

# The Canonicity of the Four Gospels

Richard Bauckham  
University of St Andrews

## 1. Introduction

Why do our New Testaments contain four Gospels, no fewer and no more? The question becomes especially interesting when we not only know that there were other Gospels that did not get into the New Testament, but also have some of those Gospels available to read and study for ourselves. The existence of ‘other’ Gospels has been an intriguing fact, guaranteed to arouse lively public interest, since at least the 1890s when a papyrus containing what was assumed to be a portion of the Gospel of Peter was discovered in Egypt. Now everyone knows about other Gospels because of the quite misleading statements about them in Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code*. The fascination of other Gospels is not hard to appreciate. They have the appeal of the unknown and, even, when seen through the lens of a conspiracy theory, as in *The Da Vinci Code*, the appeal of the forbidden. Suppose these other Gospels, rediscovered now after sixteen hundred years of oblivion, tell us what the authoritarian church that suppressed them did not want us to know. Maybe they will tell us the dangerous and embarrassing truth about Jesus that the official Gospels hushed up. And maybe the Jesus we find in these other Gospels will be altogether more congenial and appealing to us than the Jesus of the four Gospels or any of the Jesuses of the four Gospels. The danger of finding what we want in Gospels we may not have bothered to actually read is well illustrated by *The Da Vinci Code*, which makes the extraordinary claim that the Gnostic Gospels portray Jesus as purely human. Nothing could be further from the truth: the Gnostic Jesus was a thoroughly supernatural and divine figure, dubiously human.

However, one thing that the other Gospels may do for us is to help us understand the four Gospels better. A New Testament scholar once pronounced that the person who knows only the canonical Gospels does not understand them. The truth in that, certainly exaggerated claim is that we can recognize their distinctive features better when we see them in the context of the other Gospels that did not make it into the canon. What was it about the four that gave them the advantage over others? What was it about the four that is common to all four of them and marks all four of them out from others? Was the canonization process really no more than a power struggle between competing interest groups in the early Church? Or was there a process of discernment that we can understand? Does it still make sense to regard the four Gospels, in the way that virtually all Christians down the centuries have, as accounts of Jesus that are normative for Christian faith and practice?

## 2. What is a Gospel?

Before we go any further I need to say something about the types of literature we are calling Gospels when we speak of other Gospels. People who’ve heard of other Gospels but never read them tend to assume that they must be the same sort of literature as the four Gospels we know in the New Testament. Not at all. In the second and third centuries there were all sorts of Gospels (and not even their titles help very much).

Many of these are the Gospels I have been calling the Gnostic Gospels, which has long been the usual description, but I ought to explain my use of that term. Scholars have recently been

becoming cautious about the very general use of the word Gnostic to cover all of these so-called Gnostic Gospels, as well as all the groups that used them. I think there is a case for using the word Gnostic in a more restricted sense. But I also think there are major common features that distinguish these Gospels from those that became canonical, and I haven't come up with another word to categorize them. One might call them the Nag Hammadi Gospels, because they are among the documents discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, but that description has disadvantages too. For our purposes today I shall go on using the term Gnostic in the broadest sense.

These Gnostic Gospels happen to be the other Gospels (besides the four) that we have in more or less complete form. But they were not the only other Gospels. Many have not survived. So I want at this point to clarify what sort of Gospels – what sort of books about Jesus – were around in the second and third centuries. I mean that in a literary sense; we shall get to theology later. For the moment let's place both the four Gospels and the Gnostic Gospels in the spectrum of types of Gospel writings that there were.

(1) First, there are narrative Gospels. The four Gospels in the New Testament are narrative Gospels that tell the story of Jesus from his birth or from the beginning of his ministry down to his appearances after the resurrection. More precisely we could say that these are biographical Gospels because the type of literature in their time which they most resemble is the ancient biography. There were other Gospels of this type, perhaps even as old as our four Gospels, but we know little about them. There were several Gospels, at least one of them in Aramaic, used exclusively by Jewish Christians, but we have only small fragments of them. The Gospel of Peter, of which we have a considerable section of the text but still only a fragment, was probably of this type, and several papyrus fragments of unknown Gospels may well come from Gospels of this biographical type. But we cannot say much more about them. None of the Gnostic Gospels, we should note, are narrative Gospels of this kind.

(2) Narrative Gospels of a different, rather specialized kind are the infancy Gospels, which expand the Gospel accounts of the birth and infancy of Jesus. These were never really competitors with the four Gospels and we haven't time to consider them more closely today.

(3) We have only one example, the Gospel of Thomas, of a second kind of Gospel: a sayings Gospel. The Gospel of Thomas consists almost entirely of sayings of Jesus, presented one after another as individual sayings. The Gospel of Thomas is the most controversial of the Gnostic Gospels, and the one for which the term Gnostic is most hotly contested. Nevertheless it does have a lot in common ideologically with the Gnostic Gospels, and I shall treat it as belonging broadly to that category.

(4) The category into which most of the Gnostic Gospels, as well as a few other texts, fall is the post-resurrection dialogue or revelation. This accounts, for example, for the Gospel of Mary, the Apocryphon of James, the Apocryphon of John, the Dialogue of the Saviour, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, the Book of Thomas, and others. You can see these texts are by no means always entitled Gospels, but they all belong clearly to a common type. They all present the risen Christ with a group of disciples or sometimes just one favoured disciple, and record the esoteric teaching that Jesus gave them in the period after his resurrection.

(5) There are just two Gnostic Gospels that present the same kind of special revelatory teaching given by Jesus to disciples, but in this case somewhat earlier, in the period not long

before or at the time of the crucifixion. These are the Gospel of Judas and the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter.

(6) There are Gospels that are actually theological treatises: the Gospel of Truth and the Gospel of Philip.

### **3. The fourfold Gospel canon: how did it come about?**

One thing is clear: by the later second century there were lots of Gospels around and most of them claimed to be apostolic, bearing the names not only of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but also of Thomas, Philip, James, Mary and others. How did the mainstream church's four Gospel canon emerge from that plethora of candidates for authoritative Gospel status, which meant, of course, something extremely important: the authority to define what the true Christian message was, on the basis of who the real Jesus was? I should make clear at once what I mean by the term canon. We are not here concerned at all with the rest of the New Testament, only with a canon of four Gospels. One could distinguish between a collection of the four Gospels and a canon of the four. A collection wouldn't necessarily make those four Gospels the only gospels of any value for the church, but the term canon means that there are four and only four authentic and authoritative Gospels. We find an unequivocal expression of that latter view for the first time in Irenaeus of Lyons, the great theologian who was writing around the end of the second century. We find Irenaeus defending the view that there are four authentic Gospels, no fewer and no more, against proposals that the church should only use one Gospel as well as against advocates of many Gospels besides the four.

In the second century there were, after all, several possibilities. The church could have opted for just one Gospel, as one leader of a Christian sectarian group, Marcion, did, choosing Luke and carefully editing it to conform to his own teaching. Or the church could have adopted a Gospel narrative created out of all four or even more Gospels, the various sources interwoven and absorbed into a composite Gospel. Such a work – the Diatessaron of Tatian – was actually produced in the late second century, and it had precursors. Either of these options could have been attractive because either of them would meet the problem of differences between the four Gospels. Critics inside and outside the church made much of these differences during the second century. Thirdly, of course, more than four Gospels could have been accepted as authentic, the option some of the Gnostic groups took. It wasn't necessarily at all obvious that the outcome of whatever processes of debate and discernment went on should be a canon of precisely these four Gospels.

So how did the four Gospel canon come about? The first thing to say is that we have to admit that there's a great deal we don't know. I think the reason for that is that the actual process of canonization, the discernment and decision about the status of various Gospel writings, was primarily a grassroots process. It took place at the level of local Christian communities. Some such process had to happen in local Christian communities at a very early stage, because, from an early stage, in Christian worship, there were readings from the Old Testament scriptures and also from Christian writings, and no doubt there was often exposition of both. Any church had to decide which Christian writings were suitable for reading alongside the Old Testament, which must have meant pretty much scriptural status. We can imagine a process by which a degree of consensus would have spread, as one community heard what other communities were reading as scripture. An informal consensus would have grown up, at least about some groups, though it will never have been a complete consensus. But the fact is that we have limited evidence of how that happened.

There is one key question about the four Gospels in the second century that scholars have answered in different ways. Was the four Gospel collection well established in the early part of the second century, prior to the Marcion's insistence on one Gospel only and prior to the widespread circulation of the Gnostic Gospels? In that case Marcion and the Gnostics represent challenges to which the mainstream church responded by defending and reaffirming the authority of the four Gospels and defining their status more firmly and exclusively as a Gospel canon. Or should we think more in terms of a very fluid situation in the early and mid-second century, in which many Gospels were circulating and some had more authority in one place, some in another? In that case the fourfold Gospel collection was a response by the mainstream church to Marcion and the Gnostics, who made mainstream Christians think for the first time of the need for a defined collection of reliable Gospels. To put the issue very simply: did the four Gospels come before the Marcionite and Gnostic alternatives, or was the fourfold Gospel a reaction to the Marcionite and Gnostic alternatives? Scholars are divided. The latter has been a common view in twentieth-century scholarship and remains popular, but there are signs of some increasing support now for the former view.

In my view there is one very persuasive argument for the first view – the priority of the four Gospel collection – that arises from the character of the Gospels themselves, the four Gospels and the Gnostic Gospels, and the differences between the two groups. I mentioned before that the four Gospels are biographical narratives, whereas most of the Gnostic Gospels are post-resurrection revelations. Typically in Gnostic Gospels Jesus appears to the disciples after the resurrection and, either in a discussion with a group of disciples, or in a special revelation to one especially favoured disciple, imparts knowledge of the true nature of the world and salvation, the typically Gnostic message, characteristically depicted as an esoteric revelation that was not given in Jesus' public teaching during his ministry but reserved for the elect few to whom he entrusts it afterwards.

Now that form of Gospel, the post-resurrection revelation, actually presupposes that there are well known accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus before his resurrection. Readers are certainly expected already to have some idea who Jesus and his disciples are. Some of these Gospels do not even name Jesus, but speak of him simply as the Saviour or the Lord. But, more than that, the fact that they position themselves after the resurrection itself presupposes that definite accounts of Jesus' teaching during his ministry are well known. The purpose of the Gnostic Gospels is *to add*. Suppose there are well known, well-established Gospels of the narrative kind – the four Gospels, perhaps one or two others of the same sort – and someone wanted to attribute to Jesus teaching of a different kind, teaching they wish to present as the really important message of Jesus, how would one best do that? The narratives told by the four Gospels offer an obvious opportunity. They speak of a period after the resurrection in which Jesus spent time with the disciples, but they offer few indications of what Jesus might have taught them in that period, other than the commission to go and preach the Gospel. The Gnostics were not the first or the only people to exploit that opportunity for filling out the Gospel narratives with additional teaching given by Jesus after the resurrection.

The Gnostics did not, mostly, just ignore the teaching of Jesus as we find it in the four Gospels, but they thought it had hidden meanings that could only be elucidated in the light of the esoteric teaching of the post-resurrection period. Sometimes they imply that the writers of the narrative Gospels failed to understand what Jesus was talking about and so provide only obscure accounts that need interpretation and expansion by those who have received and understood the more explicit and profound teaching of the resurrected Lord. Sometimes they

imply that the public teaching of Jesus could not be his real message, which was reserved for the Gnostic elect. In one way or another they refer back to the teaching of the earthly Jesus, and sometimes they explicitly cite it in order to indicate its true interpretation. They presuppose not just a fluid situation of oral Jesus traditions and many Gospels, but a fixed body of teaching which they did not attempt to augment with further teaching given by Jesus during his public ministry. Rather they aimed to transcend it by offering a qualitatively different kind of teaching which Jesus had allegedly reserved to the end – the best wine provided last. They presuppose and make use of, but at the same time disparage the Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching during his ministry. And from the precise allusions made we can tell that these presupposed Gospels are, very largely, the four.

So in my view the probability is that the four Gospels were widely known and valued already in the early second century, not too long after the writing of the latest of them, John's Gospel. This may not have been true everywhere. We must certainly allow for local variety, but the four Gospels must have been widely accepted as authoritative. This did not necessarily exclude the possibility of other Gospels being accepted, but the tendency would be for them to be assessed in comparison with the four. The only way of, so to speak, trumping the four Gospels, of writing new Gospels with a radically different message, was to write a very different sort of Gospel, the post-resurrection revelation, a form that acknowledged the biographical Gospels but did so by way of disparaging and transcending them.

If I'm right about that – that the four Gospels are not only chronologically prior, but also in a sense logically prior to the Gnostic Gospels – that is very important. It means that when it became necessary for the mainstream church to make decisions about which Gospels were in some sense authentic and which were not, they didn't start with simply a fluid and undifferentiated melée of Gospels, nor did they impose a purely doctrinal criterion for judging Gospels. Rather they knew that at least the four Gospels had been around for a long time. The claims of *those* Gospels to be genuinely apostolic were pretty much undisputed (though some raised doubts about John). The issue was whether other Gospels were also apostolic.

From Irenaeus, and also to some extent from the Muratorian canon (I accept the late second-century date for that), we can see that the principal criterion of Gospel canonicity used in the mainstream church was apostolicity. The elevation of these four Gospels into a canon, an exclusive position, rested on the claim that all four of these Gospels are apostolic and that only these four are apostolic. I'll explain in a moment what they meant by 'apostolic' but it's worth noticing first how that term served to guarantee the retention of the four Gospels as such, as well as to rule out others. It explains why the Gospel of Mark was retained despite the fact that it seems to have been very little used in the second century (or in the following centuries). Because nearly all of the content of Mark is also to be found in Matthew and Luke, it is easy to appreciate that people should have neglected Mark's Gospel and preferred the more comprehensive Gospels. But Mark's Gospel was believed to derive quite closely from the testimony of Peter, and so retained its place among the four Gospels because it was apostolic. The criterion of apostolicity also, I think, prevented the church opting for something like Tatian's Diatessaron, a combination of the contents of all four Gospels woven together as a single narrative. This must have been an attractive option, but was not, by and large, taken because it was the four Gospels as such that were regarded as apostolic. The sense was doubtless that they came from the apostolic age and should not be superseded even by a new Gospel compiled entirely from their contents.

Now what was meant by apostolicity? This notion as used by Irenaeus and others comprises three aspects. (1) There was an important chronological aspect. Apostolic Gospels must derive from the apostolic age, which the Fathers thought of as ending c. 100, when the last of the four Gospels, John's, was believed to have been written. So we find, for example, in the Muratorian canon disqualifies from canonicity a work known as the Shepherd of Hermas, a book by an early Christian prophet. The author of the Muratorian text actually recommends the Shepherd of Hermas for reading – he regards it as orthodox and valuable - but he does not think it should be read publicly in church worship, because of its post-apostolic date. That's not a case of a Gospel, but even more so would the issue of date of origin apply in the case of Gospels.

(2) Apostolic Gospels come from the circle of the apostles of Jesus. This narrows the criterion: not only from the apostolic period, but from the circle of those whom Jesus himself gave the authority to preach the Christian message – not just, incidentally, the Twelve, but all of those Jesus had commissioned. The apostles were those who could be relied on to know what the true Gospel was. I've said 'from the circle of the apostles,' because Irenaeus and others like him did not think Mark and Luke were themselves apostles. But their Gospels qualify because they were in close touch with apostles. So we need not take apostolic authorship too strictly. It means, rather more broadly, those who were really in a position to know what those who had been close to Jesus taught.

(3) Apostolicity implies conformity with the mainstream church's tradition of teaching. Therefore, even if one could not otherwise determine the historical origin of a Gospel ascribed to Thomas or Mary (and the means of doing so were of course quite limited), one could still tell from its teaching whether it was authentically apostolic. This is the aspect of the matter that makes the four Gospel canon seem to some contemporary scholars and others no more than an ideological act of privileging the literature of one group over others, the creation of an orthodoxy by imposing a narrow definition of the faith in place of the much greater diversity of Christianity in the second century. But here it is so important that the four Gospels were not suddenly given authority at this point, but had long been treated as authentically apostolic and authoritative for Christian faith. The church's established teaching, what Irenaeus calls the rule of faith, had always been closely related to the four Gospels and was handed down along with the four Gospels. These were the already accepted standards of apostolic teaching, and it was quite reasonable to say that less well authenticated Gospels should be judged by those standards. Not everything, indeed no other Gospel, passed the test, but nor had everything passed the test at the time of the apostles themselves.

#### **4. Distinctive characteristics of all four canonical Gospels**

I want to turn now from how the four Gospels became canonical in the second century to the characteristics we can see for ourselves if we compare the canonical and the Gnostic Gospels. Many of us who study the Gospels get very used to delineating the differences between the four Gospels, especially between the Synoptics and John, although the differences between the Synoptic Gospels themselves are also well recognized. But here I want to focus on what all four Gospels have in common by contrast with the Gnostic Gospels. This is a question of perspective: when we are focused on the New Testament Gospels themselves we notice the differences, but when we compare them with the other Gospels that were known in the second and third centuries we can see more easily how much the four Gospels actually share.

(1) In terms of their literary genre, the four Gospels are biographies. They offer a richly detailed portrayal of a real human life at a specific time and in a specific place. The Gnostic Gospels, on the other hand, none of which are biographies and most of which are post-resurrection revelations, lift Jesus out of the concrete specifics of such a narrative world into an almost purely mythical one. Jesus becomes a sheerly supernatural visitor to this world who reveals timeless truth. I have suggested that the Gnostic Gospels in a sense presuppose the narrative Gospels, but they do so by radically downgrading the narrative.

(2) The four Gospels provide narratives that they closely connect with the Old Testament narrative of Israel. This is one of the most unmissable characteristics of the Gospels because they make this connexion right at the beginning in each case. Each does it differently. Matthew has the genealogy of Jesus, starting with Abraham and resuming, in effect, the whole history of Israel, and indicating that his book is the continuation and culmination of that same story, fulfilling at last the universal promises God made to Abraham. Mark, much the shortest Gospel, plunges in with a quotation from Isaiah that he portrays fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist, the herald of Jesus. Luke, again differently, makes the connexion with the story of Israel by setting his opening narratives in a context carefully designed to evoke the atmosphere of the Hebrew Bible and the way its story constantly projects its messianic future. Finally, John begins his Gospel with the very words that open the book of Genesis: 'In the beginning ...' He starts back behind the story of Israel, right back at the beginning of time, but the way his prologue proceeds shows that he does not therefore mean to bypass the story of Israel but rather to set both it and his Gospel in the longest and broadest context, the one with which the Hebrew Bible itself in its opening chapters sets its story in a universal context.

The Gnostic Gospels lack any such connexions with the story of Israel. They never refer to fulfilment of prophecy (except – the exception that proves the rule – that in the Gospel of Thomas [52] the disciples say that the prophets of Israel spoke of Jesus, and Jesus rebukes them for saying so). In most of the Gnostic Gospels Jesus is never called Messiah or Christ, the title that is more widespread than any other in the New Testament, but which, of course, connects him with the hopes of Israel. Allusions to the Old Testament are almost exclusively to the story of Adam. Now we might perhaps wonder whether all this is in the interests of universalizing the Christian message by disconnecting it from the particularity of Israel. In a certain sense this is true, but it is more a question of a different sort of universalism in each case. The four Gospels follow the thrust of the story of Israel towards all the nations. The salvation they offer takes place, for all people, in the particular history of Israel and Jesus. The Gnostic Gospels speak rather of the general human predicament in a world like this (or in many cases of the predicament of the truly spiritual ones, the elect) and the salvation they offer is mythical rather than historical.

(3) The four Gospels are deeply rooted in Jewish monotheism. For them there is one God, the Creator of all things, the God of Israel and the God of Jesus. This crucial question of the identity of God is the one that in fact Irenaeus focused on when he distinguished between the apostolic Gospels and those that contradict the apostolic faith, because the God of the Gnostic Gospels is certainly not the God of Israel. This is the strongest reason for the fact that they disconnect Jesus from the story of Israel. In many of the Gnostic Gospels we find a version of the common Gnostic myth, according to which the material world is the bungled work of an ill-intentioned creator god, who is also the God of Israel, whereas Jesus comes as the emissary of another, the Father, the high God to whom the Gnostics truly belong. It is true that this myth is missing from some of the Gospels I have been loosely calling Gnostic – the

Gospel of Thomas, the Book of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary – and we can't discuss now whether it is implicitly taken for granted even in these works. But even these Gospels do not identify the God of Jesus with the Creator of the world or with the God of Israel. They simply ignore the latter completely.

As an interesting indication of this it is worth noting that in fact most of the Gnostic Gospels rarely use the word God at all – something that singles out Gnostic literature from most of the religious literature of their time, including Jewish and Christian literature. In the four Gospels it is common because they take for granted Jewish monotheism, in the context of which there is normally no ambiguity about which God the word refers to. The Gnostics are reluctant to call the true God, the God of Jesus, God, because among mainstream Christians the word refers to the wrong god, the Creator, and also because for them divinity is a quality shared by the many spiritual beings of their myth, including the Gnostics themselves.

(4) One aspect of the narrative character of all four Gospels is the embeddedness of the narrative in a historical context that can be verified. To the extent that the Jesus of these Gospels belongs to the world of the Palestinian Judaism of the early first century, with its religious customs and rules, its factions and beliefs, its religious and political leaders, its uneasy subjection to Roman authority, and so forth, the four Gospels present a Jesus who is thoroughly credible within his time and place. In so far as the Gnostic Gospels have anything of this kind at all, it is obviously derivative (derived from the narrative Gospels), vague and even blatantly erroneous (for example, the Mount of Olives located in Galilee). The Gnostic Gospels neither preserve real historical reference nor are they at all interested in it.

## **5. The Gospels as apostolic testimony**

Apostolicity, as we have seen, was the fundamental criterion the mainstream church used to define the canon of the four Gospels as uniquely authoritative for Christian faith. But can we still regard the four Gospels as truly apostolic and contrast them in this respect with the extant other Gospels? Recall that the criterion of apostolicity for Irenaeus and others who argued this case in the early centuries did not have to entail actual authorship by an apostle, but required closeness to the apostles sufficient to enable the faithful recounting of the Gospel traditions as told and taught by the Twelve and other eyewitnesses of the events of Jesus' history.

In my recent book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, I have argued that, contrary to the view of the origins of the Gospels that has dominated New Testament scholarship since the rise of form criticism in the early twentieth century, there are good reasons to think that the Gospels as we have them are close to the way the eyewitnesses testified to what they had seen and participated in. There are no longer good reasons for supposing that Gospel traditions passed through a lengthy process of oral transmission in the early Christian communities, independently of the eyewitnesses, before reaching the Gospel writers. On the contrary, it is most plausible to think of the eyewitnesses as living and active, well known throughout the Christian movement, down to the time when the Gospels were written. They functioned as constantly accessible sources and authoritative guarantors of the traditions they themselves had formulated at the beginning of the movement. We need not think of the Gospels as far removed from their testimony, but rather as closely based on their testimony.



As I have already stated and as probably most Gospels scholars now agree, the literary genre to which the four Gospels belong is the ancient genre of biography. More precisely I think we can say that they would have appeared to their first readers to be biographies that were fairly close to the conventions and methods of ancient historiography. The ancients had strong opinions about how history should be written. It must be based on eyewitness testimony. The good historian should either have been an eyewitness himself or he should have met and interviewed people who were eyewitnesses. Good historical writing should incorporate the accounts of eyewitnesses at first or secondhand. This is why the ancients thought that real history had to be contemporary history, written when eyewitnesses were still available. The chronology of Gospel writing becomes very important here. The four Gospels were written within living memory of the events. They are contemporary history and would have been seen as such. It is surely significant that Matthew, Luke and John were probably written at the very end of the period in which this could still be true. The chronological aspect of apostolicity as the mainstream church later understood it in fact makes very good sense in the light of ancient historiography.

What we have in the four Gospels, in my view, is good access to the apostolic testimony about Jesus. I stress the term testimony. The eyewitnesses from whom these Gospels derive were not disinterested observers. They were involved participants in the events they later recalled and narrated. They were committed believers in the Jesus whose story they told. They and the Gospel writers were thoughtful interpreters of the significance of that story for human salvation. As we have noticed, all too briefly, they interpreted that significance very differently from the way the Gnostic Gospels do. But let me make two important points about this form of history – what I'm calling apostolic testimony. First, as we have seen, history matters to this testimony, as it does not for the Gnostic Gospels. It matters for the apostolic testimony that Jesus was a real participant in real history, and therefore it matters that the accounts are well based on the way the eyewitnesses told the story. The history is interpreted, of course, but it is *history* that it is interpreted. Secondly, the testimony of the eyewitnesses was in fact the kind of testimony that was valued by ancient historians – that of involved participants, people who could convey something of the reality of the events from the inside. It's the kind of testimony we need if we are to grasp anything of the meaning of events as exceptional as those of which the four Gospels tell. We cannot and don't have to polarize fact and meaning. The four Gospels give us at the same time both the most reliable access we have to what happened in the history of Jesus and also the meaning that those who were closest to Jesus and the events perceived in them when they found them to be life-changing revelation of God.

This inseparable combination of fact and meaning, history and interpretation that we have in the four Gospels qualifies them for the authority that these Gospels came to have for the mainstream church of the second and later centuries. Appropriately they came to be regarded as both the best access we have to the history of Jesus and the normative understanding of the significance of that history for Christian faith.

## **6. The authority of the four Gospels as canonical**

For the mainstream church that canonized the four Gospels, the Gnostic Gospels preached a different Jesus, a Jesus not rooted in first century history, a Jesus not related to the story of Israel, a Jesus who did not come from the one God, the Creator of all things. I think this verdict is indisputably correct. Very profound religious differences were at stake, and the

mainstream church's decision for the four Gospels alone was momentous for the character of the Christian faith down the centuries since.

We should note carefully that the church did not reduce the plurality of the Gospels to only one. It is as significant for the character of subsequent Christian faith that the church accepted no less than four, as well as no more than four. The church did receive four different perspectives on Jesus, but defined, as it were, only a limited plurality. As we have seen, the four Gospels, for all their differences, look significantly similar when we place them alongside the very different Gospels that were not accepted.

One major reason why there is currently so much interest in other Gospels is undoubtedly a post-modern cultural climate in which it seems liberating to break out of the restrictive canon of the traditional church and to recognize the great variety of interpretations of Jesus and Christian faith that were once available before the mainstream church imposed orthodox uniformity. Recognizing this variety in the ancient Christian world suits an agenda of radical pluralism in the contemporary Christian world. All sorts of interpretations of Jesus are legitimate. Any dream will do. Any notion of normative Gospels or of any authoritative norms of faith is restrictive and oppressive.

I guess the question comes down to: is there a real Jesus, a Jesus who lived in first-century Palestine as well as being alive and accessible to believers today, and does it matter what sort of God this Jesus revealed? If the answers are yes, then I think we have to face the same unavoidable decision that the early church had to make between the Jesus of the four Gospels and his God, and the very different Jesus of the Gnostic Gospels and his god.