

# Da CIPHERING Da Vinci

## Introduction

As the train pulled away from the station Elizabeth, café latte in hand, sat down next to her friend Lucy. They worked at the same firm in the city and for the last three years had commuted together. They sat in the lower level of the third carriage on the 7:35 train. On this particular morning Lucy was engrossed in a book as Elizabeth sat down.

'Good morning' Elizabeth said. 'What are you reading?'

Lucy marked her page and showed her friend the cover of the book.

'*The Da Vinci Code*? Isn't that coming out in theatres soon?' Elizabeth asked, sipping her coffee.

'This weekend.' Lucy replied. 'A few of us are talking about going on Saturday. Are you interested?'

'Sure' Elizabeth replied. 'Do you like it?' she asked, pointing to the book.

'It's great. I can hardly put it down.' Lucy replied. 'Have you read it?' she asked.

'Yeah.' Elizabeth said then averted her eyes as Lucy asked the question she'd been dreading.

'Hey, you're a Christian aren't you? What do you think of all this?'

'I thought it was a pretty good piece of fiction I suppose.' she said.

'Sure, but what about the claims it makes. You have to admit the evidence is pretty compelling. All those clues in DaVinci's paintings, church architecture and those ancient documents. The fact page says they're all accurate.'

'Um...' stumbled Elizabeth. She didn't know what to say.

## The Novel

Let's hit the 'pause' button on this fictional but not unrealistic conversation. Perhaps you've had a similar conversation with a friend or family member about the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*, the best-selling book by Dan Brown which has sold over 40 million copies worldwide and has recently been turned into a movie.

The novel makes some outrageous claims about Jesus, the Catholic Church, and the Bible.

To summarise *The Da Vinci Code* claims that Jesus was a mortal man who was married to Mary Magdalene with whom he had a child and who was to lead the church after his death. This all changed when the pagan emperor Constantine 'upgraded' Jesus to the divine son of God. In order for this to stick he commissioned a new Bible.

The 'truth' would have been lost except for the Priory of Sion who found, and protect to this day, the documents which the Catholic Church is desperate to destroy.

The difficulty for many Christians is that while they are pretty certain that the claims of *The Da Vinci Code* are incorrect they have no idea where to begin in discussing these claims with their friends. This is because they are not exactly certain which pieces of *The Da Vinci Code* are wrong nor are they exactly certain how to defend Christian beliefs such as the reliability of the New Testament. The result is that most Christians feel ill-equipped to adequately discuss the truth behind *The Da Vinci Code*.

If you find yourself in that category don't despair; help has arrived!

Despite its fictional character *The Da Vinci Code* has made quite an impact on our society. Why has this book become so popular?

In the preface to his book, *The Gospel Code*, Ben Witherington III summarises the situation. 'Western culture is a Jesus-haunted culture, and yet one that is largely biblically illiterate. Almost anything can pass for knowledge of Jesus and early Christianity in such a culture.' (2004, 11)

Many people, dissatisfied with traditional Christianity and without the ability to discern what is truthful from what is false, resonate with the assertions made in *The Da Vinci Code* that Jesus was just a great man and that original Christianity was more open and inclusive than its modern counterpart.

It supports what they want to believe about Jesus and the Church and lets them off the hook of seriously considering the claims of Jesus and Christianity.

It is therefore increasingly important that Christians get in touch with their past in order to be able to recognise true and false statements about Jesus and the Church.

It is also important that Christians be able to gently challenge the easy and uncritical acceptance of claims such as those made in *The Da Vinci Code*.

Many other books have been written in the past couple of years exposing the errors in *The Da Vinci Code*.

This booklet is different in two ways.

First, its primary aim is to provide you with the information you need to stimulate discussion about the accuracy of Dan Brown's claims with those who hold *The Da Vinci Code* to be gospel truth.

Second, it has been written with the ordinary Christian in mind. By this I mean the Christian who genuinely wants to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by *The Da Vinci Code* to talk to their friends about Jesus but isn't interested in reading several books about the novel in order to do so.

We will confine our investigation to the claims made about Constantine, the New Testament and Jesus. If, however, you find that you do want to do more reading I have included a short bibliography of recommended books with a brief review of each.

## **Fact or Fiction?**

We have already seen how the claims of *The Da Vinci Code* have tapped into the dissatisfaction that many people have with traditional Christianity.

There is, however, another reason that the claims made in the novel are being taken so seriously. The very first page is titled 'FACT' and states 'All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.' This claim to factuality has implications that run throughout the book and influences the way people read the 'evidence' set forth in *The Da Vinci Code* about Jesus, the Church and the Bible.

The problem is that Brown is anything but accurate in his descriptions of artwork, architecture and documents found in *The Da Vinci Code*.

A few examples will suffice: Brown claims that 'The Madonna of the Rocks' measures 'five-foot-tall canvas' (30:182). In reality the painting measures six and a half feet by four feet (199 cm x 122 cm). Brown claims that DaVinci's 'The Lord's Supper' is a fresco (55:318). In reality it is a tempura on stone which is a different style of painting all together. Brown claims that there are 666 panes of glass on the pyramid entrance to the Louvre (4:40). In reality there are 673 (603 diamonds and 70 triangles)

which is not nearly as devilish. And on it goes.

Now, you might be thinking, 'What's the big deal? So he got a few details incorrect? Isn't that a bit pedantic? It's just a novel.' The big deal is first of all, that Brown claims to be accurate. If he is wrong about the details of a painting which can be looked up on the web in thirty seconds can he be trusted about the claims he makes about Jesus and the Church?

Furthermore, Brown supports his claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Church from his interpretation of artwork, architecture and documents described in his novel.

It should, of course, be realised, that accurate descriptions do not automatically insure valid interpretations. Interpretation requires additional skills.

For example, when my computer plays up I can accurately describe the problem - it is really slow, it crashes a lot, etc. - but I don't necessarily know what those things might mean. I don't really understand how computers work.

While accurate descriptions do not necessarily lead to valid conclusions, inaccurate descriptions would seemingly preclude valid ones. When it then becomes clear that Brown's descriptions are inaccurate the validity of his interpretations must also be brought into question.

### **The outline of this booklet**

As mentioned earlier this booklet will explore the truthfulness behind the claims made about Constantine, the New Testament and Jesus. Each chapter will open with a brief outline of the claims made in *The Da Vinci Code* and where to find them.

Throughout this booklet whenever I reference a claim made in the novel I refer to the chapter followed by the page number in the Corgi paperback version (2004).

Hopefully, the chapter reference will help you find the material regardless of which edition you possess. You might notice that nearly all of the claims come from a series of six chapters (55, 56, 58, 60, 61, 62) while Sophie Neveu and Robert Langdon are at Château Villette with Sir Leigh Teabing.

So much of the conspiracy rests on the actions of Constantine the Great that we need to start with the claims made about the fourth century emperor.

In Chapter One we will examine four of these claims: a) that he fused Christianity and paganism together; b) that he 'upgraded' Jesus from mortal prophet to divine being at the Council of Nicea and then; c) commissioned a new Bible to support his new Christianity all the while; d) a complete pagan himself. Once we dispense with the claims that he radically altered Christianity (a & b) the authenticity of his conversion (d) becomes less significant.

Even if Constantine didn't require a new Bible to support his new official ideology *The Da Vinci Code* insinuates that the New Testament is not a reliable source of information about Jesus.

Chapter Two will be concerned with the question of how reliable is the New Testament against other sources such as the Nag Hammadi Texts which also record information about Jesus.

Finally, in Chapter Three we will examine the claims about Jesus and his marriage to Mary Magdalene as well as some of the other claims made about him in *The Da Vinci Code* including what early Christians believed about him.

## Chapter One - Constantine's Cover-Up

The Claims of *The Da Vinci Code*.

- Constantine the Great was a life long pagan.
- Constantine created a hybrid Christianity.
- At the Council of Nicea the divinity of Jesus was voted on.
- Constantine collated the Bible as we know it.

Where to find these claims: Chapters 28, 55

*The Da Vinci Code* actually has very little to say about Constantine. Nearly all of the information about the fourth century emperor is contained in a few pages. What little is said, however, is pretty significant. Constantine, in the words of historian Bart Ehrman, becomes the 'archetypical bad guy' of *The Da Vinci Code*. In chapter 28 Langdon tells Sophie that the Priory of Sion 'believes that Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity' (28.172) We have to wait until Robert and Sophie are at Château Villette, however, for the full story. In the space of half a dozen pages or so we are let in on the great cover-up. Constantine, we are told, was a lifelong pagan who only pretended to be a Christian in order to unify his empire under one religion. There were three parts to his dastardly plan to convert the pagans to Christianity. First, he fused pagan and Christian symbols together in a way which was 'acceptable to both parties'. Second, he 'upgraded' Jesus from mortal prophet, which was how he had been seen, to the divine Son of God. Third, he 'commissioned and financed a new Bible' which contained the new Christianity. All contradictory material was 'outlawed, gathered up. and burned'. If this is true history needs to be seriously revised!

In this chapter we want to answer four questions:

1. Did Constantine fuse paganism and Christianity into a hybrid religion?
2. What happened at the Council of Nicea?
3. Did Constantine commission and finance a new Bible?
4. Was Constantine's conversion genuine?

The question of Constantine's conversion is actually the least important of the claims made in *The Da Vinci Code*. It is only important if the other claims are true. In other words, if Constantine commissioned a new Bible, changed the status of Jesus and created a hybrid religion then his character and religious position is significant. If, however, he did none of those things the genuineness of his conversion is a secondary issue. Before we turn to these claims perhaps an introduction is in order!

### Who is Constantine?

Constantine the Great was a fourth century Roman emperor who reigned from 306-337 AD. In 306 Constantine ruled only over the far western portion of the Roman Empire which had been divided into four sections by Diocletian. Over the next 17 years he would slowly consolidate his power, becoming sole emperor in 323.

*The Da Vinci Code* is at least accurate when it states the he was a significant figure in the history of the Church. His relocation of the capital from Rome to Constantinople had enormous consequences on Western European history and the rise of the Roman Catholic Church as a political force.

More significantly, however, was his conversion to Christianity in 312 at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge outside Rome. From this point in time Constantine began to favour Christianity and although it was another fifty years before Christianity became the official religion of the empire this represented a significant turning point in Christian history. For the first time Christianity had legal status in the Roman Empire.

The obvious imperial patronage made Christianity more appealing to many in the empire (as did the fact that persecutions ceased) and paved the way for the marriage of Church and State which would dominate for the next millennium and a half.

While the significance of this is outside the scope of this booklet it is useful to note that religion and politics were intertwined in the ancient world. Constantine's support of religion was not new or surprising only his choice of religions.

With this brief introduction we are ready to examine the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*.

### **Did Constantine fuse paganism and Christianity into a hybrid religion?**

In order to answer this question we need to first examine the motivation for such a move. As stated in *The Da Vinci Code* the circumstances leading to Constantine's decision to unite the empire under a modified Christian religion was the 'growing religious turmoil' between pagans and Christians who had begun warring with each other. Constantine, the consummate businessman that he was, simply picked the 'winning horse' (55.313).

Several aspects of this historical description are inaccurate. First, it is difficult to speak of paganism as a unified system of belief. Pagans came in all shapes and sizes and probably would have fought amongst themselves over differing beliefs!

Second, though there was conflict between pagans and Christians it was not, strictly speaking, a war. Instead it was a situation in which Christians were being persecuted by the pagan emperors.

As Teabing asserts, Christians had multiplied since the days of Jesus (though not exponentially as the religious historian suggests) but still only constituted a minority in the empire.

They had attracted attention to themselves through their beliefs and practices. Their refusal to attend the circus or theatre, enlist in the army, or worship the gods and goddesses who were responsible for the prosperity and well-being of the empire was considered treasonous. Rumours of cannibalism and incest, based on misunderstandings of the Lord's Supper, circulated about them.

Early persecutions tended to be sporadic and localised until the middle of the third century. The most universal and systematic of these occurred just prior to Constantine's ascension and continued unabated for eight years. Many Christians were martyred for their beliefs and others were tortured and imprisoned in an attempt to convince them to recant and burn incense to the emperor.

The persecutions ended, not because Constantine decided to unify the empire under one religion, but because Galerius, the instigator of the persecution, suffering from a terrible disease, issued an edict of toleration in 311.

Constantine and his co-emperor Licinius would issue another edict in 313. This points to the third inaccuracy contained in Teabing's outline in which he suggests that the conflict continued until 325.

What should be clear is that the motivation for creating a new religion, if this is what happened, is not quite what Dan Brown would like us to believe. It was not a war between two great religions which threatened to split the empire. There was, in fact, no compelling and practical reason for Constantine to favour Christianity at all.

Christians tended to come from the lower levels of society and didn't boast many rich and powerful people who support Constantine may have desired.

A careful reading of what Langdon and Teabing have to say about what Constantine did reveals a further problem with the theory of religious fusion; they can't seem to agree on what happened.

In Chapter Six Langdon tells Bezu Fache that Christianity waged a successful war against paganism in which the Roman Catholic Church sought to eradicate pagan symbols (6.62). In Chapter Fifty-

Five, however, Teabing informs Sophie of a very different process.

Constantine converted the sun-worshipping pagans to Christianity. By fusing pagan symbols, dates and rituals into the growing Christian tradition, he created a kind of hybrid religion that was acceptable to both parties. (55.314)

Two paragraphs later, however, Teabing declares that, 'Nothing in Christianity is original'. Everything from the Virgin Mary to the date of Christmas to halos are vestiges of paganism. There are three humungous issues with this reconstruction.

First, what does Dan Brown believe happened? Did Christian symbols vanquish their pagan counterparts? Did Constantine fuse some Christian symbols together with some pagan symbols? Or did pagan symbols 'transmogrify' into the Christian symbols we know today? It seems to me that these are mutually exclusive options. If Christianity was the 'winning horse' and it was fused into a hybrid religion shouldn't there be something original in Christianity?

Second, the assumption that all Christian symbols have pagan antecedents is the perfect illustration of what I have called Langdon's Hypocritical Theory of Dynamic Symbolism. Very early in the novel Langdon is asked what a certain symbol means. He replies by saying that, 'Symbols carry different meanings in different settings.' (66) In other words, the context in which a symbol is found must be taken into account to determine its meaning.

What makes his theory so hypocritical is that he consistently ignores the Christian context of many symbols instead interpreting them as evidence of barely covered paganism! Furthermore, as Olson and Miesel point out, similarities between symbols does not prove dependence and if it does there is no reason why Christianity could not have influenced paganism.

Third, and this is the biggie, what sort of religion, especially the 'winning horse', would be happy with the sort of compromise suggested by Brown. Christians had only recently been persecuted for their exclusiveness and refusal to participate in many aspects of pagan culture.

Would those men and women who had lost loved ones or who had themselves been imprisoned and tortured accepted a hybrid in which nothing of their religion was carried over? What is suggested is so highly improbable that it ought to be rejected immediately.

Did Constantine create a hybrid religion? No. Absolutely not.

### **What happened at the Council of Nicea?**

If Constantine didn't fuse two religions into one what happened at the Council of Nicea?

*The Da Vinci Code* claims that at this council Jesus got upgraded from mortal prophet to Son of God. The first thing we need to determine is whether Christians thought of Jesus in mortal terms before Constantine.

Teabing says to Sophie that, 'until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet' (55.315). Is this true? No. Absolutely not.

The New Testament testifies that Christians thought of Jesus as divine long before Constantine. However, since *The Da Vinci Code* claims that Constantine rewrote the Bible we might be better served by the writings of the early church fathers.

The early church fathers are those leaders of the Church whose writings have come down to us. On my shelf is the thirty-eight volume set of their writings. The first ten volumes contain the writings of the church father before the Council of Nicea.

It is clear from their writings that they believed Jesus was divine. For example, Ignatius of Antioch

(98-117 AD), Justin Martyr (d. 165 AD), Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-c. 200 AD), and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215 AD), all believed that Jesus was divine. Ignatius and Justin were martyred for that belief.

The Council of Nicea was therefore not convened to determine the divinity of Jesus but to determine how his divinity was understood especially in relation to the Father. This had been a serious theological question for a century and a half and though some answers had been rejected no final definition had been agreed upon. The Nicene Creed would provide the definitive answer to this issue though it would not be fully resolved until another council at Constantinople in 381.

The issue was actually about salvation. If Jesus wasn't fully human he could not represent sinful humanity.

If, however, Jesus wasn't fully God he could not represent God.

It was necessary to affirm both aspects of Jesus' nature (human and divine) while also affirming the unity of God. In other words, Christians worship one God not two (or three if you include the Holy Spirit).

How can we understand Jesus' divinity without compromising the unity of God? You can perhaps begin to understand why it took such a long time to work it out!

It all came to a head in Alexandria, which in those days, was one of the most important Christian centres.

A dispute arose between the bishop of Alexandria and one of his church leaders, named Arius, in 318 AD about the relation of the Son to the Father. Arius taught that only God the Father was eternal. Jesus was the Father's first creation. As such he was worthy of worship but could not be considered equal to the Father. The divine substance of Jesus was similar but different than the Father's.

The bishop argued that the divine substance of Jesus was the same as the Father's thus maintaining the unity of God. Notice two things about this. First, the issue was generated from within the church not from the imperial palace. Second, both of them agreed that Jesus was divine in some way, shape or form.

Constantine, after unifying the empire politically speaking, called for a council at Nicea to bring unity to the Church. Two hundred and twenty bishops attended this Council. The first item on the agenda was the Arian question which was hotly debated. Eventually a creed was put forward which became the basis for what is now known as the Nicene Creed. The vote, which Teabing declares, was a close one was anything but. All but two bishops subscribed to the creed.

If you have ever read the creed you might have been struck by all the language describing Jesus that it contains. This is because the person of Jesus was the reason the creed was written.

And [we believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.

There were other issues that the council dealt with including the date of Easter (which Teabing gets right!) and other issues of church discipline.

For example, that new converts should not be placed in positions of authority, clergy were forbidden to have women living with them (excepting their mothers, sisters, aunts or other persons above suspicion), how bishops should be consecrated, and how to deal with heretics, schismatics and the lapsed (those who, in the persecution, had recanted or handed over sacred writings) who wished to be readmitted to the Church.

The claim that Constantine used the Council of Nicea to 'upgrade' the status of Jesus is nearly as

ludicrous as the claim that he fused paganism and Christianity into a happy hybrid!

### **Did Constantine commission a new Bible?**

Since Constantine did not fuse paganism and Christianity together and since the Council of Nicea did not 'upgrade' Jesus from mortal prophet to divine Son of God there was no real need for the emperor to commission and finance a new Bible supporting the 'new and improved' Jesus.

Constantine did commission and finance fifty copies of the Bible from Eusebius of Caesarea to be placed in the churches of the capital in 332 AD. Bart Ehrman observes that the order did not include any instructions about which gospels were to be included and which were to be excluded (2004, 92). The process of determining the official list of Scripture will be the topic of Chapter Two.

### **Was Constantine's conversion genuine?**

*The Da Vinci Code* claims that Constantine's conversion was not authentic but that he remained a life long pagan who continued to worship the Unconquered Sun and who was baptised against his will on his death bed. Bart Ehrman, head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, states that though Teabing is correct to intimate that the emperor was not a 'tried-and-true Christian with nothing pagan left about him' it is also clear that he 'began to see himself as a Christian in some sense' (2004, 10-11). Christian historian Justo Gonzalez agrees and describes Constantine's conversion as a 'long process' that began in the year 312 at the battle of the Milvian Bridge on the outskirts of Rome (1984, 107).

On the night before the battle Constantine had a vision to place a Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers. The symbol was the labarum which is the conflation of the Greek letters chi (C) and rho (R) - the first two letters of Christ's name. The next day Constantine defeated his enemy and took control of Rome. The next year he met with the emperor of the east, Licinius and issued what is known as the Edict of Milan. One of the stipulations was that persecution of Christians cease and their property be returned to them. As you can imagine this was hailed as a God-send by the persecuted Christians. Incidentally, the edict of toleration was for Christians, Jews and pagans. Christianity did not become the official religion of the empire - to the exclusion of other religions - until nearly fifty years later

Constantine's Christianity seemed to be fairly pragmatic. In Gonzalez's words,

*The truth is probably that Constantine was a sincere believer in the power of Christ... when Constantine enacted laws in favor of Christianity, and when he had churches built, what he sought was not the goodwill of Christians, but rather the goodwill of their God. (1984, 122)*

His ongoing association with paganism was due in part to his role as emperor. He would not have been able to suppress paganism without incredible opposition.

As Teabing asserts the emperor was baptised on his death bed but certainly not against his will. This reflected common practise at the time in which people put off the cleansing effect of baptism until death. What is important for us to note is that his contribution to Christian history was not doctrinal but political. He changed the legal status of Christianity but didn't change what Christians believed or taught. Therefore, at the end of the day the genuineness of Constantine's conversion is a matter between himself and God.

### **The conversation**

With this brief introduction to the truth behind the claims made by *The Da Vinci Code* let us return to Elizabeth's conversation with Lucy.

”, you’re a Christian aren’t you? What do you think of all this?” asked Lucy.

‘I thought it was a pretty good piece of fiction I suppose.’ she said.

‘Sure, but what about the claims it makes. You have to admit the evidence is pretty compelling. All those clues in DaVinci’s paintings, church architecture and those ancient documents. The fact page says they’re all accurate.’

‘It’s not nearly as accurate as you might think.’ said Elizabeth ‘Besides, don’t you think the claims are a little far-fetched?’

‘How so?’

‘Think about it. Doesn’t it sound improbable that Constantine would be able to fuse two warring religions together. I mean, what sort of a religion is going to be content with a compromise. Can you imagine Muslims and Christians resolving their differences with a compromise?! Not to mention the fact that what is described isn’t a compromise at all.’

‘What do you mean?’

Elizabeth took the book and flipped to Chapter Fifty-Five, scanned the page, pointed to a section and returned the book to her friend. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘Look at this.’

Lucy read the section. ‘Yeah? So what?’

‘If Christianity and paganism were fused into a hybrid faith how can it also be true that there is nothing original about Christianity? If it were truly a compromise you’d expect something to be original to Christianity.’

‘I hadn’t thought of it that way.’ Lucy said. ‘But what about the other claims? What about the Bible? Did Constantine write a new one?’

For these answers she’ll have to read the next chapter!

## Chapter Two - The New Testament

The Claims of *The Da Vinci Code*.

- Constantine collated a new Bible to support the new Christianity.
- The new Bible portrays an exclusively divine Jesus.
- The Nag Hammadi Texts and Dead Sea Scrolls are examples of earlier, more reliable information about Jesus.

Where to find this information: Chs. 55, 58

According to *The Da Vinci Code* once Constantine had 'upgraded' Jesus' status he was faced with a huge problem. Thousands of Jesus' followers had recorded his life with more than eighty gospels considered for inclusion in the New Testament.

The new Bible which Constantine commissioned 'omitted those gospels which speak of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike.' (55.317)

Teabing goes on to say that fortunately some of those original texts have survived in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Texts. Are these claims truthful?

As we have already seen, Constantine the Great, did not create a new hybrid Christianity in the fourth century, nor did he 'upgrade' Jesus from mortal prophet to divine being.

Therefore, there was no reason for him to commission a new Bible.

But what about the Bible that we have now? If Constantine didn't collate it, who did?

In this chapter we want to answer two questions:

1. What evidence is there for the antiquity of the Gospels?
2. What do the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi Texts have to say about Jesus?

Before we turn to these questions we need to begin with an important definition and an equally important observation.

Though *The Da Vinci Code* talks a lot about 'the Bible' what Dan Brown is really talking about are the Gospels and possibly the rest of the New Testament.

The Bible is of course made up of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is the Jewish Scriptures and was inherited by the new Christian community. This means that Teabing's assertion that Christians were somehow responsible for the book of Genesis is utterly incorrect (56.322).

To my knowledge there are no references to the epistles or the book of Acts in *The Da Vinci Code* because its primary concern is with uncovering the 'true' story of Jesus.

So, when you read 'Bible' you might want to substitute 'New Testament' or, more specifically, 'the Gospels'.

### **What evidence is there for the antiquity of the Gospels?**

*The Da Vinci Code* claims that there were over eighty gospels considered for inclusion in the New Testament of which Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were chosen by Constantine (55.313) though with embellishments to the divinity of Jesus (55.317).

There are several significant issues with this claim.

First, there were not nearly as many gospels as Teabing so confidently asserts. Evangelical scholar Ben Witherington III suggests that there were no more than twenty documents which could be called 'gospels' (2004, 21).

Second, the process of determining the official list (or canon) of books in the New Testament was begun long before Constantine and wasn't concluded until after the emperor's death. This means that Teabing is essentially correct when he states that the Bible did not appear as a finished document from heaven (55.312).

Of course, Christians would disagree with his affirmation that the Bible is a product of humanity if what he means is that it was not inspired by God. The doctrine of inspiration is the belief that what is written in the Bible is somehow the very words of God. While this is a very important topic it is outside the current scope of this booklet.

The third issue with the claims made about the Gospels is that if the Gospel of the New Testament were those which omitted Jesus' human traits, they did a singularly bad job of it.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke contain the genealogy of Jesus which emphasises his human heritage (Mt. 1:1-17; Lk. 3:23-38). Not only that but there are multiple references to Jesus' humanity. He ate (Lk. 24:43), he hungered (Mt. 4:2; 21:18; Mk. 11:12), he grew weary and slept (Lk. 8:23; Jn. 4:6). He also experienced the full range of human emotions: anger (Mk. 3:5), compassion (Mt. 9:36; 14:14), grief (Lk. 19:41; Jn. 11:35); love (Mk. 10:21; Jn. 11:5) and sorrow (Mt. 26:38).

Whatever else the Gospels tell us about Jesus' divinity they certainly speak of his humanity as well.

Contrary to what Teabing claims, when we read the New Testament Gospels we are reading those accounts of Jesus' life which have, from the earliest times, been accepted by the Church.

The antiquity of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John can be illustrated in two ways. The first way is by references made in the writings of the Church Fathers. For example Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the early second century mentions the term 'gospel' as a touchstone of belief. Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century refers to 'gospels' in his writing. The heretic Marcion (c. 140) rejected all but Luke's gospel which suggests he was familiar with others. Tatian (c. 170) prepared a harmony of the Gospels which combined the four Gospels in one long narrative.

Furthermore, we have a fragment of John's Gospel (named P52) which dates from the early second century. Clearly, the Gospels predate Constantine! In fact, the vast majority of scholars agree that the Gospels were probably written before the end of the first century with the Gospel of Mark written as early as 60 AD.

The second way the antiquity of the Gospels can be illustrated is through the lists of authoritative books compiled by various leaders.

The earliest such list is the Muratorian Canon (named after the man who discovered it) which dates from the close of the second century (c. 190). It lists Luke and John but almost certainly began with Matthew and Mark since Luke is called the third Gospel.

The reason the first two books are absent is because the fragment is torn at the top. Origen (c. 185-254) also listed all four Gospels among the works which were universally accepted.

The New Testament Gospels are certainly very ancient sources of information about Jesus. What about the other sources of information about Jesus which are mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code*: the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Texts.

## What do the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Texts have to say about Jesus?

*The Da Vinci Code* claims that after Constantine had pulled together the Bible he had all the other gospels gathered up and burned. Not all was lost, however!

'Fortunately for historians,' Teabing said, '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. And, of course, the Coptic Scrolls in 1945 at Nag Hammadi.

In addition to telling the true Grail story, these documents speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms.' (55.317)

Once again Dan Brown's accuracy in describing these documents is pretty sloppy.

First of all, the Dead Sea Scrolls are Jewish texts and contain nothing at all about Jesus or the Christian community (or, for that matter, anything about the Grail).

They are dated between the second century BC and the first century AD and have been invaluable to New Testament studies not for what they say about Jesus but because of what the light they shed on religious thought in first century Judaism.

Apart from the fact that they were found in a similar climate and at a similar time as the Nag Hammadi Texts it is entirely misleading to speak of them together; they are different in nearly every sense.

Brown's accuracy is not much better with the Nag Hammadi Texts, found in Upper Egypt. They are not, as Teabing states, scrolls but codices, or books. They are written in Coptic and were found in 1945 and they do contain information about Jesus though only five are named 'gospels'.

What is significant to note is that the majority of the codices (thirteen all together with forty-five separate works) reflect ascetic Gnostic thought. In order to understand why this is significant we need to understand something of Gnosticism.

### Gnosticism

Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis* which means 'knowledge') developed in the second century AD. It was a complex philosophical system which emphasised the importance of obtaining secret knowledge for salvation.

This secret, spiritual knowledge was not available to all but only to the elect. Salvation was being freed from the material world, which was evil, and reunited with the spiritual, which was good. This dualism between the spiritual and material led some Gnostic groups to live austere lives of self-denial (asceticism) since the physical body was part of the material world.

Recognising the character of Gnostic thought indicates how badly they have been misrepresented by *The Da Vinci Code*. In the novel Gnostics are said to be the original Christians whose Jesus was a very human prophet married to Mary Magdalene. This is inaccurate on at least three counts.

First, as we have seen, Gnostic thought developed nearly a century after Jesus. The Gospels of the New Testament predate the earliest Gnostic Gospels. Therefore, the claim that the Gnostic texts represent original Christianity is false.

Second, in the Gnostic Gospels, salvation comes from hearing and understanding the esoteric teaching of Jesus not from believing in his death and resurrection. Christianity is, and always has been, a historical religion. The Jesus we encounter in the Gnostic Gospels is only human in appearance. How could the incorruptible spirit be united with the corruptible material?

In reality, many Gnostic groups, especially the more ascetic ones, would have despised the idea that Jesus was married. How carnal!

Third, and perhaps most importantly, second and third century Gnostics were not arguing for inclusion in what was understood to be Christianity. They were arguing that they held the exclusive key to salvation over and against traditional Christianity.

Gnosticism was not another denomination within the Christian Church like Baptists and Anglican. Gnosticism was a different religion altogether. Christians disagreed with Gnostics about God, about the goodness of creation, about Jesus' humanity, about how we are saved and about who can receive that salvation.

Christians believed that God had created the material world and declared it good; they believed, as we have seen, that Jesus was fully human and fully divine; they believed that we are saved by faith in Jesus's death and resurrection and that all people, not just the elect, can receive that salvation.

The portrayal of Gnosticism in *The Da Vinci Code* is inaccurate and selective. Once again, the brevity of this booklet prevents us from discussing this any further. I would highly recommend Darrell Bock's chapter on Gnosticism for further reading (Code 4: Do the So-Called Secret, Gnostic Gospels Help Us Understand Jesus?).

While *The Da Vinci Code* adamantly affirms that the New Testament Gospels are unreliable sources of information about Jesus which cannot be trusted the reality is far different. Bart Ehrman, after an examination of the Gnostic texts and the New Testament concludes,

*And so, whether we like it or not, whether we are Christian believers or not, whether we are historians or televangelists or preachers or Sunday school teachers or just regular lay folk with an interest in knowing about the life of Jesus (and about such things as his alleged marriage to Mary Magdalene), whatever our situation and whatever our personal beliefs, we are more or less restricted to the Gospels of the New Testament in trying to learn what Jesus said and did. (2004, 109-10)*

## **The person of Jesus**

If your friends are interested in the person of Jesus, whether because of reading *The Da Vinci Code* or for another reason, the best place you can point them is to the New Testament Gospels. Let's return to Elizabeth's conversation.

'But what about the other claims? What about the Bible? Did Constantine write a new one? Lucy asked.

'No. There wasn't really any need to. Besides the Bible was around a lot earlier than Constantine. There is evidence that the Gospels as we have them were already considered authoritative as early as the second century - two hundred years before Constantine.'

'Really?' said Lucy.

'Really.' Elizabeth replied.

'So what about those other stories about Jesus in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Texts?' Lucy inquired.

'First of all, the Dead Sea Scrolls are Jewish documents which don't mention Jesus or Christianity at all.' Elizabeth began.

'They're not Christian?' Lucy exclaimed.

'No. So much for accurate descriptions of documents eh?' Lucy nodded as Elizabeth continued. 'Second, while the Nag Hammadi texts do talk about Jesus it isn't the human Jesus that *The Da Vinci*

*Code* contends.'

'It's not?'

'Not as such. It's pretty complicated but, as far as I understand it, they reflect a completely different type of teaching which emphasised the spiritual Jesus. They, the Gnostics that is, believed that you were saved by receiving the secret, spiritual teaching of Jesus.'

'So what did the other Christians believe?' Lucy asked.

'That's kind of the point. The Gnostics weren't really Christians. They believed absolutely different things about Jesus, the world, and salvation. If you'd like I can lend you a New Testament and you can see for yourself what the Christians believed. We can read it together and I'll try to answer any questions you might have.' Elizabeth said.

'I think I'd like that. *The Da Vinci Code* has really piqued my curiosity about Jesus. Was he really married to Mary Magdalene?'

'I don't think so, but I'll have to get back to you on that one.'

## Chapter Three - Jesus Christ Superstar?

The Claims of *The Da Vinci Code*.

- Jesus was a significant first century figure.
- He was married to Mary Magdalene and intended for her to lead the church.
- He was just another human leader.

Where to find this information: Chs. 55, 56, 58, 60, 61

There are two surprising features of the attitude of *The Da Vinci Code* about Jesus. First, it is surprising how positive the novel is towards the person of Jesus or at least the 'original' Jesus before that nasty Constantine ruined it all. Teabing states the following about Jesus,

*'Jesus was indeed a great and powerful man. Constantine's underhanded political manoeuvres don't diminish the majesty of Christ's life. Nobody is saying Christ was a fraud, or denying that He walked the earth and inspired millions to better lives.'* (55.316)

Second, it is surprising how little is actually said about Jesus and his teaching.

In the novel he is actually overshadowed by the figure of Mary Magdalene who appears to be the true source of faith for original Christians and for those in pursuit of the truth. After all, she is the Holy Grail and it is at her tomb that Robert Langdon kneels at the end of the novel.

Even though the limited information about Jesus is, on the whole, very positive, it is important to explore how accurately Dan Brown portrays the person of Jesus.

As we will see the information about Jesus in *The Da Vinci Code* is misleading about his first century significance, incorrect about his marriage to Mary Magdalene and incomplete about what his followers believed about him. In this chapter we want to answer three questions about Jesus.

1. How significant was Jesus' earthly ministry?
2. Is there any evidence to suggest that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene?
3. What did the early Christians really believe about Jesus?

### How significant was Jesus' earthly ministry?

Teabing tells Sophie the following about Jesus' earthly ministry:

*'Jesus Christ was a historical figure of staggering influence, perhaps the most enigmatic and inspirational leader the world has ever seen. As the prophesied Messiah, Jesus toppled kings, inspired millions and founded new philosophies. As a descendant of the lines of King Solomon and King David, Jesus possessed a rightful claim to the throne of the King of the Jews. Understandably, His life was recorded by thousands of his followers across the land.'* (55.313)

In this description Jesus is pictured as just another political leader seeking an earthly kingdom. While it is true that he was a descendant of David (and David's son, Solomon - there was only one line) it is unlikely that the carpenter's son from Galilee would have had any rightful claim to the Judean throne.

More importantly, Jesus is consistently portrayed in the Gospels as uninterested in establishing a political kingdom. In part, it was his claim to be the Messiah that led to his crucifixion by the Roman authorities.

The Jesus Teabing describes sounds like someone to be dealt with diplomatically. Anyone who has millions of followers and who has already toppled kings can't simply be arrested and executed!

The book of Acts in the New Testament suggests that Jesus had significantly fewer followers than Teabing states. In Acts 1:15 Peter stands up among the believers who Luke numbers at about one hundred and twenty.

The other primary inaccuracy in this description is Teabing's account of the number of records of Jesus' life. There are three problems with suggesting that there were thousands of documents about Jesus.

First, as we have seen, it is unlikely that Jesus ever had thousands of followers. We have narratives recorded in the Gospels in which large crowds followed him but the number of people who would have been considered 'believers' would have been much lower.

Second, even if he had thousands of followers it is highly improbable that they were literate. The highest levels of literacy would have been in the upper classes and not in the 'outback' regions of Galilee. Acts 4:13 suggests that Peter and John, two of Jesus' closest disciples were illiterate themselves.

Third, the grand total of references to Jesus, outside of the New Testament, in the first hundred years after his death is four. The earliest Jewish reference is in Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote at the end of the first century. He mentions Jesus twice.

The first reference tells us that a certain James was the brother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah. The second reference informs us that Jesus did miracles, had Greek and Jewish followers and was handed over to the Roman authorities by the Jewish people and was crucified.

The earliest pagan reference to Jesus is in the correspondence between Pliny, the governor of Bythnia, and the Emperor Trajan around 112 AD in which he asks how to handle accusations against Christians who worship Christ as god.

The only other reference within a hundred years of Jesus' death is found in Tacitus, a Roman historian of the second century who tells us that Jesus lived in Judea and was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

It is certainly true that over the last two thousand years Jesus has had a staggering influence and has had millions of followers this was not the case of his earthly ministry. Jesus was not a political wannabe. He had an entirely different mission. We'll return to this a little later.

For now, let us turn to the great secret which could crumble the Church - Jesus' marriage.

### **Is there any evidence to suggest that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene?**

The great secret of *The Da Vinci Code* is that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, supposedly from the tribe of Benjamin, thus creating a powerful political alliance. As Jesus approached his death he placed the leadership of the Church into her hands but this was usurped by Peter.

Mary and her child fled to France where they ended up founding the Merovingian dynasty. They are now protected by the Priory of Sion and on and on it goes.

We are going to concern ourselves with only the first of these claims.

There are several pieces of 'evidence' that are presented in *The Da Vinci Code* to support this claim.

First, Langdon states that Jewish custom condemn celibacy (58.330). Therefore, so the logic goes, someone would have mentioned it in the Gospels in order to explain this unnatural lifestyle. It simply makes more sense if Jesus had been married.

This is untrue. Josephus, who we mentioned earlier, was celibate as were the Essene community

responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls as was the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 7:8). This doesn't prove that Jesus was celibate but indicates that it is not so unlikely as we are led to believe.

While marriage was more common than bachelorhood it was not condemned nor was it so uncommon that it would require some explanation.

The second piece of 'evidence' is from the Gnostic Gospel of Philip which Teabing quotes while making three errors (58.331)!! After incorrectly identifying it as one of the earliest Christian documents he makes an error of omission.

The text from the Gospel of Philip is fragmented and is not as clear as Teabing makes out. Darrell Bock, in his book, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, includes the full text and an explanation in his chapter on Mary Magdalene.

*And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [... loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [...].'* The brackets indicate broken locations in the manuscript where there is no reading because the manuscript is damaged. (2004, 21)

Notice that it doesn't say where he kissed her. It could have been on the cheek, the forehead or the lips.

The third mistake is the assertion that the word 'companion' is Aramaic for consort or spouse. There are several layers to this mistake.

To begin with, the text is written in Coptic and is a translation of a Greek text which makes the Aramaic scholar superfluous. The word 'companion' in the text is a Greek loan word, *koinonos* which is most commonly translated 'companion'. If the author of the Gospel of Philip wanted to name Mary as Jesus' wife there were other Greek words at his disposal (Bock 2004, 23).

It is, therefore, unclear as to who Mary is related to in this passage and the exact nature of the relationship. Given the Gnostic context a spiritual closeness is more likely than a physical one.

Teabing goes on to show Sophie 'several other passages' which clearly indicate the romantic aspect of Jesus' relationship with Mary. He also states that there are 'countless references' to their union (58.333).

The reality is that there are no other passages which indicate that Jesus was romantically involved with Mary and absolutely no references to their marriage.

Not even in the Gnostic texts will you find a reference to their marriage.

### **The Gospel of Mary Magdalene**

Hot on the heels of these declarations Teabing shows Sophie another passage from The Gospel of Mary Magdalene which he uses to emphasise Jesus' special relationship with Mary and Peter's jealousy.

Once again Dan Brown is sloppy with his description of the documents. Teabing states that this revelation given to Mary was before Jesus' death and resurrection. In reality it takes place after his resurrection.

More importantly, the section read by Sophie, which appears in *The Da Vinci Code* as an unbroken section, is actually a selective rendering of the actual text.

Below is a comparison of Brown's quotation and the fuller text as listed in Darrell Bock's book.

<b>Dan Brown</b>	<b>Darrell Bock</b>
<p>And Peter said, 'Did the Saviour really speak with a woman without our knowledge? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?' And Levi answered, 'Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like an adversary. If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us.' (58:333)</p>	<p>But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, "Say what you (wish to) say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas." Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior: "Did He really speak with a woman without our knowledge and not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did He prefer her to us?" Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I have though this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?" Levi answered and said to Peter, "Peter, you have always been hot tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior know her very well. That is why He loved her more than us. Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect Man, and separate as He commanded us and preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said." (Bock 2004, 25-26)</p>

The full text indicates that Mary had received a special revelation from the Lord. Peter questions whether this would actually be the case. She is not claiming control of the Church. Notice also that her special status is not founded on her marital relationship with Jesus but upon being made worthy by him.

On top of that it is intriguing to note the reference to the 'perfect Man'. While Brown presents the early Gnostics as feminists this was not necessarily the case. For more information on this selective view of Gnosticism see Darrell Bock's book.

There are other problems with the story of Mary according to Dan Brown.

For example, if, as he suggests, references to Mary in the early records of Jesus' life were so troubling (58.329) it boggles the mind that she could be mentioned so regularly in the Constantinian Bible.

In the New Testament Gospels (supposedly commissioned by Constantine) Mary is presented as a disciple of Jesus who had experienced his healing touch and who supported him out of her own means. She was present at the cross and was the first to see the resurrected Lord.

How can it be that these references, especially her role as a key witness to the resurrection, failed to get edited out by Constantine and his team of editors?

Another is the supposed smear campaign that associated her with the prostitute in Luke 7:36-50.

The first time this was mentioned was by Pope Gregory the Great in the year 591 AD. His sermon makes it evident that he was not seeking to defame Mary but to elevate her as an example of repentance (Olson & Miesel 2004, 78-86)

Finally, we need to recognise that even if Jesus had been married this would not collapse the Church.

Jesus was fully human, as discussed above, and did all the things that humans do - slept, ate, drank, got angry, etc. The reason the church doesn't teach his marriage to Mary Magdalene is because there is no evidence for such a union.

There is only one thing that would spell disaster for Christianity and which is the topic of our last section.

### **What did the early Christians really believe about Jesus?**

As I mentioned earlier, it is surprising how little reference is made to Jesus' teaching or unique mission.

While Jesus' death is mentioned on a couple of occasions *The Da Vinci Code* never actually deals with the most significant thing Christians believe about Him.

Christians from the first disciples until the present day believe that Jesus was fully God and fully man and that in His death he has opened the way for us to be in right relationship with God.

His resurrection from the dead was the vindication of God of Jesus' claims to be God and is the proof that those who place their trust in Him will, like Him, be raised to eternal life.

The only secret which would devastate the Christian Church is the discovery of Jesus' body. If the resurrection did not take place, our faith is useless (1 Cor. 15:12-14).

Christian belief does not revolve around Mary Magdalene, the Priory of Sion or Leonardo DaVinci but around the person of Jesus.

Perhaps it isn't that surprising that *The Da Vinci Code* doesn't mention Jesus' resurrection.

If Jesus is just another political leader of the past we are able to ignore him in the present. Like Julius Caesar, Napoleon or Queen Victoria we can perhaps learn from Him or be inspired by his achievements but he is safely in the past.

If, however, he has been raised to life it is a very different matter.

At the end of the day, we need to challenge our friends and family members to consider the claims of Jesus.

Conspiracy theories such as those propounded in *The Da Vinci Code* are mere smokescreens to the real issue - Jesus Christ.

## The New Testament

Once more let's eavesdrop on Elizabeth's conversation.

Elizabeth sat down next to Lucy. She opened her bag and pulled out a small New Testament.

'Here,' she said, passing it to her friend. ', a New Testament, like I promised yesterday. Oh, and I have an answer for you about Jesus' marital status.'

'Oh?' Lucy said.

'There is no evidence to support the belief that Jesus was married to anyone let alone Mary Magdalene.'

'What about the passage in the Gospel of Philip.' Lucy asked.

'Do you have your copy of the book?'

'Yes.' Said Lucy, handing the novel to Elizabeth.

'Dan Brown wasn't really accurate in his description of the text,' Elizabeth said, flipping to Chapter 58. 'It's actually a fragmented text which doesn't include the words 'the Saviour', 'Christ', 'often' or 'lips'.'

'That changes the text a bit!' Lucy exclaimed.

'It sure does. And this is the strongest reference to anything even remotely romantic between Jesus and Mary.' Elizabeth said.

'Wow. I guess this is a fictional work.' Lucy said, thoughtfully.

'Are you still keen to find out more about Jesus?' Elizabeth asked.

Lucy was silent for a moment. 'Yes. Yes, I am.' She picked up the New Testament Elizabeth had given her. 'Where do I start?'

'We can start with the Gospel of Mark...'

## Conclusion

I hope that this brief introduction has equipped you to take up the challenge of *The Da Vinci Code* and I pray that you will have the courage, like Elizabeth, to talk to your friends about the truth behind *The Da Vinci Code*.

## **Bibliography**

Bock, Darrell L., 2004, *Breaking the da Vinci Code: answers to the questions everybody's asking*, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee.

This is a very readable book. Its strength is in its discussion of Gnosticism then and now.

Ehrman, Bart D., 2004, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code: A historian reveals what we really know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine*, Oxford Universtiy Press, New York.

Written by a historian and not from a Christian perspective this is a great book if you'd like more information on the sources of the New Testament.

Olson, Carl E. & Miesel, Sandra 2004, *The Da Vinci Hoax*, Ignatius Press, San Fransisco.

This book is the most scholarly that I read and has lots of footnotes for further research. The authors are Catholic and therefore pick up some of the more Catholic claims. They also cover some of the artistic errors and provide a detailed history of the Grail myth.

Witherington III, Ben 2004, *The Gospel Code: Novel claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois.

Another evangelical Christian, Witherington's book is easy to read and covers most of what Ehrman and Bock to but in a slightly different way.

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Wegner, Paul D. 1999, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The origins and development of the Bible*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan.