

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

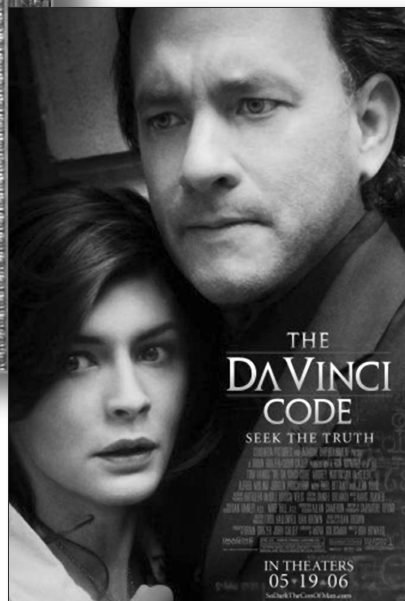
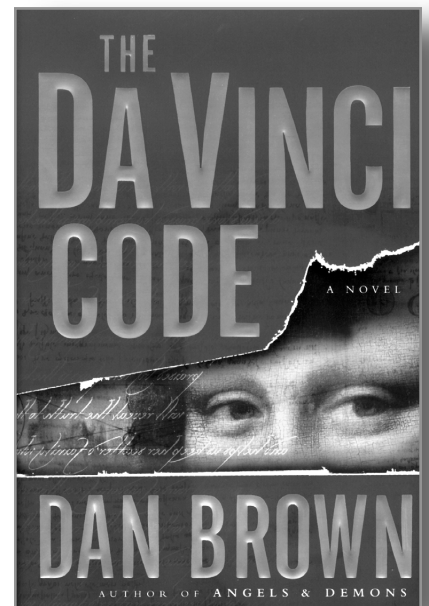
The Da Vinci Issue

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Dr. David Chapman (Covenant Seminary) provides an annotated outline to help discerning Christians bring the truth to bear on *The Da Vinci Code*.



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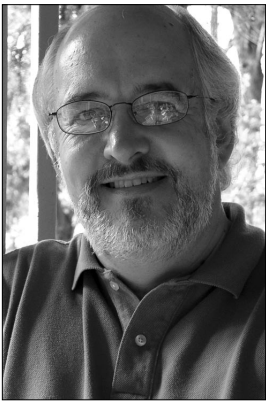
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Editor's Note



Building bridges

In the years since Ransom Fellowship was launched in 1982, we've done almost nothing about PR—our contacts have expanded almost exclusively by word-of-mouth. People hear us speak, or visit Toad Hall, or happen upon

one of our publications, they tell someone, and so it goes. It's something we've been very grateful for. Then we launched Ransom's web site, and each month now we hear from people who have discovered us by surfing the Net.

Recently we've been thinking about how to describe what Ransom is all about. We've never been drawn to slogans or bumper-stickers or sound bytes, but a few phrases do capture something of what we're about:

Helping Christians develop skill in discernment.
Reading the word, reading the world.
Developing discernment, deepening discipleship.
An authentic, winsome faith in a pluralistic world.
Faithfulness in the ordinary and routine.

We are interested in helping to bridge two chasms. First is the chasm between the church and the culture. Christians seem fearful and defensive in our post-Christian and pluralistic world. Rather than be reactionary, however, we should be creatively discerning and quietly confident. Creatively discerning in order to engage the culture with the gospel in a way that is winsome, understandable, and that prompts conversation. Quietly confident—not triumphalist—because the tomb remains empty and the gospel remains the power of God. The people of God need to be cultured, not in the elitist but in the attractively creative sense of the word.

The second chasm we'd like to help bridge

is between the generations. Occasionally, after I've spoken somewhere someone my age (give or take) will say I helped them see into the heart of their children in a new way. Or a young adult will tell me I'm the first Christian adult to take their music seriously, giving them hope that the church might come to understand their world.

Two bridges for two chasms. Helping to bridge the chasm between the church and the culture, and between the older generation in the church and the postmodern generation. Doesn't necessarily work well as a slogan, but we think it a worthy effort.

The two chasms were never meant to be. The people of God are meant to be part of their culture as Christ was part of his. We are meant to engage our culture with Christ's remarkable, redemptive blend of truth and love. Following him means following him not just in our beliefs and morals, but in his incarnation. Our world may be pluralistic and post-Christian, but make no mistake: it is our world, and we are to love it as Christ did, meaning being willing to lay down our lives that it might know grace. Grace in salvation, of course, and also the grace which flows into every aspect of life and culture when Christ is glorified. And my generation in the church is called to welcome, love, embrace and creatively reach the postmodern generation with the gospel because Christlikeness means making disciples of them. And we will do that when we open our homes and hearts in warm hospitality, listen, provide safe places for conversation, and give the gift of unhurried time.

It's a messy, risky, breathless, amazing way to live, but as we see it, we really have no choice. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue

re: Love skills & *Eat This Book*

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

To the Editor:

I look forward to receiving *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall* each time.

Having spent much of my life in art, then architecture, and now pastoring (the last 17 years), I need the discernment and love skills (and heart) that enable me to genuinely enjoy life in Christ with an engagement in culture—that is understanding, sincere, open—and the ability then to live out in relationships and words grace and truth.

Thank you for doing your work which benefits me greatly. Your impact is far greater than you probably know.

Steve Pauls
Anchorage, AK

recommend is Eugene Peterson's *Eat This Book*—a refreshing look at how to read the Bible (*lectio divina*).

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Kristin Davis
Glendale, AZ

Denis Haack replies:

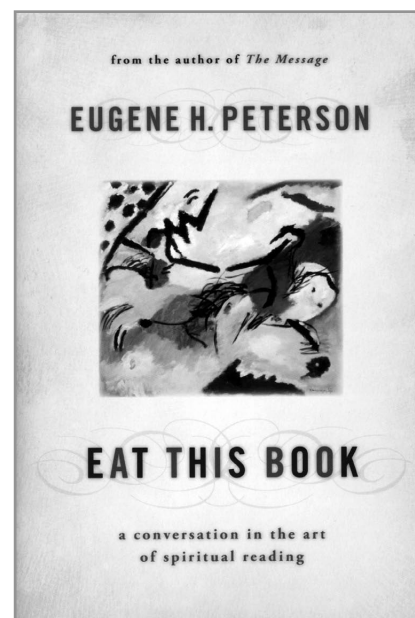
Thanks for your kind words—and I agree: *Eat This Book* is marvelous. It not only reminds us why the reading/study of Scripture is important, it helps us do it well, and gently helps us fall in love with God's word so we're motivated to do it. Peterson is a gifted author and pastor.

To the Editor:

I continue to be encouraged and strengthened in my faith by both your writings (I'm in my 7th or 8th years of reading *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall* and have all the back issues in a big binder for safekeeping!) So have to thank you once more for fighting the good fight—which becomes all the more important (in my life and the world around us) as our faith gets reduced to sound-bytes, issues of morality/control, topics to debate. It is an often discouraging, lonely, up-hill journey to keep the faith real, relevant, alive, transformative, capable of transcending our daily realities while fully being engaged in it—your ministry is a means of living with/balancing the tension inherent in living as Christians in today's messy world—loving the world even as we are called out, and set apart, from it.

I can't thank you enough.

One book I just finished and heartily



Engaging the code

An enormous amount of material—some thoughtful, some silly, some reactionary—has appeared in response to Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code* and Ron Howard's film adaptation of the book. What we are offering in this issue of *Critique* is simply a few comments and suggestions which we hope will help you sort through the available resources.

It is sad to see Christians reacting to *The Da Vinci Code* in what appears to be fear, anger, or sarcasm. There is no need to react; we can have a quiet confidence that even if nations rage and people plot, the king remains enthroned. (Psalm 2). Authentic Christianity is not a mindless leap into the dark, but a thoughtfully examined faith. The ideas Brown works into his fictional story have been around for a long time—all he's done is package them in a form that millions find attractive.

Some film critics have been pretty negative about the movie. Under the headline, "A 'Code' Not Worth Cracking," Ann Hornaday (*Washington Post*) says it isn't exciting enough. "The movie Sony Pictures has been desperately trying to position as 'the most controversial thriller of the year,'" she says, "turns out to be about as thrilling as watching your parents do a Sudoku puzzle." Roger Ebert thinks the novel is "utterly preposterous," though enjoyed the film as "preposterously entertaining." "Both contain," Ebert says, "accusations against the Catholic Church and its order of Opus Dei that would be scandalous, if anyone of sound mind could possibly entertain them. I know there are people who believe Brown's fantasies about the Holy Grail, the descendants of Jesus, the Knights Templar, Opus Dei, and the true story of Mary Magdalene. This has the advantage of distracting them from the theory that the Pentagon was not hit by an airplane."

I suspect that relatively few will simply accept all Brown's accusations. I think it more likely that *The Da Vinci Code* will plant a seed of amorphous, destructive doubt in many people's imaginations increasing their skepticism concerning Christianity's truth claims. If that is true, the real danger is that long after the specific questions raised by *The Da Vinci Code* are forgotten by our culture, the skepticism will continue.

Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian (Manhat-

tan) has some wise counsel as we begin to sort the issues out. "The temptation," Keller says, "is to throw your hands in the air and say, 'How is anyone supposed to know who is right?' My answer is—the *same way you know anything is right*. You simply *have* to read and examine things more closely." Living a unexamined, reactionary life is not an option for the faithful follower of Christ. "I propose that every Christian today," Keller says, "whether you consider yourself a 'lay person' or not, needs to study theology. Christians who are confused by books on text criticism and the formation of the Biblical canon simply haven't been willing to take the time to do some basic, introductory Biblical and theological studies. The sermons on Sunday will not be enough to help you lead an examined Christian life. You need to be in a small group, you need to read at least introductory texts on the Bible and theology, you need to take classes... Don't lead an unexamined Christian life."

In fact, resolving the contradictory claims swirling around *The Da Vinci Code* is not all that difficult. There are good biblical and historical scholars who have done solid research on the various questions, and their work is both easily available and accessible to the thoughtful student. One reason I am thankful the novel and the film have appeared is that they are prompting Christians to do the sort of study and reflection that should be part of our life of faith anyway.

Here are a few resources—a handout, an online paper, a web site, and two books—to help you get started.

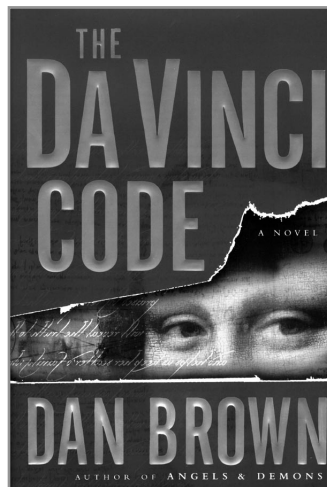
A Handout: "The Da Vinci Code and Early Christian History"

David W. Chapman, a professor at Covenant Theological Seminary, prepared the handout that appears in this issue of *Critique*. It won't answer all the questions, but it is an excellent way to get started. I'm deeply grateful for his thoughtful research and his kind permission for us to publish it here.

A Paper: "Engaging the Da Vinci Code"

Derek Melleby is a researcher at the Center for Youth/Parent Understanding (cpyu.org), a superb ministry we have long recommended in these pages. In "Engaging the Da Vinci Code," a brief, helpful paper, Melleby provides background to the controversy, outlines the basic issues and challenges raised by *The Da Vinci Code*, and outlines the contours of a thoughtful, winsome Christian response.

"Simply stating facts and refuting the false historical record does not 'win' converts," he wisely reminds us. "There are many resources addressing this issue that make it seem as if all we have to do is 'prove' that *The Da Vinci Code* is false and people will become



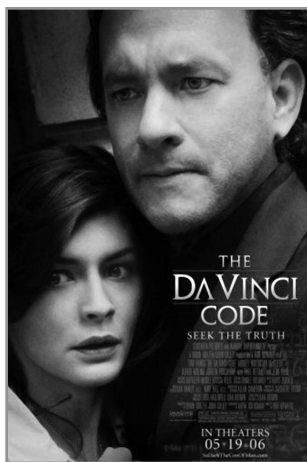
followers of Christ. Only God changes hearts, and very rarely does 'proven facts' change people's opinions and lifestyles (Did you know that smoking is bad for your health?). *The Da Vinci Code* offers a great opportunity to have meaningful conversations with people about things that matter. This moment presents a remarkable occasion to put forth a positive vision of what Christianity really is. While you will probably need to refute some of Dan Brown's 'facts,' don't miss the even greater responsibility of sharing the good news with both words and actions. Here's another important question that the church needs to ask: Why do people want to believe something like the portrait of Christianity depicted in *The Da Vinci Code*? What have we done with Christianity, in our own lives and in our churches, that has made *The Da Vinci Code*'s depiction attractive?"

Once again CPYU proves itself to be concerned for Christian discernment, for engaging the culture creatively with the gospel, and for helping all generations in the Christian community to live faithfully under Christ's Lordship. Well written and rooted in grace, "Engaging the Da Vinci Code" is an excellent place to begin.

A Web Site: www.thetruthaboutdavinci.com

Here is a small sampling of what is available on this site when you log on:

- *concise answers to the basic questions raised by the book and film:*
 - Is Jesus God?
 - Is the Bible true?
 - Was Jesus married?
 - What about the 'lost books' of the Bible?
 - What is the 'sacred feminine'?
 - What about the Holy Grail?
- *a full range of articles on the biblical and historical issues raised in the book and film, including:*
 - "The Gnostic Gospels," "The Gnostics and Jesus," & "Lost Books of the Bible" by Timothy Keller (Adjunct Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary);
 - "Dan Brown's 'Gift' to the Church" by James Garlow (pastor, Skyline Wesleyan Church, La Mesa, CA);
 - "Author Dan Brown—How does His Research Stack Up?" "Why not Just Dismiss *The Da Vinci Code* as Nonsense?" & "Emperor Constantine—Did He Create Our Bibles?" by Garry Williams (Tutor in Church History, Oak Hill Theological College, London);
 - "Reading Leonardo's *Last Supper*" by William Edgar (Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Seminary);
 - "*The Da Vinci Code* Phenomenon" by Andrew Trotter (Director, Christian Study Center, Charlotte, VA); and



"The Judas we Never Knew" by Philip Ryken.

- *Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about The Da Vinci Code, and ongoing discussion on them*
- *a variety of audio and video lectures which can be accessed free online.*

www.thetruthaboutdavinci.com was established by Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia), and essentially provides all you need to begin the research each Christian should pursue in light of the issues raised by *The Da Vinci Code*. The site is easy to navigate, the resources are well researched, thoughtful, yet accessible, and the people managing the site are trustworthy.

We recommend you log on and take advantage of it.

Book #1: *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Da Vinci* by Ben Witherington III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2004).

Dr. Witherington is a professor of New Testament who teaches at Asbury Theological Seminary (Wilmore, KY). He is also a respected biblical scholar who has first-hand knowledge of the history, controversies, and documents that supposedly underlie Dan Brown's story. This is a serious book, but accessible. One of the things I appreciate about *The Gospel Code*—besides the solid, first-rate scholarship—is Witherington's prose. Never reactionary, this is a book which not only contends for the truth, but does so with grace and compassion.

Book #2: *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everyone's Asking* by Darrell L. Bock (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books; 2004).

Dr. Bock is research professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary and a thoughtful scholar. *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* was one of the first books to be written in response to the five central questions raised by Dan Brown's novel:

Who was Mary Magdalene?
Was Jesus Married?

Would Jesus Being Single be Un-Jewish?
Do the So-Called Secret Gnostic Gospels Help Us Understand Jesus?
What Is the Remaining Relevance of The Da Vinci Code?

We warmly recommend these resources to you. ■

~Denis Haack

The Da Vinci Code and

by David W. Chapman,
Covenant Theological Seminary

"What I mean," Teabing countered, "is that almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false."

[*The Da Vinci Code*, p. 235]

Introduction

The controversy over *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown's bestselling book and blockbuster movie, has focused less on the accuracy of his interpretations of Leonardo's famous paintings and more on his shocking portrait of early Christian history. While his revisionist representation of Christianity has immense theological consequences, it also makes historical claims that fail to provide a reasonable reconstruction of church history. Nevertheless, while it is important to point out Mr. Brown's errors, wisdom requires that we simultaneously depict for the watching world a more accurate description of the early Church.

I would not claim that truth is wholly neglected in *The Da Vinci Code*. Part of the novel's power involves the mixing of truth with error – both in the details and in its broader themes. In terms of trustworthy broader themes, we can first note that Mr. Brown helpfully illustrates the importance of knowing history. The book, though misinterpreting many ancient symbols, does provide us a glimpse into the importance of symbolic expression. Moreover, the lead character models a passionate pursuit of truth no matter what the cost. By the way, with my seminary students I also like to point out that all of Dan Brown's novels represent a middle-aged professor as an action-adventure superstar (this, of course, has indeed been my personal professorial experience, and that of my colleagues). Unfortunately, although the book/movie advocates for the passionate pursuit of truth (with truth achieved by careful scholarly historical research), the author himself appears to have failed to do his own historical homework.

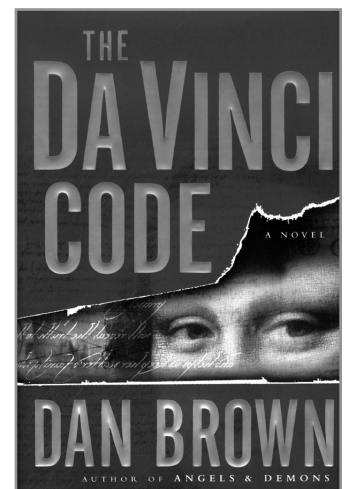
Before criticizing the historicity of Dan Brown's claims, it is worth asking: should we expect histori-

cal accuracy from a work of fiction? Of course, we might well wonder if this question itself represents an oddly conceived cultural value that historical fiction need not be historical. Beyond that, although the Christian reaction to the novel may have actually served to increase the book's popularity, it is important in the fundamental matters of our history-centered faith that we not let unfounded rumors spread unchallenged. It is all the more likely that this book could help start (or continue) such rumors since, on the opening page of the novel under the title "Fact", the author states: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." (*Da Vinci Code*, p. 1)

The following material is divided into two sections. The first lays out some false historical claims about early Christianity found in the novel, followed by brief critique. The second part attempts to lay out four basic historical propositions about early Christianity. While there is not sufficient space to fully justify these propositions, my hope is that the reader will desire to pursue these propositions further; thus I have provided some suggestions for future reading.

Part I: False Historical Claims in *The Da Vinci Code*

"Understandably, [Jesus'] life was recorded by thousands of followers across the land." Teabing paused to sip his tea and then placed the cup back on the mantel. "More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for



Early Christian History

inclusion — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.

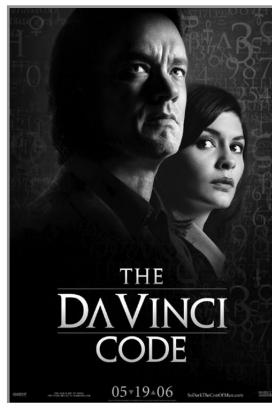
[*Da Vinci Code*, p. 231]

- The author here makes contradictory claims – “thousands” or “eighty”?
- We do not know of eighty gospels from antiquity, let alone any other extant gospels that exhibit the antiquity of the four canonical gospels in the New Testament. (See W. Schneemelcher, et al., eds. *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1 for texts and dates).
- Only four gospels were considered for the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), though a few Jewish Aramaic-speaking Christians were also reading the “Gospel of the Hebrews,” which is now only known in fragments. (See Eusebius, *Church History*, iii.25).

“The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.”

[*Da Vinci Code*, p. 231]

- Constantine was not involved in “collating” the Bible. Although the majority of the New Testament was viewed as authoritative centuries before Constantine (see below), the New Testament canon was formally recognized in a church council after Constantine (at the Council of Hippo Regius in A.D. 393).



“My dear,” Teabing declared, “until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal.”

“Not the Son of God?”

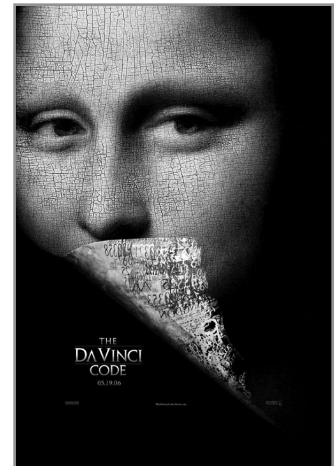
“Right,” Teabing said. “Jesus’ establishment as ‘the Son of God’ was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea.”

“Hold on. You’re saying Jesus’ divinity was the result of a vote?”

“A relatively close vote at that,” Teabing added.

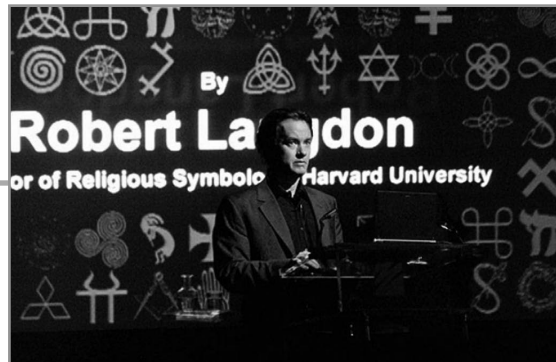
[*Da Vinci Code*, p. 233]

- Jesus has always been viewed as a mortal man by the Christian church (and this did not stop with Constantine). Jesus is fully God *and* fully human.
- The term “Son of God” for Jesus is found throughout the *first-century* New Testament books (e.g., Matt 26:63; Mark 15:39; Luke 1:35; John 1:34; Acts 9:20; Rom 1:4; Gal 2:20; Heb 4:14; 1 John 4:15; Rev 2:18 – just to note a few of the over 40 instances).
- Aside from the title “Son of God”, the deity of Jesus is affirmed throughout the New Testament (see further below) and in the subsequent earliest church Fathers.
- The Council of Nicaea did not “propose” that Jesus was the “Son of God.” In fact, all participants assumed the deity of Christ; the issue was whether there was a time before which Jesus existed (i.e., did the Father create the Son before creating the universe?) – see the creed and subsequent statements of the Council (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series two, volume 14, pp. 1-56). The Council of Nicaea pronounced that Jesus, in his nature as God, had always existed.
- Over two hundred bishops presiding at the Council of Nicaea accepted the Creed of Nicaea concerning the dual nature of Christ (i.e., Jesus is fully human and eternally fully divine); there were only two bishops present who rejected this Creed.



“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

Reading the World cont.



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."

[*Da Vinci Code*, p. 234]

- As noted above, the deity of Jesus was long assumed before Constantine (who did not "upgrade Jesus' status").
- There is no historical evidence to support the contention that Constantine commissioned a new Bible. Rather, the same books were in use long before (and after) Constantine.
- The four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) were not systematically embellished to make Jesus more godlike. Our earliest manuscripts (predating Constantine by over two hundred years) prove that the aspects of Jesus' deity were intact in the gospels from their inception in the first century A.D.

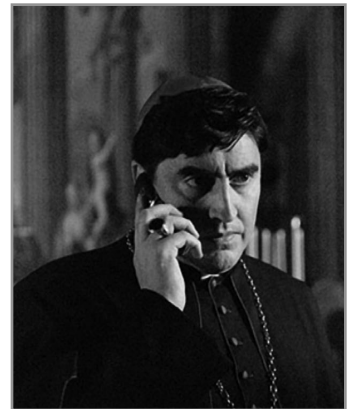
"Fortunately for historians," Teabing said, "some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1950s hidden in a cave near Qumran in Judean desert. And, of course, the Coptic Scrolls in 1945 at Nag Hammadi. In addition to telling the true Grail story, these documents speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms."

[*Da Vinci Code*, p. 234]

- There is virtually universal scholarly consensus that the Dead Sea Scrolls are Jewish documents and do not contain any Christian gospels. This is all the more clear now with the final publication of all these documents (available in the series *Discoveries in the Judean Desert*).
- The Nag Hammadi documents only contain five works called "gospels," and most of these are not actually narratives about Jesus' life (they use the term "gospel" in a less technical sense, meaning

simply "good news"). (For these documents see J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*).

- The Nag Hammadi literature tends to portray a gnostic Jesus who is more than a mere mortal man; and they thus tend to avoid discussing Jesus in "very human terms."
- The "true Grail story" as Brown relates it, is not substantiated by the Nag Hammadi documents. *The Gospel of Mary* implies not a marriage, but a special dispensation of knowledge to Mary. *The Gospel of Philip* is not direct on these matters. And the many other works found at Nag Hammadi do not represent Jesus as married, let alone having physical children.
- The early church famously (and accurately) claimed that their gospels and history were in keeping with their origins in the original teaching of the apostles (see esp. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*). Gnosticism clearly represents a later philosophical development that departed from the Jewish (monotheistic, creator-worshipping) roots of Jesus' religion.



"Of course, the Vatican, in keeping with their tradition of misinformation, tried very hard to suppress the release of these scrolls. And why wouldn't they? The scrolls 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."

[*Da Vinci Code*, p. 234]

- Despite widely publicized claims in the 1980's and early 90's, subsequent complete publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the last decade has proven that the Vatican did not seek to suppress the release of these scrolls. The delay in publica-

tion was due to the small size of the initial team involved, and due to their refusal to allow other scholars to have access to such a prized find. As far as I know, the Nag Hammadi literature was released without Vatican interference.

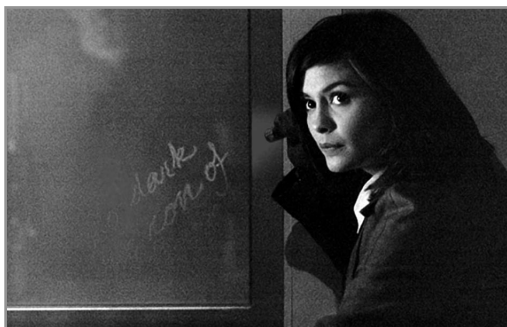
- Since the Nag Hammadi documents do not typically represent historical information about Jesus' life, they do not "highlight glaring historical discrepancies." Furthermore, where the Nag Hammadi documents make historical statements about Jesus, these documents, which are written invariably later than the New Testament, indicate a late, philosophically driven, speculative approach to Jesus.
- While one cannot ignore potential political motives throughout church history, early church statements about what books were included in the Bible invariably focus on a book's earliest historical (apostolic) claims and its theological fidelity to the teaching of Jesus.

"Because Jesus was a Jew," Langdon said, taking over while Teabing searched for his book, "and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned..."

If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible's gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood."

[*Da Vinci Code*, p. 245]

- The literature from Second Temple Judaism actually represents at least two viewpoints on marriage – many Jewish people in this period advocate marriage for the sake of procreation,



but others practiced celibacy. First-century Judaism actually evidences the famous

sect of the Essenes (long known to have practiced celibacy), whose home was in the Judean desert near where John baptized Jesus. Also there was a long history of Old Testament prophets who were unmarried. Jesus, following in that prophetic tradition and knowing that his destiny was the cross, likely chose to remain unmarried for sake of his ministry. Jesus would have been just slightly older than the common age for a man to marry (Jewish men in this period often married upon turning 30, while women tended to marry much younger).

- The Bible does not focus on the bachelorhood of Old Testament prophets nor on New Testament figures such as the Apostle Paul; no explanation for such an "unnatural state" is required.

[From the *Gospel of Philip*]

And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene.

Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?"

"As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse."

[*Da Vinci Code*, p. 246]

- Several words Brown includes in this citation are not found in the original text (especially noticeable is Brown's insertion of the phrase "on her mouth").
- The *Gospel of Philip* is written in Coptic, not in Aramaic.
- Recent scholarly interpretation of the *Gospel of Philip* contends that the "kiss" involved here was not sexual, but was like the widespread kisses of fellowship and blessing in the Gnostic religion.



Reading the World cont.



- The current editors of the *Gospel of Philip* do not argue that “companion” means “spouse.” Rather they interpret the author’s primary approach to marriage in this document to be a spiritual and not a physical act (see Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 140).

“Behold,” Teabing proclaimed, “the greatest cover-up in human history. Not only was Jesus Christ married, but He was a father. My dear, Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel. She was the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ. She was the womb that bore the lineage, and the vine from which the sacred fruit sprang forth.”

[*Da Vinci Code*, p. 249]

- The earliest church does not exhibit a strong desire to hide a marriage of Jesus. Marriage was widely accepted for followers of Jesus; and, should Jesus have been married, this would have been deemed culturally appropriate (and nothing to hide).
- Also, contrary to Brown’s assertions, Mary Magdalene is viewed very positively in the New Testament (e.g., Matthew 27:55–56; 28:1ff.; John 19:25; 20:1ff.)
- The Gnostic documents themselves do not clearly indicate that Jesus and Mary were married, let alone that they had children.
- Thus there is no ancient basis for supposing that Jesus was married, or that he had children.
- The Gnostic literature, to which Brown appeals, was very far from affirming Brown’s concept of the “sacred feminine.” Actually, in Gnostic thought, the male represented the spirit and the female represented the material world; thus women had to become as men in order to be saved.

Part II: Four Propositions about Early Church History

This section presents in propositional form four reliable historical claims about early Christianity. Here I wear my hat as a historian (rather than a theologian) in order to accurately describe church history. Although there are undoubtedly theological implications resulting from these propositions, the intent is fundamentally to outline some crucial historically verifiable base line truths. Brief support is provided underneath each proposition, and a bibliography is attached for further study.

1. The New Testament Gospels represent the earliest and most reliable historical sources about Jesus’ life.

A. “Earliest” – dating the Gospels

The four canonical Gospels are clearly first century documents. Even the most critical scholarship has moved increasingly to that conclusion. This conclusion is mandated by:

- (1) The widespread testimony to the Gospels in manuscripts (hand-written copies) from the second and third centuries A.D. (see especially the papyri numbered 45, 52, 64, 66, 75, and 90; but also papyri numbered 1, 4, 5, 7, 22, 28, 37, 39, 53, 69, 70, 80). So many copies at such early dates (unusual for any historical work of this period) provides confidence in our ability to know the original text and also grants corroboration of an early date needed for such distribution to be



achieved.

- (2) Citations of the four canonical Gospels in early second century church Fathers, combined with early church traditions about the formation of these Gospels, also require a first century dating.
- (3) Scholars have also noted the pre-70 A.D. (destruction of the Jewish Temple) aspects of the Gospels (especially of Mark).
- (4) Finally, evangelical scholars have rightly noted that the end of Luke-Acts (with Paul in prison, expecting a favorable judgment) seems to have been written during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome (otherwise why not mention his release). This indicates that Acts was written approximately A.D. 60–62, requiring the Gospel of Luke to have been authored even earlier, for Luke was written before Acts (see Acts 1:1–5).

B. "...reliable historical sources"

The intent of the New Testament Gospel writers to write accurate history is often witnessed in the Gospels themselves. No place is this more directly stated than in the opening words of the Gospel of Luke:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for

you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1–4; all Scripture citations are from the ESV). Notice in these



words the frank acknowledgment that others had already sought to compile (probably written) narratives of Jesus' life. While Luke could very well have used these, his focus (as a good historian) is on eyewitness testimony. His goal is to provide historical certainty for Theophilus' faith by writing an "orderly account" (i.e., an accurate historical narrative).

2. **Gnosticism started as a second century religion that radically diverged from Jesus' teaching.**

A. Gnosticism defined

- The label "Gnostic" derives from the Greek word for knowledge, implying that the Gnostics considered themselves bearers of secret knowledge
- The fundamental belief in Gnosticism is that: spirit is good, matter is evil.
- Although Gnostic systems varied, they mostly conclude that God did not create the material world (a demigod is usually blamed for this; often an entire speculative cosmology is put forth).
- In many Gnostic systems Christ did not die on the cross – either the wrong man was crucified, or the man ("Jesus") died but his spirit ("Christ") did not.
- Gnosticism was a second century (and later) phenomenon (on this see the studies of Edwin Yamauchi).

B. Sample texts from early Gnosticism (typical Gnostic elements noted in bullet points)

Gospel of Thomas

- (1) And he said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death."
- (2) Jesus said, "Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes



Reading the World cont.



troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the all”

(3) ...Rather the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.”

(114) Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.”

Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

- Note the emphasis on special knowledge in *logia* 1 (“finds the interpretation”), 2 (“astonished”) and 3 (“come to know yourselves”).
- Note the hints of a larger cosmology in *logion* 2 (“rule over the all”).
- Note the need for females (representing the material) to become males (representing the spirit).

Gospel of Mary (9–10)

Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren, “Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for his grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us into men.”

...Peter said to Mary, “Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the

Savior which you remember—which you know (but) we do not, nor have we heard them.” Mary answered and said, “What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you.”

- Note again the need for females (representing the material) to become males (representing the spirit); and observe the emphasis on hidden knowledge. Mary in this late second century work is not the physical spouse of Jesus, but the disciple whom he loved enough to grant his secret knowledge. The other apostles are more ignorant than her (Gnostic writings often favor more minor figures over the



apostles, probably because the orthodox non-Gnostic church laid better claim to be heirs of the apostles).

Gospel of Philip (ii,3.75)

“The world came about through a mistake.

For he who created it wanted to create it imperishable and immortal. He fell short of attaining his desire. For the world never was imperishable, nor, for that matter, was he who made the world.”

- The creator of the material world is not God Almighty, but a lesser deity who failed in his endeavor to emulate the imperishable world of the spirit.



Gospel of Judas

But their spirits did not dare to stand before [him], except for Judas Iscariot. He was able to stand before him, but he could not look him in the eyes, and he turned his face away. Judas [said] to him, "I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you."

Knowing that Judas was reflecting upon something that was exalted, Jesus said to him, "Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom. It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal. For someone else will replace you, in order that the twelve [disciples] may again come to completion with their god."

"The multitude of those immortals is called the cosmos – that is, perdition – by the Father and the seventy-two luminaries who are with the Self-Generated and his seventy-two aeons. In him the first human appeared with his incorruptible powers. And the aeon that appeared with his generation, the aeon in whom are the cloud of knowledge and the angel, is called El."

Judas said to Jesus, "Look, what will those who have been baptized in your name do?" Jesus said, "Truly I say [to you], this

baptism [56] [...] my name [–about nine lines missing–] to me. Truly [I] say to you, Judas, [those who] offer sacrifices to Saklas [...] God [–three lines missing–] everything that is evil.

But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me."

- Most of this recently published much media-hyped late second century Gnostic gospel leads to the revelation of the names of the many demigods who were generated from the Almighty. This removed the Almighty from the one who is blamed for creating the material world.
- Significant portions of the text are fragmentary (note the missing lines).
- The hidden knowledge is given to Judas, a minor figure (basically a non-apostolic figure, since he is rejected in the apostolic tradition). Judas is designated as the one to betray Jesus. However, Christ will not die, merely "the man that clothes me."

From all these Gnostic texts we can see that this Gnostic religion departs from Judaism and early Christianity, both of which affirm the goodness of the creation (material and spiritual) that came from the hand of the one true God. Remember in the New Testament that Jesus himself is involved in creation (Col 1:15-20). These texts are clearly later than the canonical Gospels, and they represent a departure from any truly historical approach to Jesus.



3. The New Testament canon is founded upon a core of first century documents immediately recognized by early Christians as authoritative.

The canon was not formally recognized at a church council until the Synod of Hippo Regius (A.D. 393), probably because the issue of the canon was not a sufficiently debated topic in the church to demand a council decision at an earlier time. This Synod was clearly after Constantine.

However, long before Constantine the early church discussed which books should be viewed as authoritative Scripture (see Eusebius' *Church History* iii.25, and the second century *Muratorian Canon*).

The practical purpose of a "canon" was to define those books that should be read aloud as authoritative in the church.

As can be seen by comparing the rationale provided in Eusebius and in the *Muratorian Canon*, the basic "criteria" for canonicity involved books that are apostolic (either written by apostles or their direct associates), historically accurate, and theologically sound.

The handful of debated books (i.e., those books considered for canonical status but ultimately rejected) was orthodox in theology and cohered with the historical representation of the church from the New Testament. See collections of the *Apostolic Fathers* for these works.

There was a core of books accepted from the beginning (including the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, etc.) that were used by the early church Fathers and that were included in all canonical lists. Therefore, the early debates over canon revolved around a few more peripheral



works. If all we had today were merely this core of universally accepted canonical books, our theology would still be based on the four Gospels and the writings of Paul (not a bad place to start).

Note how Paul's epistles are already considered "Scripture" by Peter in the first century: "And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures." (2 Peter 3:15-16)



4. Jesus in earliest Christianity was a man who intended to die for our sins, who was raised from the dead, and who was fully human and fully divine.

A. Jesus was a man.

"And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him." (Luke 2:40)

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." (Galatians 4:4-5)

B. Jesus was intended to die for our sins.

"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over



to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise... For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:33-34, 45)

"And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:27-28)

C. Jesus is raised from the dead.

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep." (1 Corinthians 15:3-6)

"To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." (Acts 1:3)

D. Jesus is fully human.

"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become

a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:14-18)

E. Jesus is fully divine.

"Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" (John 20:27-28)

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." (Hebrews 1:1-3)

See further: John 1:1; 1:18; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1; Matthew 20:18-20; Colossians 1:15-20; Philippians 2:5-11; etc.

Further evidence for each of these propositions can be found in standard theological textbooks.



Reading the World cont.



Recommended Reading:

In general:

F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003).

On church history:

Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Waco: Word, 1982).

J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (London: Black, 1977).

On the canon:

F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988).

Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988).

On the Gospels:

Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987)

D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) – especially for issues involved in dating the Gospels.

On *The Da Vinci Code*:

Ben Witherington, *The Gospel Code* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004)

Darrell Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

<http://thetruthaboutdavinci.com/>

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