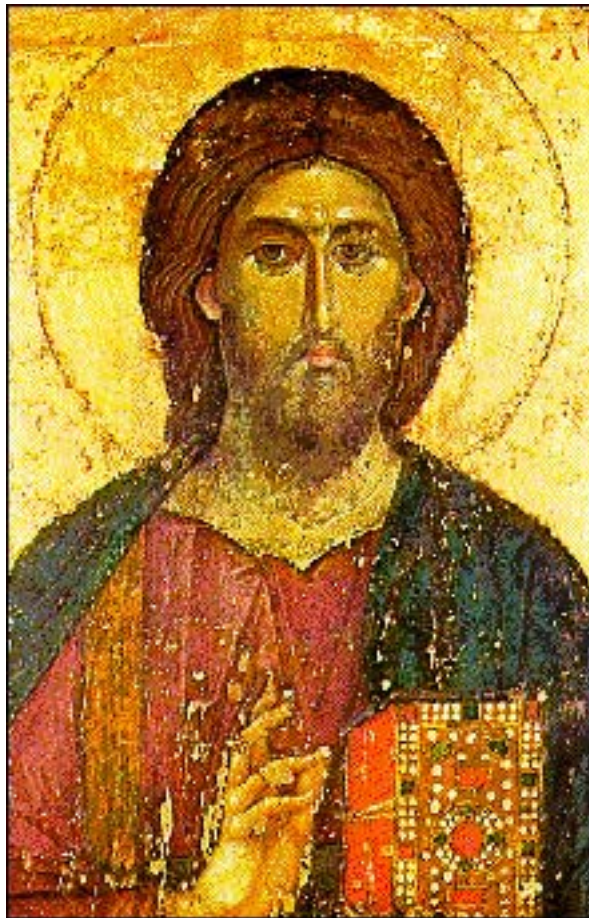


## Jesus Christ and the Church



# 1. What do we really know about Jesus

- We have more and better information about Jesus of Nazareth than any other personalities of his time. We have testimony from witnesses to his life and death: both written and oral tradition about him. Among these feature the four gospels, which have been transmitted by the community of living faith which he established and which continues today.



**We have more and better information about Jesus of Nazareth than any other personalities of his time.**

► This community is the Church, made up of millions of followers of Jesus throughout history. They have learnt the facts which have been handed down uninterruptedly from the first disciples.

► The data which appear in the apocryphal gospels and other extra-biblical references don't offer anything additional in substance to the information already available in the canonical gospels, such as they have been transmitted by the Church.

- Until the Enlightenment, both believers and non-believers accepted that the gospels contained what was known about Jesus. However, some historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century began to question the objectivity of their contents since they were written from the viewpoint of faith. For them, the gospel accounts were hardly credible as they did not contain what Jesus said and did, but rather what Jesus' followers believed some years after his death. Consequently, in the decades that followed until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the veracity of the gospels was questioned and it was said that "we cannot know almost anything" about Jesus (R. Bultmann, *Jesus, Deutsche Bibliothek, Berlin 1926*).

- Today, with the development of the science of history, archaeological advances, and a wider and better knowledge of ancient sources, one can quote a well-known specialist of the Jewish world, who cannot be labelled as a conservative: "we can know a lot about Jesus" (E .P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism, Fortress Press, London-Philadelphia 1985*).

► For example, Sanders points out "eight undisputable facts" from the historical point of view concerning the life of Jesus and Christian origins:

1. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.
2. He was a Galilean who preached and worked miracles.
3. He limited his activity to Israel.

4. He called up those who would become his disciples.

5. He raised controversy over the role of the temple.

6. He was crucified outside Jerusalem by the Roman authorities

7. After the death of Jesus, his followers continued forming an identifiable group.

8. Some Jews at least persecuted certain groups of the new movement (cf Gal 1:13,22; Phil 3:6) and, it seems, this persecution lasted at least until the time close to Paul's final ministry (cf 2 Cor 11:24; Gal 5:11; 6:12; Matt 23:34; 10:17).

- On this minimal base which historians are in agreement, one can rely about on other facts contained in the gospels as being reliable from the historical point of view.

**one can rely on other facts contained in the gospels as being reliable from the historical point of view.**



► Applying the criteria of historicity to these facts allows one to establish a degree of coherence and probability in the gospel statements, and that what is contained in these narratives is substantially certain.

- Finally, it is worthwhile noting that we know Jesus to be trustworthy and credible, because the witnesses are worthy of credibility and because tradition is critical of its very self.

► In addition, what tradition hands down to us stands the test of historical criticism.

► Certainly, of the many things which have come down to us, only some can be proved by the methods used by historians. Nonetheless, this does not imply that those events which cannot be demonstrated by these methods did not take place, but that we can only offer information on their being probable to a greater or lesser extent.

► And we cannot forget, on the other hand, that probability is not the determining factor. For, events which have a low probability have historically taken place, What is also undoubtedly true is that information in the gospel is reasonable and coherent with demonstrable facts. In any case, it is the tradition of the Church, in which these writings were born, which gives us the guarantee of reliability and which tells us how to interpret them.

## 2. What does Mary's virginity imply?

• In the first two chapters of the Gospels according to St Mathew and St Luke, it is clearly stated that Mary conceives her son with no male intervention:



**Jesus entrusted his Mother to John at the foot of the cross: the implication is that Our Lady did not have any other children.**

► “what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit”, the angel says to St Joseph (Matt 1:20). When Mary asked the angel, “How shall this be, since I have no husband?”, the angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:34-35).

► Later on, as Jesus entrusted his Mother to John at the foot of the cross, the implication is that Our Lady did not have any other children.

► The reference to “Jesus’ siblings”, occasionally made in the gospels, could well be attributed to the term “sibling” in Hebrew, which means “close relative”. It could be also be used in the sense often seen in the New Testament to refer to members of the group of believers (Acts 1:15).

► The Church has always believed in Mary’s virginity, and has called her “the ever Virgin” (Lumen Gentium, 52); that is, before, during, and after birth, as stated in a traditional and devotional formula.

• We understand Jesus’ virginal conception as the result of God’s power – “For with God nothing will be impossible” (Luke 1:37).

► As such, it is beyond human understanding. This mystery has nothing to do with pagan mythological representations in which a god, acting as a man, fertilises a woman. The virginal conception of Jesus is a divine work in Mary’s womb, similar to that of creation. It is something that is not normally accepted by a non-believer: it was rejected by some contemporaneous Jews and pagans, who made up stories to explain Jesus’ conception.

► One such story attributed it to a Roman soldier called Pantheras. He is, in fact, a fictional character, made to support an early legend mocking

Christians. From a historical and philological point of view, the name “Pantheras” is a corruption of the Greek word “parthénos”, which means “virgin”. People who used Greek as their language in the Roman Empire heard that Jesus was “the son of the virgin” (huiós parthénos); when they wished to make fun of him, they referred to him as “the son of *Pantheras*”.

► These stories only confirm that the early Church sustained her firm belief in Mary’s virginity, although it seemed to be something impossible.

• Jesus’ virginal conception is above all a sign that Jesus is truly the Son of God by nature – so he does not have a natural human father – and he is also a man born of a woman (Gal 4:4). In various passages of the gospels, we can see God’s initiative, towards salvation, in human history, as the genealogies of Jesus demonstrate.

**The virginal conception of Jesus is a divine work in Mary’s womb, similar to that of creation.**



• Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit and without a man’s intervention, can be better understood as the new Adam, who begins a new creation for man newly redeemed by Him (1 Cor 15:47; John 3:34).

• Mary’s virginity is also a sign of her firm faith and her absolute self-dedication to God’s will. For this reason, it has been said that Mary conceives Jesus in her mind even before she does so in her womb, and that she is “more blessed receiving Christ by her faith than conceiving her son in her womb” (St Augustine). By being Virgin and Mother, Mary is also a figure of the Church and her most perfect realisation.



### 3. Did St. Joseph marry a second time?

- According to St Matthew, when Mary virginally conceived Jesus, she was betrothed to St Joseph, and they were not yet living together (Matt 1:18). This happened during the time within the betrothal period which, among the Jews, involved such a strong and true commitment that the engaged couple were referred to as spouses. So strong a commitment indeed, that it could only be annulled by rejection.



**It seems more logical to believe that Joseph was a young man when he betrothed to the Most Holy Virgin Mary.**

► From St Matthew's Gospel, it is clear that the angel appeared to Joseph to explain that Mary has conceived a child by the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:20); and only then did Mary and Joseph marry and live together. The next few passages of this Gospel confirm this: Mary and Joseph share the escape into Egypt, settle later in Nazareth, and afterwards, they find Jesus among the doctors of the Law, in the Temple of Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-45).

► Furthermore, when St Luke describes the annunciation, he refers to Mary as "a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David". According to the Gospels, then, St Joseph was indeed married to the Most Holy Virgin Mary. That is certainly the only conclusion truly reflected in the historical tradition documented in the Gospels.

- Nevertheless, whether this was St Joseph's first or second marriage, or whether St Joseph was just an old widower who only took care of Mary, can only be part of speculative legends with no historical guarantee of authenticity.

► The first mention in these legends is found in the "Proto-gospel according to James", from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. This text tells us that Mary stayed in the Temple since she was three; and when she turned twelve, the priests searched for someone who could take care of her. The priests convened the widowers of the town, and when an extraordinary sign happened to Joseph's staff – a dove appeared from it – they handed custody of

Our Lady to Joseph. According to this legend, Joseph didn't take Mary as his spouse: when the angel appeared in Joseph's dreams, he does not say, as he did in Matthew's gospel, "Do not fear to take Mary your wife". Instead, the angel only says, "Be not afraid for this maiden" (XIV, 2).

► Other later apocrypha, known as the "pseudo-Matthew", perhaps from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, elaborates this story accepting that the priests said to Joseph: "to no other can she be joined in marriage" (VIII, 4), although it only refers to St Joseph as Mary's custodian.

► The fact that Mary was indeed betrothed to Joseph is, on the other hand, accepted in various other texts: in the "Book of Mary's Nativity" – a summary of the "pseudo-Matthew" apocrypha and also in the "Story of Joseph, the carpenter" (IV, 4-5).

- This diversity and lack of consensus confirm that there is not enough evidence to say that St Joseph was married before knowing Mary.

- It seems more logical to believe that Joseph was a young man when he betrothed to the Most Holy Virgin Mary, and that it was that his only marriage.

**Whether this was St Joseph's first or second marriage, or whether St Joseph was just an old widower who only took care of Mary, can only be part of speculative legends.**



## 4. Was Jesus single, married or widower?

• The facts preserved in the Gospels tell us that Jesus carried out his artisan job in Nazareth (Mark 6.3). When He was some thirty years old, He began his public ministry (Luke 3:23). During this time of ministry, there were some women who followed Him (Luke 8:2-3) and others with whom He was acquainted (Luke 10:38-42). Although at no time are we told that he lived a celibate life or was married or became a widower, the Gospels refer to his family, to his mother, to his brothers and sisters, but never to His “wife”. This silence is eloquent.

► Jesus was known as the “son of Joseph” (Luke 23:4,22, John 2:45; 6.42) and, when the people in Nazareth are surprised by his teaching they exclaim: “Is this not the carpenter Mary’s son, and brother of James and Joseph and of Judas and Simon? And his sisters, do they not live here among us?” (Luke 6.3).

► In no place is reference made to the fact that Jesus had or had had a wife. Tradition has never spoken of Jesus’ possible marriage. And it has not done so simply because it considered the reality of marriage insulting for someone like Jesus (who, incidentally, restored marriage to its original dignity, Matt 19:1-12) or because it is incompatible with the faith in Christ’s divinity.



**The Gospels refer to his family, to his mother, to his brothers and sisters, but never to His “wife”. This silence is eloquent.**

► Instead, tradition simply abided by historical reality. If there was a desire to silence aspects that could be compromising for the faith of the Church, why did it transmit the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John the Baptist who administered a baptism for the remission of sins? If the primitive Church had wanted to silence Jesus’ marriage, why didn’t it silence the presence of certain women among the people who were working with Him?

• In spite of all of this, views maintaining that Jesus was married have continued to exist. This has been so, because of the practice and doctrine common among rabbis of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. (See What was the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalen? for information about Jesus’ supposed marriage to her).

► As Jesus was a rabbi and celibacy was inconceivable among rabbis at the time, it is assumed that He had to be married. (There were exceptions,

like Rabbi Simon ben Azzai, who when accused of remaining single, said: “My soul is in love of the Torah. Others can take care of the world”, Talmud of Babylon. B Yeb. 63d).



**Among the Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century celibacy was practised.**

► It is because of this that some affirm that Jesus, like any pious Jew, would have been married when he was twenty and then would have abandoned His wife and children in order to carry out His mission.

• The answer to this objection is twofold:

► 1. There is evidence that among the Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century celibacy was practised.

- Flavius Josephus, Filon, and Phynius the Old, tell us that there were Essenes who practised celibacy, and we know that some from Qumran were celibate.

- Filon points out that the “therapists”, a group of ascetics from Egypt, led celibate lives.

- Also, in the tradition of Israel, some famous people such as Jeremiah, were celibate. Similarly, Moses, according to the rabbinical tradition, lived sexual abstinence in order to maintain a close relationship with God.

- John the Baptist never married.

- Though celibacy was not very common, it was not something unheard of.

► 2. Even if nobody lived celibacy in Israel, we would not have to assume therefore that Jesus was married.

- The evidence shows that He wanted to remain celibate and there are many reasons that make this option commendable and fitting, precisely because being celibate underlines Jesus’ uniqueness in relation to the Judaism of his time.

- Also it is more in accord with his mission. It is obvious that without devaluing marriage, or demanding celibacy from his followers, the cause of the Kingdom of God (Matt 19:12), the love for God that he embodies, are above everything else. Jesus wanted to be celibate in order to convey better that very love.

## 5. Current situation of historical research of Jesus

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Today we have a better understanding of the literary and historical context in which Jesus lived and in which the Gospels were written.

- Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when modern methods in historical science began to be applied to evangelical texts, research on Jesus has gone through various stages. We have by now, overcome the rationalistic prejudices prevalent when this research began and the hypercritical methods prevalent through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, today the situation is more positive and open. We have also overcome the scepticism that dominated research in the middle of last century (see What do we know about Jesus?).

- Today we have a better understanding of the literary and historical context in which Jesus lived and in which the Gospels were written. Researchers are more familiar with the Jewish writings at the time of Jesus and with the Gospel writers (commentaries on the biblical books and translations from Aramaic, the Qumran texts, rabbinical literature, etc). This has allowed experts to illustrate, verify and understand more deeply the Gospel texts and the image of Jesus in his time.

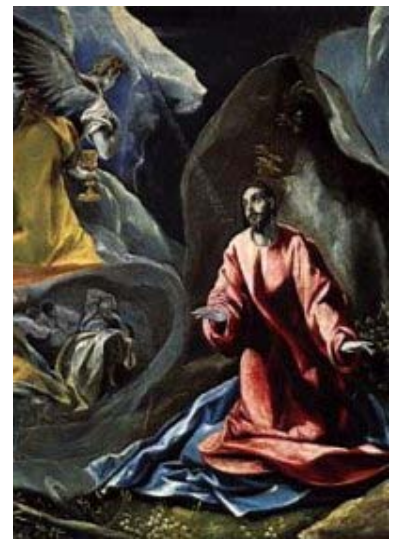
- Our historical knowledge of Jesus is, therefore, increasingly more solid. Because of this, the Gospels are more worthy of credibility and the impartial historian can discover in them a great deal of the gestures, words, actions of Jesus, through which he manifested the uniqueness of his person and mission.

- Other sources from the Greek and Roman worlds have provided a better understanding of the Hellenistic influences in Galilee at the time of Jesus.

► Moreover, the testimonies of the apocryphal writings, likely to have been written after the canonical books, and other Christian and Jewish texts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, have been helpful in analysing the traditions on which those books are based. They have also helped to put into context the contents of the Gospels.

► Archaeological findings have also been useful in the research effort. Especially interesting among those are the digs undertaken in Galilee. These have been useful to illustrate our knowledge of the Hellenistic influence in Palestine in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. In addition to a better understanding of the sources, the use of new methods and exegetical efforts (literary, canonical, etc) have helped overcome the difficulties caused by the rigidity and limitations of the historical method used in the past.

Researchers are more familiar with the Jewish writings at the time of Jesus and with the Gospel writers (commentaries on the biblical books and translations from Aramaic, the Qumran texts, rabbinical literature, etc).





## 6. What sort of historical credibility does the Bible have?

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- The books of Sacred Scripture teach firmly, with integrity and without error, the truth that God desired recorded for our salvation. They speak, then, of true facts.

- But facts can be truly expressed by means of different literary genre, each one having its own style of telling things.



**Facts can be truly expressed by means of different literary genre, each one having its own style of telling things.**

► For example, when the Psalms say that “the heavens proclaim the glory of God and the firmament announces the work of His hands” (Ps 19:2) it does not claim that the heavens pronounce words, or that God has hands. Rather, it expresses the true fact that nature gives testimony to God who is its creator.

- History is a literary genre that at the present time has particular characteristics, different from those found in the literary styles of the old Near East, and even in Graeco-Latin antiquity, that were used to narrate events.

► All the books of the Bible, of the Old, as well as of the New Testament, were written two to three thousand years ago. So, to describe them as “historical” in the meaning which we now give to that word would be an anachronism, since they were not thought or written with conceptual schemes currently in use.

- Nevertheless, though they cannot be described as “historical” in the current meaning of that word it’s not that they transmit false or deceptive information, and that they therefore do not deserve credibility.

They do transmit truths, and they make reference to facts that really happened in time and in the world in which we live, told in a way of speaking and expression that is different, but equally valid.

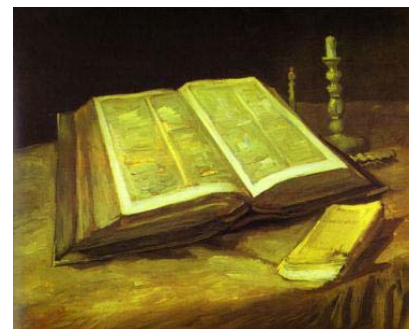
- Those books were not written to satisfy our curiosity about irrelevant details of the message that they transmit, as, for example, to tell to us what the characters ate, how they dressed, or what they fancied. What they provide, mainly, is an evaluation of the facts from the point of view of the faith of Israel and of the Christian faith.

- The Biblical texts allow one to know what happened even better than direct witnesses of the events, since they could not have had all the data necessary to evaluate fully what they were witnessing.

► For example, a person who walked past Golgotha the day they crucified Jesus would have been aware that the execution of one condemned to death by the Romans was being carried out.

► But the reader of the Gospels, in addition to that reality, knows that the crucified person is, in fact, the Messiah and that, at that precise moment, the redemption of all humanity was taking place.

**Those books were not written to satisfy our curiosity about irrelevant details of the message that they transmit.**



## 7. Who were the evangelists?

- The evangelists were those who wrote the gospels. They were either Apostles or men who were close to the apostles (cf Dei Verbum, 19). What is important in the gospels is that they give us the preaching of the Apostles. This does justice to what has been received through tradition:

- The authors of the gospels are Matthew, John, Luke and Mark.



**What is important, therefore, is not the specific person who wrote the gospel, but the apostolic authority behind each one of them.**

- Of these, the first two feature in the lists of the twelve apostles (Matt 10:2-4 and parallel accounts) and the other two appear as Saint Paul's and Saint Peter's disciples, respectively.

- Modern research, after a critical analysis of this tradition, does not find it a great issue to attribute to Mark and Luke the authorship of their respective gospels. However, it does analyse with more critical eyes the authorship of Matthew and John. It is said that such attribution reflects more the apostolic tradition from which these writings proceed, and not that they themselves were the authors of the text.

- What is important, therefore, is not the specific person who wrote the gospel, but the apostolic authority behind each one of them.

- Towards the middle of the 2nd century, Saint Justin spoke of the "recollections of the apostles or gospels" (Apologetics, 1,66,3) that were being read at liturgical meetings.

- With this, we can understand two things:
  - the apostolic origin of these writings, and that
  - they were collected to be read in public.

- Later, still in the 2nd century, other writers tell us that the apostolic gospels are four in number and only four.

- So, Origin writes: "The Church has four gospels, the heretics have very many; among these one has been written 'according to the Egyptians', another 'according to the twelve Apostles'. Basilides has dared to write a gospel and put it under his name (...). I know of a gospel called 'according to Thomas' and 'according to Matthias'; and we read many others" (Homily 1 on Luke, PG 13, 1802).

- Similar expressions are found in Saint Irenaeus, who also adds in a certain place: "The Word, the Artificer of all, He who sits upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit" (Against heresies, 3, 2,8-9). With this expression - the Gospel under four aspects - he states a very important fact: The Gospel is one, but the form is presented by four views.

- The same idea is expressed in the titles of the gospels: Their authors are not indicated, as in other writings from the same era, with the origin (gospel of...") but with the expression *kata* ("Gospel according to..."). In this way, the Gospel is shown to be one: Jesus Christ's. However it is witnessed in four ways that come from the Apostles and from the disciples of the Apostles.

- What is also indicated is a plurality in unity.

**The Gospel is one, but the form is presented by four views.**



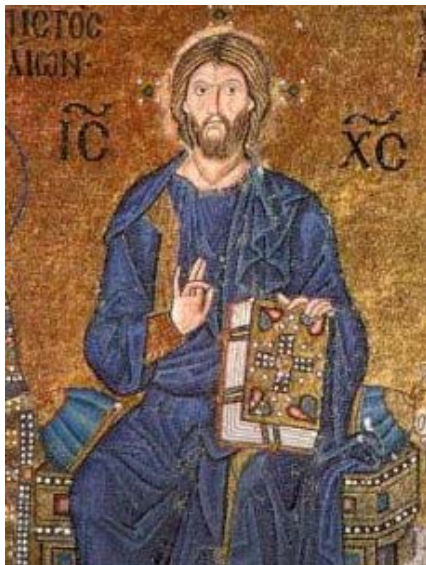


## 8. How were the first gospels written?

- The Church unhesitatingly asserts that the four canonical gospels “faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught” (Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution Dei Verbum, 19).

► These four gospels “are of apostolic origin. For what the Apostles preached in fulfilment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith” (ibid, 18).

**the gospels were written by the apostles (Matthew and John) or by disciples of the apostles (Mark and Luke), but always having collected the preaching of the gospel from the apostles.**



► Ancient Christian writers explained how the evangelists did this work. St Irenaeus, for example, says: “Matthew published among the Hebrews, in their own tongue, a written form of the gospel, while Peter and Paul preached the gospel in Rome and founded the Church. It was after his departure that Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also transmitted in writing what Peter preached. Luke, Paul’s companion, also wrote in a book what Paul preached. Then John, our Lord’s disciple, the same one who laid his face on his breast (John 13:23), also published the gospel while living in Ephesus” (Against heresies III, 1,1).

► Similar commentaries can be found in Papias of Hierapolis or Clement of Alexandria (cf Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History, 3, 39,15:6, 14, 5-7): the gospels were written by the apostles (Matthew and John) or by disciples of the apostles (Mark and Luke), but always having collected the preaching of the gospel from the apostles.

- Modern exegesis, with the help of a detailed study of the gospel texts, has explained in a minor way, this process.

► Our Lord Jesus Christ sent us his disciples not to write but to preach the gospel.

► The Apostles and the apostolic communities did so, and, to facilitate the work of evangelisation, they put in writing part of this teaching.

► Finally, in the moment when the apostles and others in their generation started to disappear, “The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches” (Dei Verbum, 19).

Therefore, it can be said that the four gospels are faithful to the Apostles’ preaching about Jesus and also that their preaching is faithful to what Jesus said and did. This is the way we can say that the gospels are faithful to Jesus.

► The names that the ancient Christian writings give to these texts – “Recollections of the Apostles”, “Commentaries, Words about Our Lord” (cf St Justine, Apology, 1,66; Dialogue with Trifon, 100) – lean towards this meaning.

► With these gospel writings we have access to what the Apostles preached about Jesus Christ.



**The Apostles and the apostolic communities did so, and, to facilitate the work of evangelisation, they put in writing part of this teaching.**

## 9. What are the canonical and the apocryphal gospels? How many are there?

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• The canonical gospels are the ones which the Church has recognised as divinely inspired and which faithfully hand on the apostolic tradition. There are four, and only four: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

► At the end of the second century we find this stated explicitly by St Irenaeus of Lyon (“Against the Heresies”, 3, 11, 8-9). The Church has always maintained this, eventually proposing it as a dogma of faith when defining the canon of Holy Scripture at the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

► The composition of these gospels is rooted in what the apostles saw and heard in Jesus’ company and in his appearances to them after his resurrection.



**The apocryphal gospels did not have the apostolic guarantee of the four recognised gospels.**

In fulfilment of the Lord’s command, the apostles immediately began to preach the good news (or gospel) about him and the salvation he brought mankind. Small Christian communities began to spring up in Palestine and in other places (Antioch, the cities of Asia Minor, Rome, etc.)

In these communities the tradition took the form of accounts or teachings about Jesus, always under the guidance of the apostles who had witnessed them. At a third stage these traditions were written down and put together to form a sort of biography of Jesus, giving rise to the gospels for the use of the communities for whom they were intended.

► The first gospel seems to have been that of Mark, or perhaps a Hebrew or Aramaic version of Matthew somewhat shorter than the one we actually have; the other three imitated its general style. In doing this, each evangelist chose

some things from among the many which were handed on, synthesised others, and tailored it all for the benefit of his immediate readers.



**The canonical gospels are the ones which the Church has recognised as divinely inspired.**

That the four were regarded as apostolic is seen by the fact that they were received and handed on as written by the apostles themselves or their immediate disciples – Mark being the disciple of St Peter, and Luke of St Paul.

• The apocryphal gospels are those which the Church did not accept as part of the genuine apostolic tradition, even though they themselves claim to have been written by one of the apostles.

► They began to circulate quite early on – they are already referred to in the second half of the second century. They did not have the apostolic guarantee of the four recognised gospels; and moreover many of them contain ideas which are at variance with the apostolic tradition.

► “Apocryphal” originally meant “secret”, in the sense that they were written for a special group of initiates who circulated them among themselves. Later it came to mean spurious and even heretical.

► With the passage of time the number of apocryphal writings grew, mainly to fill in details of Jesus’ life which were not provided by the canonical gospels (for example, the apocryphal infancy gospels), and also to place under the name of an apostle teachings which were at variance with common Church tradition (for example, the gospel of Thomas).

► Based on information gleaned from the Fathers of the Church, on extant apocrypha themselves, or manuscript references, the number of apocryphal gospels is known to be in excess of fifty. Origen of Alexandria (+ 245) wrote: “The Church has four gospels, the heretics many”.

## 10. What is the difference between the canonical gospels and the apocryphal gospels?

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- While the inspired nature of the canonical gospels is itself not demonstrable, the first demonstrable difference is external to the gospels themselves:



**The apocryphal gospels, though used sporadically by scattered groups, never managed to gain acceptance nor were they recognised by the universal Church.**

- ▶ The canonical gospels are part of the biblical canon and the apocryphal gospels are not.
- ▶ This means that the canonical gospels were received by the churches of the East and the West as the genuine apostolic tradition in the generation immediately after the apostles;

- ▶ The apocryphal gospels, though used sporadically by scattered groups, never managed to gain acceptance nor were they recognised by the universal Church.

- ▶ An important reason for this, as can be demonstrated historically, is that the canonical gospels were written during the apostolic period, understood in the broad sense, that is, while the apostles or their immediate disciples were still living. This can be deduced from references to them by Christian writers of the following generation, and also from the fact that around 140 A.D. a harmonisation was produced of excerpts from the four canonically recognised gospels (Tatian).

- ▶ References to the apocryphal gospels, on the other hand, are found only later on, around the end of the second century.

- Apocryphal manuscripts with a text style similar to the gospels, some from the middle of the second century, are very fragmentary, a sign that the works they represent were not sufficiently highly esteemed to have been passed on carefully to subsequent generations.

- Apocryphal manuscripts which have survived

or which have been found recently are very different from the canonical gospels, both in form and content.

- ▶ Those which were known throughout the patristic and medieval period are full of stories of a legendary or fantastical nature. They try to meet the demands of popular piety by giving detailed accounts about events which the canonical gospels either do not mention at all or treat very summarily.

- ▶ In general they are in agreement with Church teaching. They contain stories about St Joachim and St Anne and the birth of the Blessed Virgin (Nativity of Mary), about how a midwife discovered Mary's virginity (Proto-Gospel of James), the miracles worked by Jesus as a child (Gospel of Pseudo-Thomas), etc.



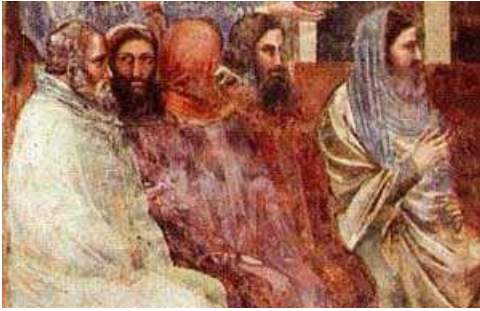
**The apocryphal gospels try to meet the demands of popular piety by giving detailed accounts about events which the canonical gospels either do not mention at all or treat very summarily.**

- ▶ Very different are the apocryphal gospels of Nag Hammadi (Egypt), which are clearly Gnostic and heretical. They take the form of secret teachings of Jesus (Coptic Gospel of Thomas), or revelations of the risen Lord about the origin of the material world (apocryphal Gospel of John), or the ascension of the soul (Gospel of Mary Magdalene), or are a turgid weave of ideas taken possibly from homilies or catecheses (Gospel of Philip). Although some of them may be fairly ancient, perhaps from the second century, the differences from the canonical gospels are immediately apparent.



## 11. What do the apocryphal gospels say?

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There are three types of apocryphal gospels that became common in the Church from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

• There are three types of apocryphal gospels that became common in the Church from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century onwards:

▶ those of which only a few papyrus fragments remain and that resemble the canonical gospels to a large extent.

▶ those that have been preserved intact, and narrate pious stories pertaining to the life of our Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary; and

▶ those that have been put under the name of an apostle, but promulgate doctrines contrary to what the Church believed to be true according to apostolic tradition.

• There are few examples of the first type and they scarcely say anything new, perhaps because little is known of their content.

▶ One such example is the “Gospel of Peter” which narrates the Passion of our Lord.

• Among the second type, the oldest one is the so-called “Infancy Gospel of James”

▶ This document narrates that the Blessed Virgin Mary remained in the Temple from the age of three and how Saint Joseph, who was a widower, was designated to look after her from the age of twelve. The priests of the Temple had gathered all the widowers together and Joseph was the one chosen when a dove miraculously emerged from his staff.

▶ Later apocryphal gospels such as the “Pseudo Matthew” also contain this story, saying that the staff blossomed miraculously.

▶ The “Infancy Gospel” also describes the birth of Jesus when St Joseph was on his way to Bethlehem with Mary. We are told that the holy Patriarch searched for a midwife who confirmed the virginity of Our Lady after childbirth.

▶ In a similar vein, other apocryphal gospels such as “the Nativity of Mary” narrate how Our Lady was born to Joaquim and Anna when they were already advanced in age.

▶ The infancy of our Lord and the miracles he performed as a child, are told in the “pseudo-Gospel of Thomas”.

▶ The death of St Joseph is the principal theme of the “History of Joseph the Carpenter”.

▶ In the later Arabic apocryphal gospels of the infancy we read about the Three Wise Men and we are even given their names in an Ethiopian text.

▶ A well-loved motive of other apocryphal gospels, like the “Book of Repose” or the “Pseudo Meliton”, was the death and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, where we are told that she died surrounded by the Apostles, and how our Lord took her away in a celestial chariot.

▶ All these pious legends had wide circulation in the Middle Ages and served as inspiration for many artists.

• The third type of apocryphal gospels contained heretical doctrines.

▶ The early Fathers of the Church quoted them in order to refute them, and named them either according to their author, such as the one of Marcion, Basilides or Valentinus or according to their intended audience such as Hebrews or Egyptians.

▶ On other occasions, the same early Fathers accuse these heretics of expounding their own doctrines under the name of an Apostle, such as James or Thomas.

▶ The information gained from the Fathers of the Church was confirmed by the discovery of some forty “gnostic” works in Nag Hammadi (Egypt) in 1945. They mostly contain presumed secret revelations of Jesus, and lack any type of credence. They tend to imagine God the Creator as a lesser and perverse god (a Demiurge) and the acquisition of salvation on the part of man as being due to the knowledge of its divine origin.

## 12. Who are the Gnostics?

- The term "Gnostic" originates from the Greek word "gnosis" meaning knowledge.

- ▶ A Gnostic is therefore a person who acquires a special knowledge and lives in accordance with it. In this respect, the term "gnosis" does not carry any negative connotation.

- ▶ Some of the early Fathers of the Church such as Clement of Alexandria and St Irenaeus speak about 'gnosis' in the sense of the knowledge of Jesus Christ that we acquire through faith: "the true gnosis" – writes St Irenaeus – "is the doctrine of the Apostles" (*Against Heresies* IV, 33, 8).



The term "Gnostic" acquired a negative meaning when these very early Fathers applied it to designate certain prominent heretics prevalent between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

- The term "Gnostic" acquired a negative meaning when these very early Fathers applied it to designate certain prominent heretics prevalent between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

- ▶ St Irenaeus was the first one to use it in this sense in order to refer to the heresy of Simon the Samaritan (Acts 8:9-24). He mentions that Simon's followers spread throughout Alexandria, Asia Minor and Rome with the result that "a multitude of Gnostics have sprung up, and have been manifested like mushrooms growing out of the ground" (*Against Heresies* I, 29,1). These in turn, St Irenaeus continued, gave rise to the followers of Valentinus who are the ones he tackles in a more direct manner.

- ▶ He explains the abundance and diversity of sects by saying that "numbers of them – indeed, we may say all – desire themselves to be teachers, and to break off from the particular heresy in which they have been involved. Forming one set of doctrines out of a totally different system of opinions, and then again others from others, they insist upon teaching

something new, declaring themselves the inventors of any sort of opinion which they may have been able to call into existence" (*Against Heresies*, I, 28, 1)

- From Irenaeus' information and from that of the other Fathers who also had to combat these heresies (especially St Hippolytus of Rome and St Epiphanius of Salamina), we can see that there was such a proliferation of splinter groups (Simonians, Nicolaitians, Ophites, Naassenes, Sethians, Peratae, Basilidians, Carpocratines, Valentinians, Marcosians...) falling under the heading "gnostic", that we can only apply this term in a most generic manner.

- ▶ From the around the forty or so "gnostic" heretical works discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi (upper Egypt) we gain a similar impression; each work contains its own distinct heretical direction.

- Of the varieties described above, the best known are the Valentinian Gnostics, who are also the ones who exercised the most influence.

- ▶ Acting within the Church they were like "a beast poised to spring" says St Irenaeus.

- ▶ They had the same Sacred Scriptures as the Church, but they interpreted them differently. The true God, according to them, was not the Creator of the Old Testament; they distinguished several Christs from among the beings of the heavenly world (Aeons).

- ▶ They considered that salvation is obtained:

- by the knowledge of oneself as a divine spark enclosed in matter;

- that the redemption of Christ consists in awakening ourselves to this knowledge;

- and that only spiritual men (*pneumatiokoi*) are destined for salvation.

- ▶ The elitist character of the sect, and its undervaluing of the created world, make up, among other traits, the mindset of these heretics, the most significant representatives of the "gnostics".

## 13. What do Roman and Jewish sources tell us about Jesus?

- The first references made to Jesus in literary documents other than Christian writings are those by Hellenist and Roman historians who lived during the second half of the first century or the first half of the second, and therefore not long after the events took place.



**The most ancient text in which Jesus is mentioned, albeit implicitly, dates back to about the year 73.**

- ▶ The most ancient text in which Jesus is mentioned, albeit implicitly, dates back to about the year 73, and was written by a stoic philosopher from Samosata in Syria called Mara bar Sarapion. He refers to Jesus as the “wise King” of the Jews, and perhaps in reference to the antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount, remarks that it was said he promulgated new laws (Matt 5:21-48). He observes that having put him to death, was of no benefit to the Jews.

- ▶ The most ancient and well-known direct reference to Jesus comes from the historian Flavius Josephus (*Antiquitates iudaicae* XVIII, 63-64) towards the end of the first century. It is also known as the Testimonium Flavianum. This text, surviving in all Greek manuscripts from among Josephus’ work, goes so far as to suggest that Jesus could be the Messiah, causing many writers believe that it was inserted by medieval copyists.

- Today, researchers believe Josephus’ original words to have almost coincided with those retained in an Arab version of this text, quoted by Agapitos – a tenth-century bishop of Hierapolis. He says the following: “At that time, a wise man called Jesus, admirable in his conduct, was renowned for his virtue. Many Jews and other peoples were his disciples. Pilate condemned him to death by crucifixion. But those who had become his disciples did not renounce their discipleship and told of how he appeared to them alive three days after the crucifixion, and that because of this, he could be the Messiah of whom the prophets had said such marvellous things”.

- ▶ Some references to the figure of Jesus and to his followers’ deeds are to be found among the work of second-century Roman writers (Pliny the Younger, *Epistolarum ad Traianum Imperatorem cum eiusdem Responsis liber* X, 96; Tacitus, *Anales* XV, 44; Suetonius, *The life of Claudius*, 25.4)

- Jewish sources, particularly the Talmud, also contain allusions to Jesus and to certain things that were said about him, making it possible to substantiate some historical details using sources which are not suspect in terms of Christian manipulation.

- ▶ Joseph Klausner, a Jewish researcher, sums up some of the conclusions which can be drawn from the Talmudic theories about Jesus: “There are some reliable theories regarding the fact that his name was Yeshua (Yeshu) of Nazareth; that he practised sorcery (that is to say that he performed miracles, as was common in those days) and seduction and led Israel astray; that he mocked the words of the wise and discussed Scripture in the same way as the Pharisees; that he had five disciples; that he said he had not come to revoke the Law, nor to add anything to it; that he was hung upon a piece of wood (crucified) as a false authority and seducer on the eve of the Passover (which fell on a Saturday); and that his disciples cured disease in his name” (J.Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.44)

- Although, from an historical point of view, Klausner’s résumé and his observations would require clarification, they demonstrate sufficiently that what can be deduced from these sources, if not comprehensive, is certainly significant. Checking this information against that provided by the Roman writers allows us to affirm with historical certainty that Jesus existed, and even to become familiar with the most important facts about his life.



**Jewish sources, particularly the Talmud, also contain allusions to Jesus and to certain things that were said about him.**



## 14. What do the Qumran manuscripts tell us?

● In 1947, two Bedouin shepherds accidentally came across a clay jar containing seven parchment scrolls in a cave in the Wadi Qumran, beside the Dead Sea. Subsequently, many scrolls and thousands of fragments were found in 11 caves, written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. It is believed that they were composed between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and the year 70 AD, the year of the destruction of Jerusalem.



● Some 800 writings have been reconstructed from among several thousand fragments, since very few complete documents have been recovered. There are fragments from every book of the Old Testament, with the exception of the Book of Esther, from the many already known non-canonical Jewish books and even from some, until then, unknown books, and several writings belonging to the Essenes, a sect which had withdrawn to the desert.

● Undoubtedly, the most important documents are the Bible texts. Until the discovery of the Qumran texts, the earliest Hebrew manuscripts we possessed dated from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Consequently, it was natural to suspect that uncomfortable words or phrases featuring in the original texts had been defaced, lengthened or modified.

▶ The discoveries prove that the original texts coincide with their medieval counterparts – despite dating from almost 1,000 years earlier.

▶ The few disparities they present match to a great extent some already authenticated by the Greek version, known as the Septuagint, or by the Samaritan Pentateuch. Several other documents have helped demonstrate that there were other ways of interpreting Scripture (and legal norms) different to that common among Sadducees and Pharisees.

● There are no New Testament texts or Christian writings of any kind among the Qumran texts. At some point, there was a discussion about whether some Greek words on two small fragments of papyrus found there belonged to the New Testament, but it seems not to be the case. This aside, further possibilities of finding Christian documents in those caves have been ruled out.

● Neither does it seem that the New Testament contains any influence from the Jewish texts found there. Today, experts agree that in the

doctrinal sphere, Qumran did not have any influence upon the origins of Christianity, for the minority Dead Sea Sect had cut themselves off from society, while Jesus and the first Christians were immersed in the Jewish society of their time and were in touch with the people.

▶ The documents have served solely to clarify some common terms and expressions of that period which were proving difficult to understand today, and to comprehend better the extremely pluralist Jewish environment into which Christianity was born.

● During the first half of the 1990's, two great myths (now dismissed) were in circulation. One claimed that the manuscripts contained doctrines that contradicted Judaism or Christianity and that consequentially the Chief Rabbinate and the Vatican had come to an agreement to prevent their publication. All the documents are now published, and it is clear that far from being of a religious kind, the publication difficulties encountered were of a scientific nature.

▶ The second myth is more convincing, because it was apparently backed by science. Barbara Thiering, a university professor from Sydney and Robert Eisenman, a California State University professor, published several books comparing the Qumran documents with the New Testament, through which they came to the conclusion that both were written in code and cannot be interpreted literally, but rather have a secret significance which must be deciphered.

- They suggest that the founder of the Qumran group may have been John the Baptist and his adversary, Jesus (according to Thiering), or that the Teacher of Justice may have been James and his rival, Paul. They based their theories on the fact that in the texts, reference is made to people using unfamiliar terminology which is meaningless to us, such as Teacher of Justice, Impious Priest, The Deceitful, Furious Lion, sons of light and sons of darkness, the house of abomination, etc.

- Today the experts accept no such claims. If we do not yet understand the scope of this terminology, it is not due to its containing esoteric doctrines. It is obvious that the Qumranites' contemporaries were familiar with these expressions and that even if the Dead Sea scrolls contain doctrines and norms that differ from those upheld by official Judaism, they have no secret key and do not conceal unspeakable theories.

## 15. What is the Nag Hammadi library?

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- The Nag Hammadi Library is a collection of thirteen ancient leather-covered codices containing over fifty texts.



**These codices are heretical in character, reflecting various Gnostic tendencies.**

► These were accidentally discovered in an earthenware jar by a group of farmers in upper Egypt in 1945, near Quenoboskion, a village 6 miles from the modern city of Nag Hammadi.

► They are now kept in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, and are described with the acronym NHC (Nag Hammadi Codices).

► There are another 3 codices which allegedly belong to the same collection, dated from 18<sup>th</sup> century and which are kept in London (Codex Aksewianus, usually known as Pistis Sophia), in Oxford (Codex Brucianus) and in Berlin (Codex Berolinensis). These three codices, although are not as old, come from the same area.

- The NHC were written up around 330 A.D. and buried towards the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century/the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

► These codices have around 50 works written in Coptic – the Egyptian language spoken by Christians there and written with Greek characters – which are translations from the Greek, and usually not very reliable.

► Nearly all the works are heretical in character, reflecting various Gnostic tendencies. Most of these were already known because they were argued against by the Fathers of the Church, specially St Irenaeus, St Hippolito of Rome and St Epiphanius.

► The main contribution of these codices is that we now have direct access to the proper Gnostic works and it can be seen that the Church Fathers knew very well what they were up against.

- From the literary point of view, one finds in

NHC the most diverse genres: theological and philosophical treatises, apocalypses, gospels, prayers, acts of the Apostles, Letters, etc. At times, the titles are not as in the original, but have been added by editors depending on the content.

► With respect to the works that carry the title “gospel”, one can notice that they have little resemblance to the canonical gospels, as they do not represent a description of the life of our Lord, but instead relate the secret revelations that Jesus allegedly related to the disciples. For example:

–the gospel of St Thomas has 114 quotes from Jesus, one after another other, without any narrative text other than that of some questions the disciples sometimes asked;

– the “Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)” narrates the revelation of the glorious Christ she had about the ascension of the soul.

- From the point of view of their doctrines, the codices in general contain Christian Gnostic works; although some of them, like the “Apocryphal John” – one of the most important since it is appears in four of codices – the Gnostic myth forms its nucleus while the Christian features appear to be secondary.

**The codices in general contain Christian Gnostic works.**



► In this myth, the first chapters of Genesis are interpreted the other way round, presenting God the Creator, or Demiurge, as an inferior and perverse god who has created matter.

► But in the codices there are also Gnostic works which are not Christian and which collect a Graeco-pagan gnosis developed around the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, considered to be the great revealer of knowledge (“Discourse 8 and 9”). This type of gnosis was already partly known before such discoveries were made. In NHC VI there is even a fragment of a rewriting from “The Republic” by Plato.

## 16. Who was Mary Magdalene?

- The Gospels do not tell us very much about Mary Magdalene. She was one of a group of women who followed Jesus and who provided for him out of their means (Luke 8:2).

- ▶ She was a woman called Mary who came from Migdal Nunaya, Tarihuaea in Greek, a small town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, some 3 miles north of Tiberias.

- ▶ Jesus had expelled seven demons from her (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9), which is the same as saying “all the demons”. This could mean possession by the devil, but it could also mean a bodily or spiritual sickness.

- The synoptic Gospels mention her as being the first of a group of women who observed the crucifixion of Jesus from a distance (Mark 15:40-41) and who were sitting opposite the tomb (Matt 27:61) when they were burying Jesus (Mark 15:47). They tell us that very early in the morning on the day after the sabbath Mary Magdalene and other women returned to the tomb to anoint the body with spices which they had bought (Mark 16:1-7). Then an angel informs them that Jesus has risen, and instructs them to go and tell the disciples.

- Saint John gives us the same information with slight variations. Mary Magdalene is beside the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross (John 19:25). Early on the day after the sabbath, while it was still dark, she comes to the tomb, sees that the stone has been taken away and goes to tell Peter, thinking that someone has stolen the body of Jesus (John 20:1-2). She returns to the tomb and is weeping there when she meets Jesus who tells her to announce to his disciples that he is to ascend to his Father (John 20:11-18). That is her glory.

- That is why the tradition of the Church in the East has called her “*isapostolos*” (equal to or equivalent to an apostle), and the Church in the West “*apostola apostolorum*” (apostle of apostles). There is a tradition in the East that she was buried in Ephesus and that her relics were taken to Constantinople in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

- Mary Magdalene has often been identified with other women in the Gospels.

- ▶ From the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Latin Church they tended to identify Mary Magdalene as the sinful woman who, in the house of Simon the Pharisee, bathed the feet of Jesus with her tears (Luke 7:36-50).

- ▶ Some Fathers of the Church and ecclesiastical writers, harmonising the Gospels, had already identified that sinful woman as Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who, in Bethany anoints the head

of Jesus with perfume (John 12:1-11). Matthew and Mark do not mention the name of Mary, but just say that it was a woman, and that the anointing took place in the house of Simon the leper (Mt 26, 6-13).



- ▶ As a result, due largely to Saint Gregory the Great, in the West the idea spread that the three women were all the same person. However, nothing in the Gospels indicates that Mary Magdalene is the same person as the Mary who anoints Jesus in Bethany, because it seems that the latter is the sister of Lazarus (John 12:2-3). Nor can one conclude that she is the sinner who according to Saint Luke bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears. In this case, however, the identification is understandable since Saint Luke, immediately after the account of Jesus forgiving this woman, says that Jesus was helped by some women, among whom was Mary Magdalene from whom he had expelled seven demons (Luke 8:2).

- ▶ Furthermore, Jesus praises the love of the sinful woman: “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much” (Luke 7:47), and we also discern great love in the encounter which Mary has with Jesus after the resurrection (John 20:14-18). In any case, even if it were the same woman, her sinful past is not a dishonour. Peter was unfaithful to Jesus, and Paul was a persecutor of Christians. Her greatness lies not in her being impeccable, but in her love.

- Because of her prominent role in the Gospel she received special attention from some fringe groups of the primitive Church. These were basically Gnostic sects whose writings gathered together secret revelations of Jesus after the resurrection and made use of the figure of Mary for transmitting his ideas. They are stories that have no historical foundation.

- ▶ Fathers of the Church, ecclesiastical writers and other works highlight the role of Mary as a disciple of the Lord and proclaimer of the Gospel. From the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards some fictitious stories appeared which exalted her and which spread mainly in France. It is there that the legend grew up, which has no historical foundation, that Mary Magdalene, Lazarus and some others, when the persecution of the Christians began, went from Jerusalem to Marseille and evangelised Provence. According to this legend Mary died in Aix-en-Provence or Saint Maximin and her relics were taken to Vezelay.



## 17. What was the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene?



**It is clear from the Gospels that Mary Magdalene had a great love for Jesus. She had been freed by him from possession by seven devils, had followed him as a disciple.**

- It is clear from the Gospels that Mary Magdalene had a great love for Jesus. She had been freed by him from possession by seven devils, had followed him as a disciple, ministering to him from her means (Luke 8:2-3), and had been with Mary, the Mother of Jesus and the other women when Jesus was crucified (Mark 15:40-41). She was, according to the Gospels, the first person to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection, after searching for him tearfully (John 20:11-18). Hence the veneration which the Church has had for her as a witness to the risen Christ. (See: "Who was Mary Magdalene?"). From these Gospel passages one cannot conclude that she was a sinner, and much less that she was the wife of Jesus.

- Those who claim that she was the wife of Jesus rely on some apocryphal gospels. All of them, with the possible exception of part of the Gospel of Thomas, were written after the canonical Gospels and are not historical in character, but were written to transmit Gnostic teachings. According to these works, which are not properly speaking Gospels but rather writings that contain what are said to be secret revelations of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection, Mariam (or Marianne or Mariham – the name Magdalene does not appear except in a few books) was the one who best understood those revelations. That is why she is Jesus' favourite disciple and receives from him a special revelation.

- ▶ The opposition which she faces from the apostles because she is a woman (according to some of these writings: The Gospel of Thomas, Dialogues of the Saviour, Pistis Sophia, The Gospel of Mary) reflects the negative attitude of some of the gnostics to the feminine and to Mary as an important disciple. Nevertheless, some people like to see this opposition as a reflection of the attitude of the official Church at the time, against the spiritual leadership of women as proposed by those groups. None of this is demonstrable.

- ▶ This opposition is more likely to have been a conflict of doctrines: Peter and the other apostles confronting the ideas that these gnostic groups were putting forward in the name of Mariam. In any case,

having recourse to Mary was a way of justifying their gnostic ideas.

- ▶ In other apocryphal gospels, especially the Gospel of Philip, Marian (this time she is also cited with her name of origin, Magalene) is a model of gnosticism, precisely because of her femininity. She is the spiritual symbol of discipleship of Christ and of perfect union with him. In this context they speak of a kiss between Jesus and Mary (if the text is really to be understood in that way), symbolising that union, since through that kiss, which was a kind of sacrament superior to baptism and to the eucharist, the gnostic engendered himself as a gnostic. The whole tone of these writings is quite foreign to any kind of sexual implications.

- ▶ If, according to the gospel of Judas, Jesus himself orders the apostle to betray him, it is because, by dying, the divine spirit which was in him would finally be able to liberate itself from involvement of the flesh and re-ascend to heaven. Marriage oriented to births is to be avoided;



woman will be saved only if the "feminine principle" (thelus) personified by her, is transformed into the masculine principle, that is, if she ceases to be woman.

- No serious scholar takes these Gnostic texts as historical evidence of a sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. It is very sad that that accusation, which has no historical foundation – not even the Christians of that time found themselves having to defend themselves against it – should resurface every now and again as though it were a great novelty.

- ▶ The huge misunderstanding is the fact that these writings are used to make them say exactly the opposite of what they intended. The Gnostic vision – a mixture of Platonic dualism and Eastern doctrines, cloaked in biblical ideas – holds that the material world is an illusion, the work of the God of the Old Testament, who is an evil god, or at least inferior; Christ did not die on the cross, because he never assumed, except in appearance, a human body, the latter being unworthy of God (Docetism). The strange thing is that today there are those who believe they see in these writings the exaltation of the feminine principle, of sexuality, of the full and uninhibited enjoyment of this material world!

## 18. What does the “Gospel according to Mary (Magdalene)” say?

- What is known as the “Gospel according to Mary (Magdalene)” is a Gnostic document, originally written in Greek, found in Oxyrhynchus ( in northern Egypt) as two fragmented texts:

- a papyrus from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (P.Ryl. III 463 y P.Oxy. L 3525),

- and another fragment translated to Coptic<sup>1</sup> from the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Papyrus Berolinensis 8502). Both were published between the years 1938 and 1983;

- but the original text was very likely written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

- ▶ Mary, probably Mary Magdalene – although she is always referred to only as Mary – is seen as a source of “secret revelation”, since she seems to maintain a close relationship with the Lord.



**We could reason that an idea proposed from a sectarian group should not be extrapolated in an attempt to understand more general circumstances of a larger reality.**

- In the fragmented text available to date, there are details on an encounter in which the disciples ask the risen Christ questions and he responds.

- ▶ Christ then sends them to preach the Good News to the gentiles, and he leaves. The disciples are left sad, without confidence to fulfil their mission. Mary encourages them to carry on with what they have been asked to do.

- ▶ Peter asks Mary to communicate to the disciples the words they have not heard from Jesus, since they knew that Jesus “loved her more than the rest of the women”. Mary talks about one of her

visions, full of Gnostic connotations. In the context of a world which is disintegrating, Mary explains the difficulties the soul has to overcome to reveal its true spiritual nature in ascending to its eternal resting place.

**Some authors wanted to see in the Apostles’ opposition to Mary a reflection of the existing confrontations within the Church in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.**



- ▶ When she finishes relating her vision, Andrew and Peter do not believe her. Peter doubts the Lord preferred her to the other disciples, and Mary starts crying. Levi defends her (“You, Peter, always been hot tempered”) and blames Peter for attacking Mary.

- ▶ Then Levi encourages the disciples to accept that the Lord preferred Mary to themselves, and invites them to go and preach the Gospel. So they finally do.

- This is all the testimony left on the fragmented texts of this gospel. Not much, certainly. Some authors wanted to see in the Apostles’ opposition to Mary (in some way also present in the gospels according to Thomas, Pistis Sophia and in the Greek gospel according to the Egyptians) a reflection of the existing confrontations within the Church in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. That would indicate that the official Church would be opposed to the esoteric revelations and leadership by a woman.

- Considering the Gnostic nature of these texts, it is more plausible to believe that these “gospels” do not represent the true circumstances in the Church, but do reflect particular conflicts and antagonisms towards the Church. We could reason that an idea proposed from a sectarian group should not be extrapolated in an attempt to understand more general circumstances of a larger reality. Just as we understand that an exception should never become the rule.

<sup>1</sup> In modern English usage, the word Copt refers to Christian natives of Egypt, in particular members of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Arab historians, such as al-Maqrizi, also use the Arabic equivalent of the word to refer to pre-Islamic native Egyptians regardless of religion. Some modern Egyptian nationalists use *Copt* in a similarly generic sense to signify any native of Egypt.

## 19. What was the relationship between Peter and Mary Magdalene?

- The Gospel according to St John refers to the day after Saturday, when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb where Jesus was buried. There, after seeing that the stone had been moved away from the tomb, she runs to tell Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. When they receive the news, they set out for the tomb, where later Mary Magdalene finds the risen Lord (John 20:1-18).



The relationship between Peter and Mary Magdalene would have been like the one between Peter and John.

- ▶ This is all the Gospels tell us about the relationship between Peter and Mary Magdalene. From a historical point of view, there is nothing else to add.

- ▶ The gospel according to Peter, an apocrypha probably from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, which also recreates the last scenes from the Passion, the Resurrection, and the encounters with the risen Lord, refers to Mary Magdalene as “the disciple of the Lord”.

- In the marginal literature from Gnostic circles, we find various texts in which some confrontations between Peter and Mary Magdalene are noted. It is good to remember that these texts do not have a historical identity. They refer to fictitious dialogues between the various characters, as a way to spread the Gnostic doctrines.

- ▶ In the gospel according to Mary Magdalene, as in other Gnostic gospels, Peter seems to disapprove of the so-called “secret revelations” Mary Magdalene had received.

- Another text, apparently earlier, is the gospel according to Thomas. Here there is a story where

Peter says: “Let Mariham leave us, for women are not worthy of life.”. Jesus then answered, “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.”

- ▶ In Pistis Sophia, Peter becomes impatient and he complains because Mary understands the mysteries of faith better than others do, although in a Gnostic sense. Jesus also congratulates her, and Peter says: “My Lord, we will not endure this woman, for she takes the opportunity from us and has let none of us speak, but she discourses many times” (36). In this scene, nevertheless, Martha, Lazarus’ sister, is present, so actually Mary could be Martha’s sister, and not Mary Magdalene, but the reference could well have been to both Mary’s.

- ▶ We observe in these texts some distinctive aspects of the rabbinic rationale, where women were not considered able to appreciate religious doctrine (cf. John 4:27), and classical elements of the Gnostic anthropology, where females play a fundamental role as a vehicle to communicate esoteric revelations.

- The relationship between Peter and Mary Magdalene would have been like the one between Peter and John, or between Peter and Paul, or between Peter and Salome, etc.



When they (Peter and John) receive the news, they set out for the tomb, where later Mary Magdalene finds the risen Lord (John 20:1-18).

- ▶ This probably means that the relationship was proper to one at the head of the Church with others who had been the disciples of the Lord, and who after the resurrection, gave testimony of the risen Lord and proclaimed the Gospel.

- ▶ Any other insinuation about these relationships is the result of fantasy.



## 20. What went on at the Last Supper?

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- The hours that preceded the Passion and Death of Jesus were registered with singular force in the memory and heart of those who were with Him.

- ▶ For this reason, many of the details concerning what Jesus did and said at the Last Supper are recorded in the New Testament. It is one of the best reported episodes of His life, according to Joachim Jeremias. On that occasion, Jesus was alone with the Twelve Apostles. (Matt 26:20; Mark 14:17 & 20; Luke 22:14). Neither Mary, His mother, nor any of the holy women were present.

- In St. John's account, he explains that, in an act full of significance, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples thereby providing us with an example of humble service (John 13:1- 20). There then follows one of the most dramatic moments during this event: Jesus announces that one of those present is going to betray Him. They all look at another, stupefied by what Jesus has just said. Jesus, then, discreetly points to Judas (Matt 26:20-25; Mark 14:17-21; Luke 22:14 and John 13:21-22).

- So far as the supper itself is concerned, the most surprising aspect was the institution of the Blessed Eucharist. We have four accounts of this event: the three Synoptics (Matt 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20) and that of St. Paul (1 Cor 11:23-26), all of which are very similar. In each case, the account only runs to a few verses. They record the actions and words of Jesus that gave rise to the Blessed Sacrament and which form the central element of the new rite: "And he took bread, and when had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' (Luke 22:19 and ff.).

- ▶ These words express the enormous difference between what happened during this particular supper which Jesus had with his Apostles and an ordinary supper. Jesus did not distribute bread to those who were at table with Him at the Last Supper. Instead, what he gave was something utterly different under the appearance of bread: "This is my body." And He gave to the apostles present there the necessary power to do what He had just done: "Do this in remembrance of me."

- There is a further event of special relevance at the end of the supper. "And likewise the cup after supper, saying, This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:20 and

ff.).

- ▶ The apostles understood that they had witnessed earlier the giving of His body under the appearance of bread whereas now they were being given His blood in a cup. Through this, Christian tradition understood that the memory of the separate giving of His body and blood was an efficient sign of the sacrifice that was to culminate on the cross a few hours later.

- Furthermore, Jesus continued to speak throughout with such affection that His last words penetrated into the heart of His apostles. The gospel of St. John records the extended and moving conversation at the end of the meal. It is at this point when the new commandment is pronounced, the fulfilment of which will become the sign that will define a Christian: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35).



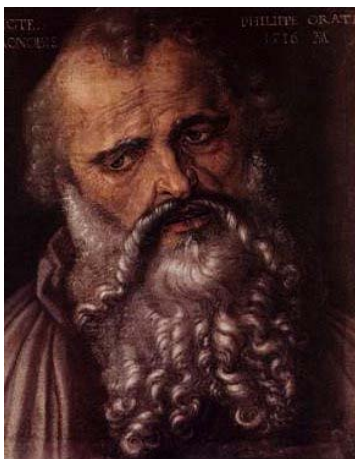
**So far as the supper itself is concerned, the most surprising aspect was the institution of the Blessed Eucharist.**

## 21. What does the gospel of Philip say?

- Philip's gospel consists of a document within Codex II which forms part of the Nag-Hammadi (NHC) collection of Coptic codices now kept in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. It certainly does not have anything to do with the "Gospel of St. Philip" mentioned by St. Epiphaneus who said it was used by some Egyptian heretics, or with what other ecclesiastical writers claimed to belong to the Manicheans.

- The Nag-Hammadi document (NHC II 51 29-86, 19) carries the title "The gospel according to Philip" in spite of the fact that it is not a gospel - it does not offer an account of the life of Jesus - and nor is it presented as a text written by Philip. In fact, the title was added sometime after its original composition, probably in Greek during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century. This was probably done on the basis that this apostle was attributed with the (then) popular saying according to which Joseph the Carpenter made the cross from the trees that he had planted.

- The document contains around one hundred ideas, some more developed than others, but without any common thread between them. Seventeen of these are claimed to have been said by Our Lord, of which nine are to be found in the canonical gospels while the remaining eight are new. Mostly, they refer to paragraphs that have been obtained from earlier sources that were either homily based or catechetical.



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- Although these ideas reflect a particular Gnostic doctrine, they have some things in common with other Gnostic heresies such as that of the Valentinians. Thus,

- ▶ a) The understanding of the celestial world (Pleroma) formed by pairs: the Father and the Higher Sophia, Christ and the Holy Spirit - this last understood to be female, and the Saviour and the

Lower Sophia from whom proceeds the material world;

- ▶ b) The distinction between the various Christs among whom is numbered Jesus in his earthly apparition;



**What appears at first sight to be expressions with an erotic undertone are, in reality, meant to be signs that Mary Magdalene had already reached Gnostic perfection.**

- ▶ c) the understanding of salvation as a union in this world between the soul (the female element in man) and the angel from Pleroma (the masculine element);

- ▶ d) the distinction between spiritual men (pneumatics) who achieve that union and the psychic and "hylic", or material ones, for whom it is impossible.

- One of the most frequent reasons for which attention is paid to this "gospel" is what it has to say about Jesus and Mary Magdalene. She is presented as Christ's companion.

- ▶ She is said "to have kissed Our Lord on many occasions (on the mouth)" because she loved Him more than all the disciples.

- ▶ What appears at first sight to be expressions with an erotic undertone are, in reality, meant to be signs that Mary Magdalene had already reached Gnostic perfection and had reached the light because Christ had granted it to her.

- ▶ Something similar is meant when "the nuptial chamber" is described as a sacrament or, literally, a mystery which is the culmination of Baptism, the Anointing, the Eucharist and Redemption. The image of matrimony is used to symbolise the union of the soul and its angel in that sacrament of the "nuptial chamber". This sacrament is presented in Philip's gospel as being the acquisition of the original unity of man in this world, which will be crowned in the celestial world and which, according to the author, is the real "nuptial chamber".

## 22. Did Jesus really mean to found a Church?

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- The preaching of Jesus was directed in the first place to Israel, as he himself said to his followers: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). But from the beginning of his active life he invited everyone to conversion: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

- ▶ However, this call to personal conversion was not conceived in an individualistic context; rather, he was continually looking to reunite a scattered humanity into the People of God whom he had come to save.

- Open to all of humanity, Jesus intended to reunite the people of the Covenant. A clear sign, in fulfilment of the promises made to his people, is the institution of the Twelve apostles, with Peter at the head.

- ▶ "The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him" (Matt 10:2-4; cf Mark 3:13-16; Luke 6:12-16).

- ▶ The number 12 is a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel. It shows the significance of this initiative to gather together the holy people of God, the *ekklesia Theou*. They are the foundations of the new Jerusalem.

- A new sign of this intention of Jesus is that during the Last Supper he entrusted to them the power to celebrate the Eucharist, which he instituted on that occasion (see the question, What went on at the last supper?). In this way he transmitted to the whole Church, in the person of those Twelve who were at her head, the responsibility of being a sign and instrument of the meeting begun by Him, which is to be offered up to the end times.

- ▶ His self-giving on the cross, anticipated sacramentally in this supper, and made present every time the Church celebrates the Eucharist, creates a community united in communion with Him, a Church called to be sign and instrument of the task begun by Him.

- ▶ The Church is born, then, with the complete self-giving of Christ for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and consummated on the Cross.



**The Twelve apostles are the most evident sign of the will of Jesus as regards the existence and mission of his Church, the guarantee that between Christ and the Church there is no opposition.**

- The Twelve apostles are the most evident sign of the will of Jesus as regards the existence and mission of his Church, the guarantee that between Christ and the Church there is no opposition.

- ▶ They are inseparable, despite the sins of the people who make up the Church.

- The apostles were aware that their mission had to be perpetuated, because this was what they had been told by Jesus.

- ▶ So they made it their concern to find successors. Their aim was that the mission entrusted to them should continue after their death, as witnessed in the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

- ▶ Through their apostolic ministry they left behind them a structured community, under the guidance of recognised pastors, who built and sustained it in communion with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, in which all people are called to experience the salvation offered by the Father.

- In St Paul's letters, the members of the Church are considered as "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone." (Eph 2:19-20).

- It is not possible to meet Jesus without the reality which He created and in which he is communicated.

- ▶ Between Jesus and his Church there is a profound continuity, inseparable and mysterious, and through which Christ is made present today in his people.



## 23. What is the Holy Grail? How is it related to the Holy Chalice?

- The term "grail" comes from late Latin *gradale* or *gratalis*, which derives from the classical Latin *crater*, a dish. In the books of knights of the Middle Ages, one understands it to be a receptacle or cup in which Jesus consecrated his Blood at the Last Supper; it was then used by Joseph of Arimathea to collect the blood and the water which was spilt when washing the body of Jesus.



**This legend was born in Wales, inspired by ancient Latin sources, such as the Acts of Pilate, an apocryphal work of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century.**

► In mediaeval romance, the grail was said to have been brought to Glastonbury by Joseph of Arimathea and his followers. He formed a community of guardians of the relic, which was later associated with the Templars. It is likely that this legend was born in Wales, inspired by ancient Latin sources, such as the Acts of Pilate, an apocryphal work of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. In the time of Arthur, the quest for the Grail was the highest spiritual pursuit.

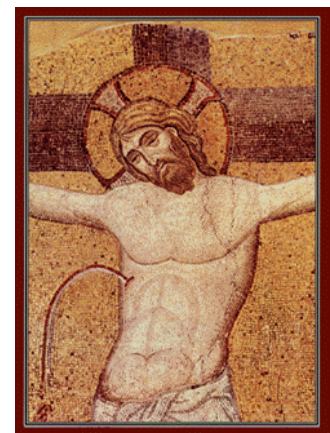
► For Chrétien, author of *Perceval*, Perceval is the knight who must achieve the quest for the Grail. For other French authors, as for Malory, Galahad is the chief Grail knight, though others (Perceval and Bors in the *Morte d'Arthur*) do achieve the quest. The Grail becomes a precious stone, guarded for some time by the angels. It was then entrusted to the custody of the Knights of the Order of the Holy Grail and its head, the king of Grail.

► Every year, on Good Friday, a dove descends from Heaven and, after placing a host on the stone, it renews its strength and its mysterious force, which communicates perpetual youth and can satisfy any desire for food and drink. Every now and again, some inscription on the stone reveals who have been called to eternal bliss in the castle of the Grail in Munsalvaesche (*mons salvationis*).

- This legend is linked to the chalice which Jesus used at the Last Supper and there are several ancient traditions, about it – basically three.

► The oldest is from the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, which holds that an Anglosaxon pilgrim states that, when he was in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, he had seen and touched the chalice which Jesus used. It was made of tin, and had two handles.

► A second tradition holds that this chalice – the *sacro catino* – is now in the cathedral of St Lorenzo in Genoa. It is greenish glass, looks like a dish, and would have been taken to Genoa by the crusaders in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.



**In mediaeval romance, the grail was said to have been brought to Glastonbury by Joseph of Arimathea and his followers.**

► According to a third tradition, the chalice of the Last Supper is the one which is in Spain, in Valencia Cathedral, and is venerated as the Holy Chalice. It is a cup of agate, dark in colour, which would have been taken by St Peter to Rome, and used by his successors there until the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century. During the persecutions it was given to the safe custody of St Lorenzo who took it to Huesca (in northern Spain). After being placed at various sites in the province of Aragon, it was taken to Valencia in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.

1. *What do we really know about Jesus?*
2. *What does Mary's virginity imply?*
3. *Did St. Joseph marry a second time?*
4. *Was Jesus single, married or widower?*
5. *Current situation of historical research of Jesus*
6. *What sort of historical credibility does the Bible have?*
7. *Who were the evangelists?*
8. *How were the first gospels written?*
9. *What are the canonical and the apocryphal gospels? How many are there?*
10. *What is the difference between the canonical gospels and the apocryphal gospels?*
11. *What do the apocryphal gospels say?*
12. *Who are the Gnostics?*
13. *What do Roman and Jewish sources tell us about Jesus?*
14. *What do the Qumran manuscripts tell us?*
15. *What is the Nag Hammadi library?*
16. *Who was Mary Magdalene?*
17. *What was the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene?*
18. *What does the "Gospel according to Mary (Magdalene)" say?*
19. *What was the relationship between Peter and Mary Magdalene?*
20. *What went on at the Last Supper?*
21. *What does the gospel of Philip say?*
22. *Did Jesus really mean to found a Church?*
23. *What is the Holy Grail? How is it related to the Holy Chalice?*