

The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?

The Da Vinci Code is the biggest selling adult hardback fiction book of all time. The *Da Vinci Code*, published in April 2003, has sold millions, been translated into dozens of languages, and is currently being turned into a film by Columbia Pictures due for release in May 2006. *The New York Times* described it as '*Riddle-filled, code-breaking, exhilarating, brainy thriller*' and the *New York Daily News* adds a note of credibility when they wrote "*His research is impeccable!*"

Whilst there may be debate about the literary merits of the book, there is no doubt about its impact. One individual unsympathetic to Christianity said, '*It shows that the Bible can't possibly be accurate and that the text was changed.*' Another committed Christian said '*It nearly made me lose my faith.*' Another said, '*It made me think I don't have any real facts to back up my faith anymore.*'

How can a novel – a work of fiction – have such an impact?

The Da Vinci code is a thriller presented as an historical novel. It is fiction and yet it seeks to convince the reader that it is based wholly on fact. In the words of Cardinal George of Chicago, it is '*preposterous, but for many it is persuasive.*'

So what are the main issues or theological challenges that this book unleashes?

The root and the foundation of the book is theological. It is all about who Jesus Christ was, and what he did. The whole premise is built on a theory about Jesus, which is why this book has created such a storm. The many other points of interest contained within the Da Vinci Code I would suggest become a sideshow if there is anything in Dan Brown's contentions concerning Jesus. (This overview will not examine the accuracy of the descriptions of the various places mentioned, e.g. Chateau de Villette near Paris, the Ritz Hotel, the Louvre museum, the Temple church and many others. Nor do we have the space for other issues and facts surrounding the Knights Templar, The Priory of Sion, the works of Leonardo Da Vinci, attacks on the Catholic Church ('The Vatican') and Opus Dei.)

(Note: Many of the core ideas in The Da Vinci Code were first published in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, published in 1982, Brown is now facing the threat of legal action from its authors; Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln)

1. What is the central premise of *The Da Vinci Code*?

- Through its "fact" based storyline *The Da Vinci Code* asserts that '*Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false.*'
- The Catholic Church has kept the facts hidden through force and terror.
- Jesus was in fact married to Mary Magdalene (who was the head apostle).
- The Holy Grail is not the chalice used at the last supper but the womb of Mary Magdalene who bore Jesus' daughter, whose name was Sarah. Their descendants became Kings of France.
- Jesus was not the Son of God. He was a mortal prophet, a great and powerful man of staggering influence who inspired millions to a better life.
- He was also a radical feminist. He was a good man who was only made "God" by the pagan emperor Constantine in AD 325. Prior to that, no one believed Jesus was divine.
- At the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, Constantine upgraded him into a deity. He became the Son of God by a narrow vote.
- This turned Jesus, the mortal prophet, into a deity. Constantine's motive was to give power to the Roman Catholic Church ... the rest, as they say ... is history!

How on earth does he get to this conclusion?

Dan Brown's suggestion is that the earliest Christian records do not match up to the Bible. It was Constantine who collated the Bible as we now have it. Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted earlier and more revealing gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and that he edited and embellished the 4 Gospels to make him God-like.

Brown goes further to suggest that Constantine rejected dozens of other 'gospels' and rewrote the four that are in our Bibles. Thousands of gospels were burnt or outlawed but some survive e.g. Q, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents.

The heart of the matter according to Brown is that the church has been hiding the real truth about Jesus. This is the greatest conspiracy and cover-up of the last 2000 years.

Rumours of this conspiracy have been whispered for centuries in countless languages – art, music and literature – and most dramatically in the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci.

The secret remains protected to this day by a clandestine brotherhood, the Priory of Sion of which Da Vinci was a member ... **Conclusion: Christianity as we know it, is a gigantic fraud!**

2. Does Dan Brown himself believe all this to be true?

The novel starts with a 'fact page', which ends by claiming '*All descriptions, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.*' Presumably this includes the New Testament documents and the other documents, which refer to Jesus. Many readers have interpreted this to mean that the conclusions he comes to about Jesus also have some basis in 'fact'.

Dan Brown's website states that it is '*My belief that the theories discussed by these characters have merit.* He does not actually state that they are accurate or true but he disagrees '*with those who attempt to disprove The Da Vinci Code.*' He describes himself as a Christian but distinguishes himself from those who accept '*the Bible as immutable historical fact.*' He says, '*We're each following our own path of enlightenment. I consider myself a student of many religions.*'

3. What is his evidence? Is there any evidence for an earlier and more authentic version of Christianity than the one, which we have in the New Testament?

The Da Vinci Code cites three sources. These are described together as '*the earliest Christian records*' - documents that Brown assumes tell the true story of Jesus and that Constantine attempted to eradicate, but in fact have survived. These are the document "Q", The Dead Sea Scrolls which were found in the 1950s hidden in a cave near Qumran in the Judean desert and the Coptic Scrolls in 1945 at Nag Hammadi.

Brown suggests that in addition to telling the true Grail story, these documents speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms. ...These scrolls he suggests highlight glaring historical discrepancies and fabrications, clearly confirming that the modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda – to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use His influence to solidify their own power base.

Let's look briefly at these 3 sources:

(i) **Q.** *The Da Vinci Code* describes this as 'the legendary 'Q' Document – a manuscript than even the Vatican admit they believe exists. Allegedly, it is a book of Jesus' teachings, possibly written in his own hand.' Biblical scholars comment, '*There is nothing new here – except a suggestion that Q was written by Jesus' own hand*'

Q is in fact, a hypothetical source of the common passages of the synoptic gospels where Matthew and Luke show a close similarity to each other but not to anything in Mark's gospel. It consists largely of sayings of Jesus. These came to be referred to by German scholars as Quelle ('which means Source').

In the 20th Century, the "Q" hypothesis was the basis of nearly all serious study of the origin and development of the gospel traditions.

Whether or not it actually exists, as a document is to some extent irrelevant. The whole point is that we know roughly speaking what was in Q from the gospels of Matthew and Luke. So there is nothing new here and certainly there is nothing to shake the confidence in the documents which we already have in the New Testament. Q adds nothing to what we already have in the New Testament and certainly does not contradict the 4 gospels in the Bible.

(ii) **The Dead Sea Scrolls.**

These were found from 1947 onwards near Qumran. They contained three things:

- All of the Old Testament biblical books except Esther. For example, there was found the oldest copy of Isaiah by 1000 years.(Thus an independent source confirming the validity of the canon of the Old testament)
- Old Testament commentaries, psalms and hymns.
- Sectarian material belonging to the community itself.

It is very true that delays in publication led to many conspiracy theories emerging to suggest that the Scrolls contained information that would undermine Christianity.

However all the Scrolls are now published in English and can be purchased at any good bookshop. These are not gospels at all. There is no mention of Jesus, Paul or John the Baptist.

They do however contain very interesting background information about the New Testament. But they bear no direct relationship to it.

Far from being the earliest Christian records they are not Christian records at all. They are records from a competitive movement. (To draw an analogy it's a bit like looking for the truth about Alex Ferguson from Arsene Wenger's personal assistant!)

(iii) The Nag Hammadi documents.

In 1945 two peasant farmers in Upper Egypt came across a jar as they were digging. They smashed the jar thinking it might contain gold. Inside they found papyrus codices. One of them, Muhammad Ali, wrapped the books in his tunic, got on his camel and carried them back to his village.

When the documents eventually came to light, they were found to be 4th century Coptic papyrus manuscripts. There were 12 complete codices and eight leaves from a 13th codex.

They contained 45 separate titles written in Coptic but translated from Greek. They provide a Gnostic library which is the most important single contribution towards our knowledge of Gnosticism, a 2nd and 3rd Century movement.

Gnosticism is a very difficult movement to define. Rather like the New Age movement today, it was esoteric, decentralised and eclectic.

It was the greatest challenge to the fledgling Christian faith of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. There were endless varieties, but at heart there was a radical dualism between the spiritual and the material.

The function of Christ therefore according to the Gnostic viewpoint could only be to come as an emissary of the Supreme God, bringing 'gnosis' or knowledge to a depraved humanity.

The knowledge of Gnosticism has greatly increased by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi documents. However, there is no 'secret' about what was found at Nag Hammadi (as implied by *The Da Vinci Code*) - they can be bought at any large bookshop. James M. Robinson edited the definitive translation of the Gnostic scriptures of The Nag Hammadi Library in 1977... There was no conspiracy to hide the contents it just took him 32 years to complete the painstaking work!

What is key is to appreciate the context on these so called gospels and to understand what they were as a literary form to the original writers and readers. In fact they are not really gospels at all. The gnostic 'gospels' are non-historical and even anti-historical with little narrative or sense of chronology. They were written generations after the facts whilst claiming direct, secret knowledge about them. Much of it is pseudepigraphy which is at best a literary device and at worst a fraud.

In other words, they claim to have been written by the apostle Thomas when they cannot possibly have been so written as he had probably been dead for decades, if not centuries by the time they were written.

The Da Vinci Code cites three of the 'gospels' especially as evidence:-

1) The 'Gospel' of Thomas: This is a Coptic version written around 400 AD, translated from the original Greek (probably written around 150 AD). It is not like the canonical gospels. It consists of a series of pithy sayings and parabolic discourses of Jesus (e.g. parable of the sower, mustard seed, tenants, lost sheep and various sayings from the Sermon on the Mount). In addition, it includes other sayings, which show tell tale signs of Gnosticism.

2) The 'Gospel' of Philip: This is another gnostic treatise found at Nag Hammadi. It contains no narrative but only a few incidents and sayings attributed to Christ. It may well have been written as late as the second half of the 3rd century. This 'gospel' contains the passage on which *The Da Vinci Code* relies for the suggestion that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. '*The Saviour loved Mary Magdalene more than all the disciples and kissed her on the mouth often*'

3) The 'Gospel' of Mary: This again belongs to the genre of the Gnostic dialogue. It was originally written in Greek sometime in the 2nd century.

The passage which *The Da Vinci Code* relies on is on page 333 ... 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.*'

From these passages in the Gnostic writings a leap of logic is deduced by Brown on page 334:

'According to these unaltered gospels, it was not Peter to whom Christ gave directions with which to establish the Christian Church. It was Mary Magdalene.'

4. Is there any evidence that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene?

There are at least a dozen references to Mary from Magdala (A town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee) in the four gospels, which is a fairly significant presence. And indeed it was common for Rabbi's to be married. These two facts have caused some (Even Martin Luther) to consider the marriage between Jesus and Mary a possibility.

However a coming together of the "Alpha male and his goddess" would, you would think, generate a bit more coverage!.

In fact not even the Gnostic gospels taken at face value suggest that he was married. Nor do they mention a child. Most scholars discount such a match as it finds no support from the canonical gospels and is at best only hinted at within symbolic passages of the Gnostic gospels.

Indeed, despite Brown's suggestion that the "*earlier*" gospel of Philip contains the truth concerning Jesus' relationship with Mary it should be noted that these 'gospels' were not earlier than the New Testament documents. The 'Gospel' of Philip actually quotes from the New Testament chapter and verse (e.g. 1 Corinthians 8:1, 1 Peter 4:8, Matthew 15:13).

This surely is conclusive proof that the 'Gospel' of Philip was written after the New Testament and not before!

5. What about the passages in the Gnostic writings that suggest Jesus had a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene?

(Extracts from Deirdre Good a Professor of Harvard and Ether de Boer's book Mary Magdalene "*Beyond the Myth*")

"What the Da Vinci Code does is to use fiction as a means to interpret historical obscurity and fill the gaps ... the relationship between Jesus and Mary of Magdalene is perhaps the best example of this and given our society's interest in issues about gender roles, women leaders, and sex... the Da Vinci code is right on time!"

With the discovery of the Nag Hammandi documents much was sensationally written from early reading and research into them. (See: The last temptation of Christ and E. Phillips book: Was Jesus married?) However more recently a clearer understanding has emerged regarding the use of symbolic worlds in the Gnostic writings. Take for example the primary passage in the Gospel of Philip that has been used to contend a sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary:

"The Saviour loved Mary Magdalene more than all the disciples and kissed her on the mouth often" (Philip 63:34-35)

De Boer writes " *We must not understand this "kissing" in a sexual sense, but in a spiritual sense. There is a grace exchange to those who kiss, it makes them born again. An earlier (but much less quoted) passage in the Gospel of Philip helps clarify the symbolic Gnostic notion of kissing"*

"They receive nourishment from the promise, to enter into the place above. The promise comes from the mouth, for the Word comes from there and has been nourished from the mouth and becomes perfect. The perfect conceive through a kiss and gives birth. Because of this we also kiss one another. We receive conception from grace which we have among us" (Gospel of Philip 58:20)

6. What about the evidence for the bloodline of Christ in France? Isn't the list of the secret society members of the Priory of Sion conclusive evidence of a cover up by the church of Jesus' bloodline?

The notion that Magdalene was pregnant by Jesus at his crucifixion became a myth in France. Here there was already a 13th century legend of her immigration in a boat, bearing the Holy Grail having fled Palestine. This theme was developed following the 1986 best seller *Holy Blood Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln when the Holy Grail - the chalice became substituted for Mary herself being the Holy Grail - the receptacle for Jesus' bloodline.

This best selling book claimed to have uncovered what had been the well-kept secret of the Priory of Sion namely the secret knowledge by generations of well known individuals (like Newton and Leonardo Da Vinci) of the bloodline of Christ through a French family. However there is no textual, or objective evidence for the existence of such a bloodline and the Priory of Sion listing has now been disclosed as a fabrication and a hoax by the confession of Jean-Luc Chaumeil, and De Cherisey who admitted to creating parchment forgeries and forged dossiers ...but the myth still lives on!

However what Dan Brown has done here is to weave an even more intricate web of misinformation by combining not only the Priory of Sion hoax and the lineage of the Merovingian kings in France but has mingled it with a further French legend concerning the arrival of two Mary's (Mary Salomey and Mary Jacoby) on a boat to a town called Aiges Mortes in France with their Egyptian servant which is still celebrated today. (Perhaps Brown has confused which Mary's arrival they were celebrating and has misinterpreted the word servant...for "Sarah" the child of Christ?)

7. Is there any evidence for this 'earlier form of Christianity' when 'no-one believed Jesus was divine'?

The suggestion of the book is that prior to 325 AD no one believed Jesus was divine.

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 god-like. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned. ... Brown writes, that fortunately for historians... *some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive*. In addition to telling the true Grail story, these secret documents speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms.

In fact, the very opposite is the case. The Gnostic gospels tend to omit Christ's human traits and embellish him to make him more 'godlike'...consistent with the Gnostic viewpoint that humanity is evil and only the spirit is good, hence they create a rather celestial Christ-like being.

Rather than supposedly amping up the divine nature of Christ, as Brown suggests, the New Testament does quite the opposite - as it integrates and articulates the full humanity of Jesus as well as his deity. He had a human body; he was sometimes tired and hungry. He had human emotions; he was angry, he loved and he was sad. Also, the New Testament writers dealt very firmly with anyone who suggested that Jesus was not fully human, and much of the new Testament is written to counter the Gnostic/celestial/God-like view of Christ.

The actual textual facts of the New Testament are the very opposite to those which *The Da Vinci Code* suggests.

Further, it is not true to say that '*prior to 325 AD no one believed Jesus was divine*'. Analysis dates the orthodox New Testament gospels around the 1st century and indicates that they are far earlier than the Gnostic varieties.

Importantly the epistles of St Paul are even earlier than the Gospels and he writes, for example, '*One Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came*' and '*He is the image of the invisible God. By Him all things were created.*'

Also, numerous church fathers writing in the second century speak of the divinity of Christ and this attested to by many archaeological findings.

The Da Vinci Code fails to produce a shred of credible evidence of an "*earlier form of Christianity*" in which '*no one believed Jesus was divine*'. The historical evidence is all to the contrary.

8. What happened at Nicaea and what was Constantine's role?

According to Dan Brown Jesus' establishment as '*the Son of God*' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea' i.e. Jesus' divinity was the result of a vote and '*a relatively close vote at that*...

It is true that Constantine summoned the Council of Nicaea in AD325. However, it is not true that '*he was a lifelong pagan who was baptised on his deathbed, too weak to protest.*'

Constantine's policy was to unite the Christian church to the secular state. He did his best to conciliate both pagans and Christians. It is difficult to say when he was converted. It is true he was not baptised until shortly before his death – but the deferment of baptism was common in those days.

His policies were strongly Christian from the first. Constantine summoned the Council of Nicaea primarily to end disunity and controversy caused by the... **Arian Controversy**.

Arius taught that although Jesus was the Son of God he was in some way less than the Father. He was a lesser god (the nearest equivalent might be the position of the Jehovah's Witnesses today).

220-250 bishops attended the Council and here the Arian creed was rejected. They produced the Nicene Creed with four anti-Arian anathemas attached. This was accepted by all but two of the bishops (i.e. over 99% in favour). They declared that Jesus was the Son of God '*begotten not made, of the same substance (homousios) as the Father*'.

The Christian community from the very beginning had regarded Jesus as the Son of God. The discussion at Nicaea was not about whether he was the Son of God, but whether he was the same substance as the Father or a lesser God. The vote was not '*relatively close*' but an overwhelming majority in favour of the orthodox creed....which we still use today!

Nor is it true to say that '*the Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine*'.

The emperor Constantine had absolutely nothing to do with "fixing" the Canon of Scripture. The canon was pretty well established by the second century and confirmed by the 4th century. The Nicean Council did not establish the canon it only debated the merits of some of the more obscure books such as Hebrews and Jude.

The Gnostic gospels were never among the books considered for the canon by the early church - they were written a century too late to be written by the people they name (e.g. Thomas, Philip or Mary Magdalene) and authentic and undisputed apostolic authorship was the pre-eminent standard of inclusion.

Even the Gnostic 2nd century leader Marcian did not list the Gnostic writings as part of his canon but only the books found in our current New Testament! This is the strongest possible evidence that the so called 'gnostic gospels' did not exist at that stage.

***The Da Vinci Code* does not in fact uncover evidence for an earlier form of Christianity to that which we find in our New Testament. Browns contention is another leap of logic not supported by fact, archaeology or textual research.**

9. So when and how was the Bible canonised?

To understand this process we need to step back to the middle of the second century. Here when writing in his *"First Apology"* Justin Martyr stated that on Sundays in the Christian worship the *"Memoirs of the apostles were read together with the writings of the prophets"*.

It is evident therefore that not long after the apostolic age, New testament writings were established as a reliable source of orthodoxy. This is in fact confirmed by an important archaeological find dated to the middle of the second century when the "Muratorian Fragment" was discovered by L.A. Muratori. This fragment contains a listing of the New Testament books...part of the fragment is missing but the broad outline of the contents of what we now call the New Testament is defined quite clearly. In fact it would appear that during the second century there were a good many books in circulation including the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas, yet these books were never received on par with what had clearly been established as Apostolic writings. The Muratorian Fragment itself states *" These could be read in public worship but were not to be counted among the prophetic or apostolic writings"*.

The word canon is used to describe a list of books acknowledged as being divinely inspired and to be included in the bible. The formation of this canon was a gradual process but at least by the middle of the second century a status had been conferred upon a certain list as to what books represented supreme authority.

No church, no council, and most importantly no individual called Constantine in AD 325 conferred a status upon certain documents for his own ends, but rather the authority and power of the authentic documents was inherent within themselves and rose to the top of the pile as having the ring of truth.

10. So why has this book been so powerful and how does it challenge us?

In short everyone loves a good book, and everyone loves a good conspiracy theory...The Da Vinci Code is both!!

However I would contend that there are two more fundamental and searching reasons why this book has struck such a chord worldwide.

Firstly we live in a post-Christian society.... but not a post-spiritual society. People are increasingly open minded to things "spiritual" but are dissatisfied with what they think is on offer within the walls of the traditional church.

The fact that the Da Vinci Code unlocks a stream of consciousness that Brown suggests has been whispered for centuries in countless languages – art, music and literature – and most intriguingly in the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci all sits very comfortably within a new age society.

Secondly I would suggest, that from the day that Jesus spoke the words on the Sermon on the Mount of there being *"A narrow way that leads to life, and a wide road that leads to destruction,"* mankind has largely chosen the easy way.

I would contend that the real conspiracy here is with ourselves!!

Someone told me after reading the Da Vinci Code that the book *"Confirmed his own worst suspicions"*.

I think what they were really saying was; that although they have never taken time to check out the facts, update themselves on Christian belief since their R.E lessons, or undertake a genuine search into faith with an Alpha course or something similar, in order to assess the validity of the truth of Christ, they were in fact more comfortable reading a fiction book that gave them a short cut or the easy way, it sort of lets them off the hook in their search for truth.

To conclude:

One thing that did come out of the AD 325 Council chaired by Constantine was the Nicean creed, which is the creed, still used by our church as part of the communion service. It defines Christian belief. However I'd like to close with some extracts from Steve Turner' poem called *The Creed* in which he sums up the prevailing sentiment of our post-Christian society and much of the myth and myopia contained within both the Da Vinci Code and Dan Brown's own position...

"We're each following our own path of enlightenment. I consider myself a student of many religions"

The Creed: By Steve Turner:

We believe all religions are basically the same...at least the one we read was.

We believe Jesus was a good man, just like Buddha, Mohammed and ourselves.

We believe Jesus was a good moral teacher, we just think his good morals were bad

We believe that each man must find the truth that is right for him

Reality will adapt accordingly, the universe will re-adjust. History will alter.

We believe that there is no absolute truth, excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth!

Jesus on the other hand said this in Jn 14:6 " I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the father except by me"