A(NOTHER) NEW GOSPEL

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Recently lots of people got excited about a document which claimed to have an eyewitness account of Jesus performing miracles. But it wasn't true. The problem is that once we start claiming that internet hoaxes support our Christian faith, then we tie ourselves in all sorts of knots.
Category: Observations

A few weeks ago, my Twitter and Facebook feed were full of reportsÂ that a document had been found which had an eyewitness account of Jesus performing miracles. This was great news, it confirmed that the Bible was true and gives Christians an excellent historical basis to refute those pesky skeptics who refuse to believe in our message.

> *Rome| An ItalianÂ expert studyingÂ aÂ first century document written by the Roman historianÂ Marcus Velleius Paterculus that was recently discovered in the archives of the Vatican,Â found what is presumed to be the first eyewitness account ever recorded of a miracle of Jesus Christ. The author describes a scene that he allegedly witnessed, in whichÂ a prophet and teacher that he names lÄ“sous de Nazarenus, resuscitated a stillborn boy and handed him back to his mother.*

But, there are a few problems.

The Origin of the Report: this news first surfaced on the World News Daily Report, which sounds like a serious a reliable source. However, a quick search of the WNDR website quickly turns up this disclaimer:

> *World News Daily ReportÂ is a news and political satire web publication, which may or may not use real names, often in semi-real or mostly fictitious ways.Â All news articles contained within worldnewsdailyreport.com are fiction, and presumably fake news.Â Any resemblance to the truth is purely coincidental, except for all references to politicians and/or celebrities, in which case they are based on real people, but still based almost entirely in fiction.*

So the source that we were looking at for confirmation that the Bible is true, was a satire site that publishes in 'semi-real or mostly fictitious ways'. With a bit more digging, you could soon discover that the photo of theÂ document discovered in the Vatican library, was actually from Vindolanda in Northumberland. Oh, and the photo of the Italian scholar was someone else entirely; it's not even clear that the Italian expert named in the article actually exists.

This report shows all the hallmarks of a cleverly concocted ruse to demonstrate how gullible Christians are. I suspect the authors are laughing themselves silly at the way so many people were taken in.

Where the ReportÂ Wasn't Published: If a document such as this one had been discovered, it would have been debated in great detail in the academic press. There is a massive amount of archaeological and documentary research being done into the history of Israel, the life of Jesus and the early church. But it is published in the places that academics do their publishing, not in news web sites that no one has heard of. For those of us who don't read the academic press, the first we would hear of a story like this would probably be in Christianity Today or some other reputable

journal or magazine. There are also a lot of New Testament scholars blog on issues like this one; try this for size.

What Else Do We Have To Take Seriously? The problem is, thatÂ if we are going to start getting excited about documents that add something to the story of the Gospels, we end up tying ourselves in knots. The Independent (a more reliable source of news than the World News Daily Report), had this story in the last few days:

> *Jesus married the prostitute Mary Magdalene and had children, according to a manuscript almost 1,500 years old unearthed at the British Library.*
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> *The so-called â€œLost Gospelâ€ , which has been translated from Aramaic, allegedly reveals the startling new allegations, according to The Sunday Times.*
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> *Professor Barrie Wilson and writer Simcha Jacobovic spent months translating the text, which they claim states Jesus had two children and the original Virgin Mary was Jesusâ€™s wife and not his mother.*

Another story about a document unearthed by scholars in a respected museum, but people don't seem to be getting quite so excited about this one. However, if we are going to uncritically accept the first report from a self-confessed satire website, we have even less reason to reject this one.

However, once again, everything is not quite as it first seems. Greg Carey, a professor of New Testament in the US has written a devastating critique of the so called 'Lost Gospels'. While the Jesus blog, has this amusing take on it.

> *Once, just once, could we have a hoax that claimed Jesus married someone else? Does it always have to be Mary Magdalene? According to the newest medieval rumor mill, not only does Jesus wed Mary (identified as a prostitute), the holy couple had two kids.*

Where Do We Place Our Faith? Why do people latch onto these internet rumours so quickly? Partly, it's because we are gullible and trusting. However, I also believe that there is a sense in which people want to have 'proof' to support their Christian beliefs. In a skeptical, irreligious age, when religion in general is under attack, it would be good to have something sold it to hold on to; some proof that we aren't fooling ourselves.

Jesus had something to say about this; in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, he told the story of a rich man who had died and gone to a place of torment. He wants to send someone back to his family to warn them to change their ways:

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> *28Â For I have five brothers, and I want him to warn them so they donâ€™t end up in this place of torment.â€™*
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> *29Â â€œBut Abraham said, â€˜Moses and the prophets have warned them. Your brothers can read what they wrote.â€™*
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> *30Â â€œThe rich man replied, â€˜No, Father Abraham! But if someone is sent to them from the dead, then they will repent of their sins and turn to God.â€™*
>
> *31Â â€œBut Abraham said, â€˜If they wonâ€™t listen to Moses and the prophets, they wonâ€™t be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.â€™â€*

We are in a much better place than the rich man's family; we have Moses, we have the prophets and we have the gospels and we have the indwelling witness of the Spirit. We don't need more.

It is entirely possible that documents will be unearthed which throw light on the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth; who knows. But if they do, they will be vigorously debated by scholars who know about these things and the reports will appear in the serious press. But they won't be the inspired Word of God.

> *Then Jesus told him, â€œYou believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.â€ (John 20:29)*

If someone does send you a link to something that looks too good to be true, just do a simple google search for the subject, but add the word 'hoax' at the end of your search term. You'll be surprised at what you turn up.Â