both style and theology, agrees with the text of our canonical Gospels. This shows that behind our Gospel tradition there stands a Person whose words have reached us substantially unchanged."

What Are the New "Sayings" of Jesus?

Many of Jesus' "sayings" recorded in "The Gospel According to Thomas" (Harper & Brothers) paraphrase words of the accepted Gospels, such as this rendering of Matthew 11:28-30:

JESUS SAID: *Come to Me, for easy is My yoke and My lordship is gentle, and you shall find repose for yourselves.*

Others, however, are totally foreign to the canonical Gospels and mystical in the Gnostic style:

JESUS SAID: *This heaven shall pass away and the one above it shall pass away, and the dead are not alive and the living shall not die. In the days when you devoured the dead, you made it alive; when you come into light, what will you do?*

JESUS SAID: *If those who lead you say to you: Behold, the kingdom is in heaven, then the birds of heaven will precede you; if they say to you that it is in the sea, then the fish will precede you. But the kingdom is within you and it is outside of you.*

COVER:

There's a bloom on us today. It goes from Winston Pote's cover of crocuses, which know it's spring despite the snow, to the young miss who's budding as a hostess despite being seven years old (see p. 18).

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