

Faith Pulpit

The Da Vinci Code and Early Christian History, Part 1

The Da Vinci Code, authored by Dan Brown, has quickly become an international bestseller and is now in theatrical release.¹ Because of its depiction of Jesus Christ and Christianity, this fictional page-turner has caused vociferous reactions far outside the literary world. Page one of the work, entitled “FACT,” asserts that “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” The book actually includes numerous historical inaccuracies, however. For the sake of time and convenience, this article will simply highlight those factual errors surrounding the book’s portrayal of early Christianity.² These historical blunders particularly concern the fields of canonicity and Christology and are especially concentrated in the discussions on pages 230–259. Those thirty pages contain informative conversations between the three main characters of the novel: Sophie Neveu (a French cryptographer), Robert Langdon (a Harvard symbologist), and Sir Leigh Teabing (a former British Royal Historian).

Some may wonder why the historical assumptions of a fictional work deserve a critique at all. First, reviews found in such sources as The Chicago Tribune and New York Daily News have called Brown’s historical research “impeccable” and “breathtaking.”³ Second, the novel clearly manifests an underlying religious agenda. “What I mean,” affirms Leigh Teabing on page 235, “is that almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false.” Brown specifically portrays Jesus as merely a “mortal prophet” who married Mary Magdalene and fathered a child with her. Third, Dan Brown himself takes the historical claims of his book seriously. In an ABC News Special on November 3, 2003, he confided, “I began as a skeptic. As I started researching the Da Vinci Code, I really thought I would disprove a lot of this theory about Mary Magdalene and Holy Blood and all of that. I became a believer.”⁴ Fourth, the Da Vinci Code (and similar materials) are influencing popular views. The results of a recent on-line poll concerning Mary Magdalene were as follows: Six percent believed that Mary Magdalene was a reformed prostitute. Twenty-six percent believed she was an early church leader

whose importance is not fully reflected in the Bible. Forty-two percent believed that she was one of Jesus' followers and the first to see the risen Christ. Twenty-seven percent believed that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife.⁵

Canoncial Issues

On page 231, Teabing cites "the fundamental irony of Christianity": "The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great." FACT: Constantine (died in A.D. 337) did not choose the contents of the New Testament canon. On the one hand, the first extant list that corresponds exactly to our modern canon is found in an Easter letter of Athanasius (A.D. 367). On the other hand, the basic structure of a four-fold gospel and a collection of Pauline epistles was securely in place within the second century. The book of Acts and some of the general epistles enjoyed a similarly early and continuous recognition as Scripture.

On page 234, Langdon adds, "Anyone who chose the forbidden gospels over Constantine's version was deemed a heretic. The word heretic derives from that moment in history. The Latin word *haereticus* means 'choice.' Those who 'chose' the original history of Christ were the world's first heretics." FACT: The earliest Christian use of "heresy" stems from the Greek word *hairesis*, and Titus 3:9 already refers to a *hairetikon anthrōpon* ("factious person").⁶ Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr refer pejoratively to "heresy" in the early and mid-second century.⁷ And Irenaeus (flourished A.D. 180-200) described various heretical movements in *Adversus haereses*.

On page 231, Sir Leigh Teabing claims that Jesus' life was "recorded by thousands of followers across the land." "Because Constantine upgraded Jesus' status almost four centuries after Jesus' death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal man" (234). In addition, "More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion—?Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them." FACT: Even if one counts the various apocryphal and Gnostic gospels, scholars are only aware of about twenty "gospels."⁸ Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are not merely among the Gospels included in the canon. They are the only canonical Gospels. The Gnostic Gospels were never deleted from the mainstream Christian canon, since they were never serious contenders for inclusion. Moreover, Constantine's summoning of the Council of Nicea happened three (not four) centuries after Jesus' death.

Page 245 refers to the book entitled *The Gnostic Gospels*, which is said to contain photographs of papyri documents found among the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea Scroll collections. FACT: *The Gnostic Gospels*, a study authored by Elaine Pagels, does not discuss the Dead Sea Scrolls, since they are not Gnostic Gospels. Moreover, the book does not contain any photographs of ancient documents at all.

“Fortunately for historians,” Teabing says on page 234, “some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1950s hidden in a cave near Qumran in the Judean desert.” Page 245 includes these Dead Sea Scrolls among “the earliest Christian records.” FACT: The Dead Sea Scrolls were first discovered in 1947, and they continued to be salvaged from eleven caves near Qumran into the 1950s. None of the Dead Sea documents are gospels concerning Jesus. In fact, the Dead Sea Scrolls are not even Christian texts, since they were written by Jewish sectarians.

Teabing also notes the “Coptic Scrolls” found “in 1945 at Nag Hammadi” (234). “In addition to telling the true Grail story, these documents speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms.” FACT: The Nag Hammadi library contained over forty codices (not scrolls). The collection was heavily influenced by Gnosticism, which stressed the divinity of a superhuman Christ-figure to such an extent that Jesus’ humanity was radically de-emphasized or completely denied.

Christological Issues

Teabing proposes that Jesus had not been considered divine until the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. At that council, according to Teabing, belief in Jesus’ divinity resulted from a “relatively close vote” (233). “Until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet” (233). FACT: The New Testament itself refers to the deity of Jesus Christ, and at least ten second-century authors referred to Jesus as “God.”⁹ As Bart Ehrman asserts, “Scholars who study the history of Christian theology will find it bizarre, at best, to hear Teabing claim that Christians before the Council of Nicea did not consider Jesus to be divine.”¹⁰ Ben Witherington dismisses this claim as “patently false.”¹¹ About three hundred bishops were in attendance at the Council of Nicea, and since only two bishops (along with Arius himself) refused to support the Nicene confession, it would be disingenuous to label the outcome as a “relatively close vote.”¹² Even the dissenters did not consider Jesus to be merely a “mortal prophet.”¹³

Teabing continues, “Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned” (234). “Therefore, any gospels that described earthly aspects of Jesus’ life had to be omitted from the Bible.” FACT: According to the Life of Constantine, the emperor did not commission a new Bible, but ordered fifty copies of the Scriptures to be made for churches in Constantinople (3.37). There is also no historical evidence that Constantine enacted an imperial policy of burning prohibited gospels.¹⁴ Moreover, all four canonical Gospels speak of the very human traits of Jesus, such as hunger, thirst, and weariness. Brown’s attempt to depict the Gnostic gospels as “earlier” than the canonical gospels is challenged by significant contrary evidence.¹⁵

On page 246, Sophie reads a passage from the Gospel of Philip that refers to Mary Magdalene as “the companion of the Saviour.” Teabing explains, “As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word

companion, in those days, literally meant spouse.” FACT: The Gospel of Philip is extant in Coptic, not Aramaic. The word *koinōnos* (“companion”) is a loan word from Greek that applies to various relationships, including friends and associates.

Teabing refers to the “countless references” to the union of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. He claims that the subject “has been explored ad nauseam by modern historians” (247). “As I said earlier, the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is part of the historical record” (245). FACT: None of the ancient documents, Gnostic or otherwise, explicitly mention a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Until very recently, the subject had only been explored by various conspiracy theorists and revisionist historians, including the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1982).¹⁶

On page 247, Sophie reads from the Gospel of Mary. Then Teabing explains to Sophie, “At this point in the gospels, Jesus suspects He will soon be captured and crucified. So He gives Mary Magdalene instructions on how to carry on His Church after He is gone.” Teabing further claims that Mary Magdalene was pregnant with Jesus’ child at the time of the crucifixion (255). FACT: The conversation in the Gospel of Mary seems to occur after the crucifixion. The revelation given to Mary in this Gnostic gospel concerns deliverance of the soul, not instructional guidance for the Church. No ancient document, whether “orthodox”¹⁷ or Gnostic, claims that Mary was bearing Jesus’ child.¹⁸

Works Cited

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
2. In other words, I will bypass issues concerning Opus Dei, the Priory of Sion, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Knights Templar.
3. See Grant Osborne, “Decoding The Da Vinci Code,” *Trinity Magazine* (Fall 2004), 20.
4. Cited in Darrell Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 3.
5. Available at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/135/story_13503_1.html.
6. The Greek term *hairesis* was used of “a choice, choice of belief, school of thought.”
7. See Allain Le Boulluec, *La notion l’hérésie dans la littérature grecque, IIe-IIIe siècles* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1985).
8. “Gnosticism” collectively refers to various syncretistic religious movements in the early centuries of the common era. They emphasized a pronounced dualism between the material and the spiritual, and they expounded a revealed knowledge (*gnōsis*) of secret truth concerning release from material bondage and the soul’s return to the divine realm.
9. See Paul Hartog, “Jesus as God in the Second Century,” *Christian Research Journal* 29.1 (2006): 24–31.
10. Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15.
11. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Code* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 22.
12. Patristic scholars dispute the exact tally of all the participating bishops, but the total amounts to around three hundred. Although Bock reproduces what he considers to be “the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325” on page 103, he has actually provided the so-called Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of A.D. 381. For an introduction to the original Nicene Creed, see Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 128–133. Grant Osborne states that the Council of Nicea voted on the canon of Scripture, and “actually only three of 300 bishops failed to vote for it” (Osborne, 22). Osborne seems to have confused a supposed vote for the biblical canon with these subscriptions emphasizing Christology.
13. Arius, for example, did not deny that the Son existed prior to the creation of the universe. Arius did, however, oppose the Son’s eternality and consubstantiality with the Father.
14. See Ehrman, 73–75.
15. See the summary of the evidence in Witherington, 21,22.
16. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which was written by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, is mentioned on page 253 of *The Da Vinci Code*. Two of these authors have recently accused Dan Brown of plagiarism, but they lost their legal case.
17. The actual term orthodoxy does not appear in first- through third-century documents. Nevertheless, New Testament authors were already contending for a form of normative Christianity.

18. Bart Ehrman (a contemporary author and an agnostic with no theological ax to grind) simply scoffs at Mary's supposed pregnancy: "That's a good one" (Ehrman, xv).

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