

Faith Pulpit

The Da Vinci Code and Early Christian History, Part 2

Other Historical Issues

Teabing argues that Christians and pagans were warring in the early fourth century, “and the conflict grew to such proportions that it had threatened to rend Rome in two.” FACT: Christianity did not have enough political or military clout to rival the pagan masses in the early fourth century. Christianity actually began the century as an oppressed minority suffering under the Great Persecution of A.D. 303–313.

Langdon asserts that early Christianity “honored the Jewish Sabbath of Saturday, but Constantine shifted it to coincide with the pagan’s veneration day of the sun.” Langdon then pauses and explains with a grin, “To this day, most churchgoers attend services on Sunday morning with no idea that they are there on account of the pagan sun god’s weekly tribute—Sunday” (p. 232–233). FACT: Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 112) stated that Christians did not observe the Sabbath but the “Lord’s Day” (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10).¹ Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 160) affirmed that “Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly.”² And Tertullian (c. A.D. 197) specifically maintained, “We devote Sunday to rejoicing for a far different reason than sun worship.”³

According to Teabing, “establishing Christ’s divinity [at the Council of Nicea] was critical to the further unification of the Roman empire and to the new Vatican power base . . . now the followers of Christ were able to redeem themselves only via the established sacred channel—the Roman Catholic Church” (233). FACT: The Council of Nicea declared Rome to be one of three ecclesiastical patriarchates (along with Alexandria and Antioch). In a sense, the actual “power” at that specific time was really shifting to the new capital of Constantinople.⁴

On page 232, Teabing declares that Constantine “was a lifelong pagan who was baptized on his deathbed, too weak to protest.” FACT: The reality and depth of Constantine’s conversion can most

definitely be questioned. He was not baptized on his deathbed because “he was too weak to protest,” however. Constantine was baptized upon his own request by Eusebius of Nicomedia, in the presence of a group of local bishops.⁵ The church historian E. Glenn Hinson muses, “Exactly why he [Constantine] delayed baptism is uncertain. He may have done so for political reasons, to avoid offending the predominantly pagan populace; for personal reasons, because he felt unworthy and, early on, unsure of his faith; for theological reasons, wanting to be sure he would receive full remission of sins and not wanting to undergo the rigors of penance at this time; or for a combination of these reasons.”⁶ The Life of Constantine accentuates the emperor’s desire to be “purified” through the “efficacy” of “the salutary waters of baptism” (4.61).

Langdon claims that celibacy was virtually forbidden by Jewish social decorum and was practically condemned by universal Jewish custom (245). FACT: Although family life was definitely the Jewish norm, there were notable exceptions. Philo, Josephus, and Pliny the Elder all discuss the Essenes, a Jewish group that encouraged celibacy. Philo wrote, “they repudiate marriage; and at the same time they practice continence in an eminent degree; for no one of the Essenes ever marries a wife.”⁷ Certain Jewish apocalyptic prophets encouraged celibacy, and the Jesus material found in Matthew 19:10–12 discusses the concept of being “eunuchs” for the sake of the kingdom. The Apostle Paul continued this positive valuation of celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7:25–27, 32–38.

According to page 248, Mary Magdalene was from the tribe of Benjamin. Teabing explains that this meant “Mary Magdalene was of royal descent” (248). FACT: No ancient evidence connects Mary Magdalene with the tribe of Benjamin. Furthermore, unlike the assumptions of the novel, being a member of this tribe did not entail a royal ancestry. For example, the Apostle Paul was a member of the tribe and had absolutely no regal aspirations (Phil. 3:5).

On page 256, Teabing refers to the “Q” Document as an existing manuscript. “Allegedly,” according to Teabing, “it is a book of Jesus’ teachings possibly written in His own hand.” Teabing claims that “Q” has been suppressed by the Vatican. FACT: The “Q” document is a hypothetical source for the materials that Matthew and Luke have in common but are not found in Mark.⁸ The reconstructed document is built upon the theory of “Markan priority” within Synoptic studies.⁹ In actuality, there is no extant copy of “Q,” suppressed by the Vatican or otherwise.

Conclusion

So what’s the point? Dan Brown seems to portray early “orthodox” Christianity as intolerant and elitist, while the Gnostics are characterized as tolerant and egalitarian. In other words, his “Gnostics” mirror influential members of the modern academy. Thus “Jesus was the original feminist” who emphasized the “sacred feminine” (p. 248). Nevertheless, various aspects of Gnostic thought hardly fit the part required of them in Dan Brown’s engaging drama. Consider the closing words of the Gospel of Thomas.¹⁰ “Jesus said to them, ‘I myself shall lead her [Mary Magdalene] 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” (114).¹¹ According to this text, the feminine must transcend itself and become masculine.¹²

Similarly, the Dialogue of the Savior warns the disciples to pray in a place free of women and exclaims, “Destroy the works of womanhood!”(144). Other Gnostic-influenced passages emphasize an androgynous theology. For example, the Gospel of Thomas 22 states, “And when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female . . . then you will enter the kingdom” (22).

Nor were the early Gnostics “tolerant” inclusivists. Both Gnosticism and “orthodox” Christianity recognized their mutual incompatibility, and the Gnostics similarly claimed that their version was the only correct one. Gnosticism was an elitist religion for the chosen few who had accepted a special gn̄sis, or esoteric knowledge. Moreover, Gnosticism’s mythological cosmology was far too complicated to become a universalizing religion.

The Da Vinci Code phenomenon gathers as a vaporous cloud above a modern cultural brew consisting of biblical illiteracy, historical amnesia, and radical revisionism boiling in a pot fired by the hermeneutics of suspicion. Anti-establishment conspiracy theories seem to thrive like weeds in this contemporary environment. Nevertheless, I do think that the popularity of this novel has served as a helpful reminder. Ben Witherington notes, “While many traditional Christians might be tempted to scoff at and dismiss such books as either mere fiction or the opinions of a few fringe scholars, this would be a serious mistake. We are facing a serious revolution regarding some of the long-held truths about Jesus, early Christianity and the Bible.”¹³ The influence of the Da Vinci Code underscores the importance of a working knowledge of early Christianity.

Perhaps a personal anecdote may illustrate this necessity. About a decade ago, I spoke at a pastors’ fellowship concerning the “Jesus Seminar,” including its use of the Gospel of Thomas.

A year later a pastor who had been in attendance admitted to me that he had skeptically wondered about the importance of my topic until one of his church members was perplexed by a PBS special on the “historical Jesus.” The media furor surrounding the recent examination of the Coptic Gospel of Judas further highlights the contemporary importance of early Christian studies. For the foreseeable future, pastors will need to possess a basic knowledge of important figures, texts, and movements in the early church (especially the second century). The compilation and recognition of the New Testament did not occur in a historical vacuum, and neither should our study of the canonical texts.

The luxury of abandoning the study of early Christianity to the more liturgical denominations is an option that Baptists can ill afford today. Furthermore, we must admit that common Baptist historiography has often caricatured an innocently pristine Christianity completely reversed by the

“Constantinian Turn.” But a critique of this unfortunate oversimplification must await another time and venue. In the meantime, the controversial figure of Mary Magdalene reminds us not of a supposed spouse of Jesus, but of an important follower of Christ who personally witnessed both the crucified Savior and the risen Lord the very foundations of the Gospel itself.

Works Cited

1. Ignatius, Magnesians 9.
2. Justin Martyr, First Apology 67.
3. Tertullian, Apology 16.
4. Five patriarchates were recognized by A.D. 451: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon, which confirmed the prerogatives of Constantinople as the new imperial seat and the “New Rome,” was not approved by the Roman delegation. By the end of the sixth century, the bishop of Constantinople was granted the title of “ecumenical (universal) patriarch.”
5. See the Life of Constantine 4.61–64. Eusebius of Nicomedia was a bishop with so-called “Arian” tendencies. Constantine himself had (ironically) attempted to restore Arius to an ecclesiastical post shortly before his death.
6. E. Glenn Hinson, *The Church Triumphant* (Macon: Mercer, 1995), 157.
7. Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.14–17.
8. The designation Q is usually traced to the German word *Quelle* (“source”).
9. Hence the “Two-Source Theory”: Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark and a second source.
10. The Gospel of Thomas seems to presuppose a Gnostic system, although it does not explicate the framework.
11. Translation by Thomas O. Lambdin in James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*. Rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990).
12. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 69.
13. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Code* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 11.

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