

The Da Vinci Code, the Nature of Christ, and Historical Accuracy

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Dan Brown's book *The Da Vinci Code* has given forty million people¹ a distorted version of Christian history. Millions more have been influenced by Ron Howard's motion picture adaptation of this book, released in May, 2006.² Even before the film came out, my students were asking questions about the concepts found in the book.

Some people have dismissed concerns about its theological and historical errors by saying, "It's just a work of fiction." However, popular perceptions of the past are heavily influenced by the images the public has seen in "historical" motion pictures and dramatic television productions, as well as the mental images generated by reading popular historical novels.³

Furthermore, Dan Brown claims that *The Da Vinci Code* is more than just a work of fiction. Not only do the dialogues in the book imply that Brown has superimposed a made-up story on a framework of essential truth,⁴ but the author baldly asserts, "All descriptions of . . . documents in this novel are accurate." Some of the historical misinformation is contained in these "descriptions of . . . documents."⁵

¹ Cathleen McGuigan, "Heck of a Prob, Brownie," *Newsweek*, 13 March 2006, 21.

² In its first five weeks after release, ticket receipts totaled \$680 million. AFP, "'Da Vinci Code' Tops World Box Office for 5th Straight Week," *DNA World*, 20 June 2006 <<http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?NewsID=1036644>>

³ A similar point is made in Bart Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), xvi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁵ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), [1].

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On the other hand, a few of the book's historical claims have the ring of truth for Seventh-day Adventists embracing the ideas of Ellen G. White's *Great Controversy*. Like Ellen White,⁶ Brown, through the novel's fictitious fountain of historical information, former British Royal Historian Sir Leigh Teabing, questions the genuineness of Constantine's conversion. He describes the pagan-hearted Constantine as creating a "kind of hybrid religion" by "fusing pagan symbols, dates, and rituals into the growing Christian religion."⁷ Adventists would be even more gratified to hear another of the novel's fictional scholars, Robert Langdon, professor of religious symbology at Harvard University,⁸ declare that Christianity originally "honored the Jewish Sabbath of Saturday." Constantine, he says, "shifted it to coincide with the pagan's veneration day of the sun."⁹

However pleased they might be to see a recognition of the seventh day as the original Christian Sabbath in a book read by scores of millions, they would hardly relish its positive slant on goddess worship¹⁰ and its totally unfounded¹¹ claim that ancient documents speak of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene.¹² They would be even less sympathetic with the book's head-on attack on the inspiration and reliability of the Bible¹³ and the divinity of Jesus Christ. Brown has Teabing assert that prior to the Council of Nicea, "Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet"—His "establishment as the 'Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on" in "a relatively close vote" at this council of Nicea.¹⁴

⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1911, 1950), 49–50. Some historians have made a similar assessment. For example, see Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Dorset, 1967, 1986), 125; Jacob Burkhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, trans. Moses Hadas (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1949), 292.

⁷ Brown, 216, 231–232; cf. White, 50.

⁸ Brown, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 232–233.

¹⁰ See, for example, *ibid.*, 46, 124, 255, 256, 390–391, 434, 444, 446, 448, 454.

¹¹ Ehrman, 143–144. Two of the *Nag Hammadi* gospels imply that Jesus had a special relationship with Mary but say nothing about marriage. James M. Robinson, gen. ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, third, completely rev. ed., 145, 148, 525, 526.

¹² Brown, 244–247, 255.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 231, 341.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

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Is that true? Was the divinity of Christ a novelty—a new idea introduced at the Council of Nicea? Do we owe our belief in Jesus as the Son of God to Constantine¹⁵ and a “close” vote at Nicea? Are there—as Brown asserts—gospels older and more reliable than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that present a Jesus who was altogether human?¹⁶ What is the historical evidence?

First, we should note that even scholars—such as Bart Ehrman—who use critical methods to attack the historical truth of much of the information in the New Testament gospels¹⁷ admit that these books are the oldest and most reliable accounts of Christ’s life. This, Ehrman declares, is not just his own opinion: “It is the conclusion that has been reached by every one of the hundreds (thousands, even) of scholars who work on the problem of establishing what really happened in the life of the historical Jesus.”¹⁸

Furthermore, even if the noncanonical gospels were reliable, they would not provide evidence that Jesus Christ was a mere mortal. Indeed, some of them point in the opposite direction, challenging the idea that he was really a human being. As Roland Bainton points out, “The greatest fight in the early church was to establish not the divinity, but the humanity of Christ.”¹⁹

Gnosticism, perhaps the greatest heretical challenge facing the early church, had a negative view of all things material, including the body, going so far as to present salvation as liberation from the body-prison. Various schools of Gnosticism presented Christ as either only appearing to have a body or as assuming the body of the man Jesus at His baptism and then abandoning it when Jesus—or Simon of Cyrene—was nailed to the cross.²⁰

¹⁵ Brown also makes the unfounded claim that Constantine created the canon; *ibid.*, 231. The canon’s “basic outline was fixed during the second half of the second century.” This includes the general acceptance of the “fourfold witness to the gospel” championed by Irenaeus and the exclusion as heretical of other gospels; Gonzalez 1:149.

¹⁶ See, for example, *ibid.*, 231, 234, 235, 245.

¹⁷ Ehrman, 116–117, 124.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 102–103. See also Robert Sheaffer, “The Da Vinci Code Cult,” *Skeptical* 11/4 (2005): 22–23. However, some scholars suggest that at least part of the Gospel of Thomas may be as old as, or older than, the canonized gospels. See Robinson, 125; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1978), xvii.

¹⁹ Roland Bainton, *Christianity*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964, 2000), 67.

²⁰ Kurt Randolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. and ed. Robert McLachlan Wilson (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1977, 1987), 157–158, 167; Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, rev. ed., vol. 1: *From the Begin-*

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The specific ancient documents that Brown mentions are the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gnostic Gospels in the Nag Hammadi Library. “These documents,” he declares, “speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms.” He quotes specifically from the gospels of Philip and Mary.²¹

The Dead Sea Scrolls are Jewish documents. They “do not contain any gospels” or any mention whatever of Jesus Christ or the emerging Christian movement.²²

The Nag Hammadi books are indeed Gnostic “Christian” literature, including a number of gospels. The Jesus they present is “the revealer and proclaimer of gnostic wisdom,” and Christ is “made into a strictly mythological being.”²³ Says Ehrman, who translated some of these gospels for his book *Lost Scriptures*,²⁴ “If anything, Jesus is portrayed as more divine in the Nag Hammadi sources than he is in the Gospels of the New Testament.”²⁵

The Gospel of Mary, which scholars date to the second century—perhaps late in that century,²⁶ says nothing to indicate that Jesus was a mere mortal. In fact, it seems to me that He is describing Himself in this book as “the Good” who has “come into your midst.”²⁷ Its main focus seems to be on the ascent of the “enlightened soul”—evidently liberated from its body-prison—taking various forms in order to deceive the powers that would keep it down.²⁸

The Gospel of Philip is a third-century document that may have made use of older sources.²⁹ This “gospel” includes a statement of the Gnostic idea that the creation of this world was a mistake³⁰ and speaks of

nings to the Council of Chalcedon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970, 1987), 74, 130 (text and n. 24), 132, 134; Ehrman, 42, 43.

²¹ Brown, 234, 245–247.

²² Ehrman, 26; Gonzalez, 35; Bainton, 213; Sheaffer, 22.

²³ Randolph, 151.

²⁴ Bart D. Ehrman [ed.], *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003).

²⁵ Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction*, 26.

²⁶ Robinson, 524; Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 35.

²⁷ “Gospel of Mary,” in Robinson, 525.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 523, 526.

²⁹ Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 38; Robinson, 141.

³⁰ “Gospel of Philip,” 99, in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 43.

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Christ as a pre-existing being³¹ who “showed himself not to be as he really was, but appeared in a way that they could see him.”³²

This is not the only Gnostic gospel that seems to deny the essential humanity of Jesus Christ. Another is the Apocalypse of Peter, in which Jesus speaks of “my incorporeal body.”³³

Although Brown is clearly mistaken in citing the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gnostic gospels as evidence that early Christians believed that Jesus was a mere mortal, he could presumably have looked elsewhere. Historians speak of other pre-Constantine Christians who denied Christ’s divinity, including some people classified as Judaizers³⁴ (especially Ebionites), adoptionists,³⁵ and dynamic monarchians.³⁶ Such groups were clearly a small minority on the fringes of Christianity.³⁷ The divinity of Jesus Christ was something most early Christians seem to have taken for granted. Declaring Jesus to be divine was not some novelty Constantine invented.

As Jaroslav Pelikan points out, “The oldest surviving pagan report about the church described Christians as gathering before sunrise and ‘singing a hymn to Christ as to [a] god.’”³⁸ This report was written by Pliny in A.D. 112.³⁹ Pelikan also notes that the “oldest surviving sermon of the Christian Church after the New Testament opened with these words: ‘Brethren, we ought so to think of Jesus Christ as of God, as of the judge of the living and the dead.’”⁴⁰

³¹ Ibid., 9, in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 39; cf. Robinson, 142.

³² “Gospel of Philip,” 26, in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 41; cf. Robinson, 144–145.

³³ “The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter,” in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 81.

³⁴ Gonzalez, 74, 122–124. Gonzalez (122) notes, “It is difficult to determine the exact nature of the doctrine held by the diverse Judaizing movements” for two reasons: the “scarcity of sources” and the fact that the “ancient Christian writers” discussing them “seem confused.”

³⁵ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, I: Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1953, 1975), 143–144; Linwood Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 76.

³⁶ Gonzalez, 144.

³⁷ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), 114; Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction*, 20; Gonzalez, 144.

³⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971), 173.

³⁹ Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction*, 104–105.

⁴⁰ Pelikan, 173, cf. “An Ancient Homily” in J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Greek Texts with Introductions and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1984, 1987 from the 1891 ed. pub. by Macmillan, London), 87. This was “probably written before A.D. 150”; Gonzalez, 65.

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The Apostolic Fathers are considered the “earliest surviving Christian writings apart from those” included in the New Testament. They all agreed “in affirming” both Christ’s “divinity and his humanity,” as well as His pre-existence, according to Justo Gonzalez, who says all but one of them agreed “in making use of diverse Trinitarian formulas, no matter how primitive.”⁴¹ This was long before the time of Constantine.

Ignatius, who was executed very early in the second century,⁴² was one of these “Apostolic Fathers.” He says that “our God, Jesus the Christ was conceived in the womb by Mary.”⁴³ He uses the expression “our God Jesus” more than once and refers to the passion of Christ as “the passion of my God.”⁴⁴

Among the other second-century Christian writers who affirmed the divinity of Jesus are Justin Martyr, Tatian, Tertullian, and Irenaeus. Justin said,

The Jews, being . . . of the opinion that it was the Father of the universe who spake to Moses, though He who spake to him was indeed the son of God . . . are justly charged . . . by Christ Himself with knowing neither the Father nor the Son. For they . . . are proved neither to have become acquainted with the Father, nor to know that the Father of the universe has a Son, who also, being the first-begotten Word of God, is even God. And of old He appeared in the shape of fire and in the likeness of an angel to Moses and to the other prophets; but now . . . become Man by a virgin.

Justin then reminds his readers that the words coming from the burning bush, spoken by the individual Justin has identified as Jesus, were, “I am that I am, the God of Abraham, The God of Isaac, and the God of your fathers. . . .” There is absolutely no question about this: Justin Martyr taught the divinity of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Gonzalez, 61, 95. An example of this is found in Clement, “To the Corinthians,” 46: “Have we not one God and one Christ and one Spirit of grace . . .” Lightfoot and Harmer, 77.

⁴² Philip Shaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. I: *Ante-Nicene Christianity, A.D. 100–325* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910, rpr. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987), 49.

⁴³ Ignatius, “To the Ephesians” 18 (cf. 15) in Lightfoot and Harmer, 141.

⁴⁴ Ignatius, “To the Romans” 3, 6, in Lightfoot and Harmer, 150–151.

⁴⁵ “The First Apology of Justin,” 43, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994, rpr. American Ed. of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), 1:184.

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Tatian was another second-century writer who said, “God was born in the form of a man.”⁴⁶ Irenaeus, borrowing a phrase from Isaiah, called Jesus “the mighty God,”⁴⁷ and he indicated that God consisted of Father, Son, and Spirit.⁴⁸

Tertullian and his disciple Hippolytus, like most early Christians,⁴⁹ believed that humanity and divinity were united in Jesus Christ.⁵⁰ Regarding Christ’s divinity, Tertullian said, “For God alone is without sin; and the only man without sin is Christ, since Christ is also God.”⁵¹

These examples from the second century should suffice to show that the divinity of Jesus Christ was not a fourth-century invention. By the time the Council of Nicea was called in 325 A.D., Christians had been declaring that Jesus was divine for more than two hundred years.

Thus we see that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are generally considered even by historical-critical Biblical scholars to be the oldest and most reliable gospels and that more than a century before the Council of Nicea, most Christians considered Jesus Christ to be the divine Son of God. Whatever Constantine and the Council of Nicea accomplished, those accomplishments did not include inventing the idea of Jesus’ divinity.

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⁴⁶ “Address of Tatian to the Greeks” 21 in *ibid.*, vol. 2:74.

⁴⁷ “Irenaeus Against Heresies” 3. 19. 2 in *ibid.*, vol. 3:449.

⁴⁸ Gonzalez, 161.

⁴⁹ Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction*, 18. This includes Clement of Rome. Gonzalez, 67.

⁵⁰ Gonzalez, 182, 234.

⁵¹ “A Treatise on the Soul” 41, in Roberts and Donaldson, vol. 3:221. Roland Bainton credits Tertullian with coining “the word *Trinity*.” Bainton, 79.