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# Was There a Jesus Conspiracy?

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We have seen that leading historians unanimously accept the fact that Jesus was a real person who has significantly impacted our world.

Nevertheless, countless conspiracy theories have attacked the New Testament teaching of his deity. Perhaps the most widely believed conspiracy theory has been postulated by Dan Brown in his fictional novel, *The Da Vinci Code*.

*The Da Vinci Code* is not to be ignored as a fictional plot. Its premise, that Jesus Christ has been reinvented by the church for political purposes, attacks the very foundation of Christianity. Its author, Dan Brown, has stated on national TV that, even though the plot is fictional, he believes its account of Jesus' identity is true. So, what is the truth? Let's take a look.

- Was Jesus' deity invented by Constantine and the church?
- Were the original records of Jesus destroyed?
- Do recently discovered manuscripts tell the truth about Jesus?
- Did Jesus have a secret marriage with Mary Magdalene?

Several of Brown's assertions regarding Jesus Christ's identity try to persuade the reader of a conspiracy. For example, the fictional scholar in the book states:

Nobody is saying Christ was a fraud or denying that He walked the earth and inspired millions to better lives. All we are saying is that Constantine took advantage of Christ's substantial influence and importance. And in doing so, he shaped the face of Christianity as we know it today.<sup>1</sup>

*The Da Vinci Code* book has sold over 80 million copies and has been watched by millions more in a blockbuster movie starring Tom Hanks. Although the plot is fictional, it has convinced many readers that its theme of a Jesus conspiracy is actually true.

## The Jesus Conspiracy

Brown's fictional plot begins with the murder of a French museum curator named Jacques Sauniere. A scholarly Harvard professor and a beautiful French cryptologist are commissioned to decipher a message left by the curator before his death.

The message turns out to reveal the most profound conspiracy in the history of humankind: a cover-up of the true message of Jesus Christ by a secret arm of the Roman Catholic Church called Opus Dei.

Before his death, the curator claimed to have evidence that could disprove the deity of Christ. Although (according to the plot) the Church tried for centuries to suppress the evidence, great thinkers and artists have planted clues everywhere: in paintings such as the *Mona Lisa* and *Last Supper* by da Vinci, in the architecture of cathedrals, even in Disney cartoons. The book's sensational claims are these:

- The Roman emperor Constantine conspired to deify Jesus Christ by personally selecting the books of the New Testament.
- The Gnostic gospels were banned by men to suppress women.
- Jesus and Mary Magdalene were secretly married and had a child.
- Thousands of secret documents disprove key points of Christianity.

Brown reveals his conspiracy through the book's fictional expert, British royal historian Sir Leigh Teabing. Presented as a wise old scholar, Teabing reveals to cryptologist Sophie Neveu that at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 "many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon," including the deity of Jesus.

"Until that moment in history," he says, "Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet ... a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless."

Neveu is shocked. "Not the Son of God?" she asks.

Teabing explains: "Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea."

"Hold on," she exclaimed. "You're saying Jesus' divinity was the result of a vote?"

"A relatively close vote at that," Teabing tells the stunned cryptologist.<sup>2</sup>

So, according to Teabing, Jesus was not regarded as God until the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, when the real records of Jesus were allegedly banned and destroyed. Thus, according to *The Da Vinci Code* conspiracy theory, the entire foundation of Christianity rests upon a lie.

*The Da Vinci Code* has sold its story so well that many readers think its plot is factual rather than fictional. For example, one reader concluded, “If it were not true it could not have been published!” Another reader said he would “never set foot in a church again.” A reviewer of the book praised it for its “impeccable research.”<sup>3</sup> Pretty convincing for a fictional work.

Although *The Da Vinci Code* is fictional, it does base much of its premise upon actual events (the Council of Nicaea), actual people (Constantine and Arius), and actual documents (the Gnostic gospels). If we are to get to the bottom of the conspiracy, our investigation must be to address Brown’s accusations and separate fact from fiction.

## **Constantine And Christianity**

In the centuries prior to Constantine’s reign over the Roman Empire Christians had been severely persecuted—even martyred—because they worshiped Jesus rather than Caesar. Yet, the church grew through persecution, and when Constantine became Emperor in AD 306, over 10% of the Roman Empire were Christians.

Although Constantine wasn’t a Christian when he became Emperor, six years later he claimed to have seen a bright image of a cross in the sky inscribed with the words “Conquer by this.” Inspired by this vision, he marched into battle under the sign of the cross and embraced Christianity.

Constantine’s apparent conversion to Christianity was a watershed in church history. Under his reign, Rome became a Christian empire. For the first time in nearly 300 years, it was relatively safe to be a Christian.

No longer were Christians persecuted for their faith. Constantine then sought to unify his Eastern and Western Empires, which had been badly divided by schisms, sects, and cults, centering primarily on the issue of Jesus Christ’s identity.

These are some of the kernels of truth in *The Da Vinci Code*, and kernels of truth are a prerequisite for any successful conspiracy theory. But the book’s plot turns Constantine into a conspirator. So, let’s address a key question raised by Brown’s

theory: did Constantine invent the Christian doctrine of Jesus' deity?

Deifying Jesus?

To answer Brown's accusation, we must first determine what Christians in general believed before Constantine ever convened the council at Nicaea.

According to ancient manuscripts, Christians had been worshiping Jesus as God since the 1<sup>st</sup> century. But in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Arius, a church leader from the east, launched a campaign to defend God's oneness. He taught that Jesus was a specially created being, higher than the angels, but not God.

Athanasius and most church leaders, on the other hand, were convinced that Jesus was—as the New Testament eyewitnesses claimed— God in the flesh.

Constantine wanted to settle the dispute, hoping to bring peace to his empire, uniting the east and west divisions. Therefore, in AD 325 he convened more than 300 bishops at Nicaea (now part of Turkey) from throughout the Christian world.

The crucial question is, did the early church think Jesus was the Creator or merely a creation—Son of God or merely son of a carpenter? To answer that question they looked to what the apostles believed and taught. So, what did the apostles teach about Jesus?

From their very first recorded statements, the apostles regarded Jesus as God. About 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul wrote the Philippians that Jesus was God in human form (Philippians 2:6-7, NLT). And John, a close eyewitness, confirms Jesus' divinity in the following passage:

In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. Life itself was in him...So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us (John 1: 1-4, 14, NLT).

This passage from John 1, has been discovered in an ancient manuscript, a copy of the original, carbon-dated at AD 175-225. Earlier fragments from John's Gospel have also been discovered, proving that Jesus was clearly spoken of as God over a hundred years before Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea (See Appendix page 92, "Did the Apostles Believe Jesus is God?").

This forensic manuscript evidence contradicts *The Da Vinci Code's* claim that Jesus' deity was a 4<sup>th</sup> century invention. But what does history tell us about the Council of Nicaea? Brown asserts in his book, through Teabing, that the majority of bishops at Nicaea overruled Arius's belief that Jesus was a "mortal prophet" and adopted the doctrine of Jesus' deity by a "relatively close vote." True or false?

The historical record reveals that only two of the 318 bishops dissented, one of them being Arius himself. Whereas Arius believed that the Father alone was God, and that Jesus was his supreme creation, the council overwhelmingly concluded that Jesus and the Father were of the same divine essence, condemning Arius as a heretic. The nearly unanimous vote only confirmed what the apostles had taught.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were deemed to be distinct, coexistent, coeternal Persons, but one God. This doctrine of one God in three Persons became known as the Nicene Creed, which is the central core of the Christian Faith and its trinitarian doctrine.

From the first days of the Christian church, Jesus was regarded as far more than a mere man, and most of his followers worshiped him as Lord-the Creator of the universe. So, how could Constantine have invented the doctrine of Jesus' divinity if the church had regarded Jesus as God for more than 200 years? *The Da Vinci Code* doesn't address this question.

#### Firing On the Canon

*The Da Vinci Code* also states that Constantine suppressed all documents about Jesus other than those found in our current New Testament canon.

The early church fathers were committed to preserving the writings of the original apostles, eliminating those that were fraudulent or questionable. This preservation of the original New Testament documents (canon) is recognized by the church as authentic eyewitness reports of the apostles.

However, in the book, Brown asserts that the New Testament accounts were altered by Constantine and the bishops to reinvent Jesus. Another key element of *The Da Vinci Code* conspiracy is that the four New Testament Gospels were cherry-picked from a total of "more than 80 gospels," most of which were supposedly suppressed by Constantine.<sup>5</sup>

There are two central issues here, and we need to address both. The first is whether Constantine altered or biased the selection of the New Testament books. The second is whether he barred documents that should have been included in the Bible.

Regarding the first issue, letters and documents written by 2<sup>nd</sup> century church leaders and heretics alike confirm the wide usage of the New Testament books nearly 200 years before Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea.

So, if the New Testament was already widely in use 200 years before Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, how could the emperor have invented or altered it? By that time the church was widespread and encompassed millions of believers, all of whom were familiar with and trusted the traditional New Testament accounts.

In his book *The Da Vinci Deception*, an analysis of *The Da Vinci Code*, New Testament scholar Dr. Erwin Lutzer sets the record straight about the New Testament's authenticity,

Constantine did not decide which books would be in the canon; indeed, the topic of the canon did not even come up at the Council of Nicaea. By that time the early church was reading a canon of books it had determined was the Word of God two hundred years earlier.<sup>6</sup>

Although the official canon was still years from being finalized, the New Testament of today was deemed authentic more than two centuries before Nicaea.

## **Why the Gnostic Gospels Were Excluded**

This brings us to our second issue; why were these mysterious Gnostic gospels destroyed and excluded from the New Testament? In Brown's book, *Teabing* asserts that the Gnostic writings were eliminated from 50 authorized Bibles commissioned by Constantine at the council. He excitedly tells Neveu:

Because Constantine upgraded Jesus' status almost four centuries after Jesus' death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history. ...

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.<sup>7</sup>

Are these Gnostic writings the real history of Jesus Christ? Let's take a deeper look to see if we can separate truth from fiction.

The Gnostic gospels name comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." These people thought they had secret, special knowledge hidden from ordinary people.

The Gnostic writings date from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, at least a hundred years after Christ. Therefore, they couldn't have been written by eyewitnesses. In comparison, the New Testament writings date from the mid to late 1<sup>st</sup> century while eyewitnesses would still have been living.

Of the 52 Gnostic writings, only five are actually listed as gospels. As we shall see, these so-called gospels are markedly different from the New Testament Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

As Christianity spread, the Gnostics mixed some doctrines and elements of Christianity into their beliefs, morphing Gnosticism into a counterfeit Christianity. However, for their system of thought to fit with Christianity, Jesus needed to be reinvented, stripped of both his humanity and his absolute deity.

In *The Oxford History of Christianity* John McManners wrote of the Gnostics' mixture of Christian and mythical beliefs.

Gnosticism was (and still is) a theosophy with many ingredients. Occultism and oriental mysticism became fused with astrology and magic. ... They collected sayings of Jesus shaped to fit their own interpretation (as in the Gospel of Thomas), and offered their adherents an alternative or rival form of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

## Early Critics

Contrary to Brown's assertions, it was not Constantine who branded the Gnostic beliefs as heretical; it was the apostles themselves. A mild strain of the philosophy was already growing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century just decades after the death of Jesus. The apostles, in their teaching and writings, went to great lengths to condemn these beliefs as being opposed to the truth of Jesus, to whom they were eyewitnesses.

Check out, for example, what the apostle John wrote near the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century:

Who is the great liar? The one who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Such people are antichrists, for they have denied the Father and the Son (1 John 2:22).

Following the apostles' teaching, the early church leaders unanimously condemned the Gnostics as a cult. Church father Irenaeus, writing 140 years before the Council of Nicaea, confirmed that Gnostics were condemned by the church as heretics. He also rejected their "gospels." However, referring to the four New Testament Gospels, he said, "It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are."<sup>9</sup>

Christian theologian Origen wrote this in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, more than a hundred years before Nicaea:

I know a certain gospel which is called "The Gospel according to Thomas" and a "Gospel according to Matthias," and many others have we read—lest we should in any way be considered ignorant because of those who imagine they possess some knowledge if they are acquainted with these. Nevertheless, among all these we have approved solely what the church has recognized, which is that only four gospels should be accepted.<sup>10</sup>

There we have it in the words of a highly regarded early church leader. The Gnostics were recognized as a non-Christian cult well before the Council of Nicaea. But there's more evidence calling into question claims made in *The Da Vinci Code*.

## **Who's Sexist?**

Brown suggests that one of the motives for Constantine's alleged banning of the Gnostic writings was a desire to suppress women in the church. Ironically, it is the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas that demeans women. It concludes (supposedly quoting Peter) with this eye-popping statement: "Let Mary go away from us, because women are not worthy of life."<sup>11</sup>

In stark contrast, the Jesus of the biblical Gospels always treated women with dignity and respect. The New Testament writings have been foundational to attempts at raising women's status. As the apostle Paul writes,

In Christ there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians—you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28, NLT).

## Mystery Authors

When it comes to the Gnostic gospels, just about every book carries the name of a New Testament character: the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary, The Gospel of Judas, and so on.

But since the Gnostic gospels are dated about 110 to 300 years after Christ, no credible scholar believes any of them could have been written by their namesakes. In James M. Robinson's comprehensive *The Nag Hammadi Library*, we learn that the Gnostic gospels were written by "largely unrelated and anonymous authors."<sup>12</sup> Dr. Darrell L. Bock, professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote,

The bulk of this material is a few generations removed from the foundations of the Christian faith, a vital point to remember when assessing the contents.<sup>13</sup>

Biblical scholar Norman Geisler summarizes the case against including the Gnostic writings in the New Testament:

The Gnostic writings were not written by the apostles, but by men in the second century (and later) pretending to use apostolic authority to advance their own teachings. Today we call this fraud and forgery.<sup>14</sup>

## Mrs. Jesus

The most provocative assertion of the Da Vinci conspiracy is that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a secret marriage, resulting in a child that perpetuated his bloodline. Furthermore, Mary Magdalene's womb, carrying Jesus' offspring, is presented in the book as the legendary Holy Grail, a secret closely held by a Catholic organization called the Priory of Sion. Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo Da Vinci were all cited in the book as members of this secret organization.

Romance. Scandal. Intrigue. Great stuff for a conspiracy theory. But is it true? Let's look at what scholars say.

A *Newsweek* magazine article, that summarized leading scholars' opinions, concluded that the theory that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were secretly married has no historical basis.<sup>15</sup> The proposal set forth in *The Da Vinci Code* is built primarily

upon one solitary verse in the Gnostic Gospel of Philip that indicates Jesus and Mary were companions.

In the book, Teabing tries to build a case that the word for companion (*koinonos*) could mean spouse.<sup>16</sup> But Teabing's theory is not accepted by scholars.

There is also a single verse in the Gospel of Philip that says Jesus kissed Mary. Greeting friends with a kiss was common in the 1st century and had no sexual connotation. There is no historical document to confirm its theory that Jesus and Mary had a marital relationship. And since the Gospel of Philip is a forged document written 150-220 years after Christ by an unknown author, its statement about Jesus isn't historically reliable.

## **The "Secret" Documents**

But what about Teabing's disclosure that "thousands of secret documents" prove that Christianity is a hoax? Could this be true?

If there were such documents, scholars opposed to Christianity would have a field day with them. Fraudulent writings that were rejected by the early church for heretical views are not secret, having been known about for centuries. No surprise there. They have never been considered part of the authentic writings of the apostles.

And if the book's expert, Teabing, is referring to the apocryphal, or Gnostic Gospels, they are not secret, nor do they disprove Christianity. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown has said of the Gnostic gospels,

We learn not a single verifiable new fact about the historical Jesus' ministry, and only a few new sayings that might possibly have been his.<sup>17</sup>

The historical evidence reveals that Jesus' followers believed in his deity from the time of the resurrection and early church history. The true church never deviated from the eyewitness accounts recorded in the New Testament. And although conspiracy theories like *The Da Vinci Code* attack the validity of the New Testament, scholars deem it the most reliable of all ancient writings. As New Testament Historian F. F. Bruce explains,

There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.<sup>18</sup>

New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger revealed why the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas was not accepted by the early church:

It is not right to say that the Gospel of Thomas was excluded by some fiat on the part of a council: the right way to put it is, the Gospel of Thomas excluded itself! It did not harmonize with other testimony about Jesus that early Christians accepted as trustworthy.<sup>19</sup>

## History's Verdict

So, what are we to conclude regarding the various conspiracy theories about Jesus Christ? Karen King, professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard, has written several books on the Gnostic gospels, including *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* and *What Is Gnosticism?* King, though a strong advocate of Gnostic teaching, concluded, "These notions about the conspiracy theory ... are all marginal ideas that have no historical basis."<sup>20</sup>

Despite the lack of historical evidence, conspiracy theories will still sell millions of books and set box office records. Scholars in related fields, some Christians and some with no faith at all, have disputed the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*. However, the easily swayed will still wonder; Could there be something to it after all?

But if you want to read the true accounts of Jesus Christ, then Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us what the eyewitnesses saw, heard, and wrote.

And what the eyewitnesses wrote about was the most amazing person in the history of our planet: A man who healed the lame, deaf and blind, raised the dead, and defeated death. But the claim he made that led to his rejection and death was the same one that *The Da Vinci Code* attempts to refute—that God put on humanity to become our Savior.

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## Endnotes