

VERITAS

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Study Guide

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KEY TERMS

bazi	Bavarian slang for “lovable trickster.”
codex (plural codices)	An ancient manuscript in bound form; a book. Replaced the scroll as primary format for long texts in the first centuries A.D. Adopted by early Christians, who may have sought to physically distinguish their sacred texts from the scrolls of Jewish scripture.
Coptic	The language of Egypt’s earliest Christians and of some of the oldest surviving copies of the gospels. A product of Alexander the Great’s conquest of Egypt, the Coptic alphabet is made up of the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet, plus half a dozen Egyptian characters.
<i>The Da Vinci Code</i>	Bestselling 2003 novel by Dan Brown about a Church conspiracy to conceal evidence of the marriage and bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Protagonist is a fictional Harvard University professor of “religious symbology.”
Egyptology	The study of the history, language and culture of ancient Egypt. A field noted for its complexity.
forgery	A manuscript or other work created to deceive an audience about its source, authorship or authenticity. A fraudulent copy; a fake.
gnosis	Greek for “knowledge,” often in the context of spiritual mysteries.

KEY TERMS

Gnostic gospels	Christian texts, dating mainly from the second to fourth centuries A.D., that portray spiritual insight—rather than Jesus’s death and resurrection—as the path to salvation. Female figures like Mary Magdalene, Eve and Sophia are prominent. Church fathers deemed the Gnostic scriptures heretical, effectively banishing them from the collection of authorized texts that would become the New Testament.
Gospel of Jesus’s Wife	The title given by Harvard Divinity School professor Karen King to a business card-size piece of papyrus bearing the Coptic words, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife...’” Dr. King announced her discovery in September 2012 at a scholarly conference across from the Vatican.
Gospel of Mary	Gnostic gospel that portrays Mary Magdalene as spiritually superior to the male disciples. Thought to have been written in the second century, fewer than half its pages survive. The only known gospel written in the name of a woman.
Gospel of Philip	Ancient anthology of cryptic excerpts from otherwise unknown Gnostic texts. In its perhaps best known passage, Jesus kisses Mary Magdalene on a part of her body that can’t be gleaned from the gospel’s surviving fragments.
Gospel of Thomas	Mysterious list of 114 “secret sayings” of Jesus. Written as early as the first century, it shows Gnostic influence.

KEY TERMS

<i>Holy Blood, Holy Grail</i>	Bestselling 1982 book by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. Speculative history about the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Helped inspire <i>The Da Vinci Code</i> .
Harvard Divinity School	The second oldest professional school at Harvard University. Founded in 1816 to train ministers and other students in “the serious, impartial and unbiased investigation of Christian truth.” Though led in its early years by Unitarians, it is officially a nonsectarian theology school—the country’s first—and houses many of Harvard’s top religion scholars. Unlike many of its peers, Harvard has no freestanding department of religious studies.
interlinear	A format for printed translations in which lines of foreign-language text alternate with the same lines in translation.
lacuna (<i>plural lacunae</i>)	A physical hole in or other missing part of a manuscript.
Lycopolitan	A rare, early dialect of Coptic. Seen, for example, in the Qau codex of the Gospel of John.
Mary Magdalene	A woman from the Galilean town of Magdala who supports Jesus’s ministry out of her own wealth, according to the New Testament. In the Gospel of John, she is the first person to whom the risen Jesus appears. A homily by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591 led to centuries of unfounded—and, in many ways, slanderous—portrayals of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute.

KEY TERMS

Nag Hammadi	An Egyptian town some 300 miles south of Cairo. In 1945, peasants exploring nearby cliffs found a buried jar containing the largest known hoard of Gnostic manuscripts: thirteen papyrus codices containing forty-six texts, a full forty-one of them previously unknown. Scholars sometimes refer to the find collectively as “The Nag Hammadi Library.”
nomen sacrum	A Latin term for the abbreviation of divine names in early Christian manuscripts. In the Gospel of Jesus’s Wife, the Coptic word for “Jesus” appears as the nomen sacrum IC, reflecting the first and last letters—iota and sigma—of Jesus’s name. Scribes often topped a nomen sacrum with an overline, or “supralinear stroke.”
paleography	The study of ancient handwriting, particularly for purposes of dating manuscripts.
papyrology	The study of papyri. Involves the decipherment of faded text on ancient fragments.
papyrus (<i>plural papyri</i>)	An ancient writing material that predominated at the dawn of Christianity. Made from the pressed and sun-dried stalks of reeds that grew along the Nile River in Egypt.
provenance	The ownership history of an artwork, manuscript, archaeological relic, or other collectible. Critical to evaluating an object’s origins, legal status and authenticity.

IMAGE OF THE PAPYRUS



DR. KAREN KING'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS'S WIFE

"... not to me. My mother gave me life ...
... "The disciples said to Jesus, " ...
... deny. Mary is (not?) worthy of it ...
... " Jesus said to them, "My wife ...
... she is able to be my disciple ...
... Let wicked people swell up ..
... As for me, I dwell with her in order to ...
... an image ...

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Women and the Bible

1. From Abraham and Moses to Jesus and his twelve apostles, the Hebrew Bible and New Testament are crowded with male figures and male perspectives. In the Book of Exodus, God punishes Eve by decreeing, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth...Yet your desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you." In 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul bars women from leading or teaching and demands their silence in church. "If they want to inquire about something," he says, "they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." Other biblical verses treat women as property, demonize their sexuality, or render them anonymous, important only insofar as their relationship to a named man.

Do you think women exercised more power in antiquity than the Bible suggests and that ancient theologians deliberately wrote them out of the story? Or do verses like the ones above merely mirror the patriarchal and at times misogynistic societies of their ancient authors? Could both be true?

2. The 19th-century feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton said, "The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of woman's emancipation." Do you agree? In what ways does the relative scarcity of women leaders and female viewpoints in the authorized texts of Judaism and Christianity affect believers today, particularly women and girls?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

3. What should modern believers do when aspects of sacred literature conflict with their own values? Is it enough to simply read such texts critically? Would you be willing to rewrite traditional prayers to better reflect modern mores, for instance by adding more names of women—from Sarah and Rachel to Mary Magdalene and Phoebe—to liturgy? If you're a believer, how would you feel about studying—or even worshipping from—non-canonical scriptures, like the Gospel of Mary, in which female figures play more prominent roles?
4. “For more than fifteen centuries, Christian authorities...equated sex—and, in turn, women—with sin,” author Ariel Sabar writes in *Veritas*. “For centuries, preachers and theologians taught believers to feel shame and revulsion at the most human of yearnings.” Do you think most people today still see sexuality, or certain kinds of sexuality, as sinful? Why? Have attitudes changed since your grandparents' generation? If so, what forces—inside and outside your church, synagogue, or mosque—do you credit for such changes?

Faith and Reason

5. As *Veritas* demonstrates, religious scholarship is a battlefield. The bitter debates that roil any academic discipline are often sharpened in biblical studies by another variable: the deeply held spiritual or moral beliefs of many scholars drawn to the field. Do you think it's possible for religion scholars to separate their faith (or, in some cases, their atheism) from their scholarship? Do you think they need to set aside their personal beliefs to produce credible work? Or, as the Harvard Divinity School scholar Karen King contends, can one's faith and one's secular scholarship be mutually reinforcing? To what extent do you think Dr. King's beliefs shaped her handling of the “Gospel of Jesus's Wife”?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

6. Many traditional believers regard the Bible as both actual history and the unfiltered word of God. But archaeology, historical criticism, and science have raised significant questions about the “historicity”—or historical reality—of the people and events the Bible describes. Does it matter whether the Bible is historically true? As Sabar puts it in *Veritas*, does faith need facts?

Con Artists and Marks

7. It's not something most people brag about, but have you or a loved one ever been taken in, even a little, by a con artist? When did you realize you'd been fooled and how did you respond? In retrospect, what techniques did the con artist use to try to get you to lower your guard?
8. *Veritas* tells the story of how a college dropout living in rural Florida snookered leading international scholars into launching a sensational forgery into the headlines. As you evaluate the actions and motivations of the various characters, where do you assign blame? Do you view the scholars as innocent victims?
9. “Human error” results from the mistakes or omissions of a single person. A “systems failure” results from the breakdown of multiple safeguards in a person's environment. Do you view the saga of the Gospel of Jesus's Wife as a tale of human error or as a systems failure? Defend your answer.
10. What role do you think the international renown of Harvard University played in the way the saga unfolded? Had a scholar at a less prestigious institution announced the discovery, what might have been different?

Truth and Consequences

11. A critic suggests that Dr. King saw the Gospel of Jesus's Wife as “fake but accurate”—a forgery that could all the same inspire public interest in very real, early Christian debates about marriage, sex, and women's leadership. In *Veritas*, Sabar notes the almost paradoxical moral question this idea raises: Is it ethical to use a lie to open the world's eyes to a larger truth? In what cases, if any, might such a lie be justified? Is the Gospel of Jesus's Wife a justifiable lie? For either Karen King or Walter Fritz, is it an understandable one?
12. At a higher level, *Veritas* probes foundational questions of *epistemology*, an academic term for how humans decide whether something is true. As a longtime journalist, Sabar is at heart an *empiricist*, someone who believes that facts can be uncovered through shoe-leather reporting and diligent investigation. The deeply devout set store by faith, trusting in God to light the way, even if divine truths can't be scientifically proven or even seen. Dr. King, as a postmodernist, in some ways represents a third archetype: a thinker who rejects the idea of objective truth and believes that language creates the world, that the people who tell—and sell—the best story *create* reality.

Can these different paths to truth be reconciled? In your opinion, which best explains—and which is the best response to—the era of “alternative facts” in which much of the world now finds itself?