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MONA LISA'S SMIRK:

Was there a Da Vinci Conspiracy?

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

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

Has a gigantic conspiracy resulted in the reinvention of Jesus? According to the book and movie, *The Da Vinci Code*, that is exactly what happened. Several of the book's assertions regarding Jesus smack of conspiracy. For example, the book states:

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

Could this shocking assertion from Dan Brown's best-selling book be true? Or is the premise behind it just the stuff of a good conspiracy novel—on a par with a belief that aliens crash-landed at Roswell, New Mexico, or that there was a second gunman on the grassy knoll in Dallas when JFK was assassinated? Either way, the story is compelling. No wonder Brown's book has become one of the best-selling stories of the decade.

The Jesus Conspiracy

The Da Vinci Code begins with the murder of a French museum curator named Jacques Sauniere. A scholarly Harvard professor and a beautiful French cryptologist are commissioned to decipher a message left by the curator before his death. The message turns out to reveal the most profound conspiracy in the history of humankind: a cover-up of the true message of Jesus Christ by a secret arm of the Roman Catholic Church called Opus Dei.

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

- The Roman emperor Constantine conspired to deify Jesus Christ.
- Constantine personally selected the books of the New Testament.
- The Gnostic gospels were banned by men to suppress women.
- Jesus and Mary Magdalene were secretly married and had a child.

- Thousands of secret documents disprove key points of Christianity.

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

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

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

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

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

"A relatively close vote at that," Teabing tells the stunned cryptologist.²

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

The Da Vinci Code has sold its story well, drawing comments from readers such as "If it were not true it could not have been published!" Another said he would "never set foot in a church again." A reviewer of the book praised it for its "impeccable research."³ Pretty convincing for a fictional work.

Let's accept for the moment that Teabing's proposal might be true. Why, in that case, would the Council of Nicaea decide to promote Jesus to Godhood?

"It was all about power," Teabing continues. "Christ as Messiah was critical to the functioning of Church and state. Many scholars claim that the early Church literally stole Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power."⁴

In many ways, *The Da Vinci Code* is the ultimate conspiracy theory. If Brown's assertions are correct, then we have been lied to—by the church, by history, and by the Bible. Perhaps even by those we trust most: our parents or teachers. And it was all for the sake of a power grab.

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

Constantine And Christianity

In the centuries prior to Constantine's reign over the Roman Empire, Christians had been severely persecuted. But then, while entrenched in warfare, Constantine reported to have seen a bright image of a cross in the sky inscribed with the words "Conquer by this." He marched into battle under the sign of the cross and took control of the empire.

Constantine's apparent conversion to Christianity was a watershed in church history. Rome became a Christian empire. For the first time in nearly 300 years it was relatively safe, and even cool, to be a Christian.

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

These are some of the kernels of truth in *The Da Vinci Code*, and kernels of truth are a prerequisite for any successful conspiracy theory. But the book's plot turns Constantine into a conspirator. So let's address a key question raised by Brown's theory: did Constantine invent the Christian doctrine of Jesus' divinity?

Deifying Jesus

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

Christians had been worshiping Jesus as God since the first century. But in the fourth century, a church leader from the east, Arius, launched a campaign to defend God's oneness. He taught that Jesus was a specially created being, higher than the angels, but not God. Athanasius and most church leaders, on the other hand, were convinced that Jesus was God in the flesh.

Constantine wanted to settle the dispute, hoping to bring peace to his empire, uniting the east and west divisions. Thus, in 325 A.D., he convened more than 300 bishops at Nicaea (now part of Turkey) from throughout the Christian world. The crucial question is, did the early church think Jesus was the Creator or merely a creation—Son of God or son of a carpenter? So, what did the apostles teach about Jesus? From their very first recorded statements, they regarded him as God. About 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul wrote the Philippians that Jesus was God in human form (Philippians 2:6-7, NLT). And John, a close eye-witness, confirms Jesus' divinity in the following passage:

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

This passage from John 1, has been discovered in an ancient manuscript, and it is carbon-dated at 175-225 A.D. Thus Jesus was clearly spoken of as God over a hundred years before Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea. We now see that forensic manuscript evidence contradicts *The Da Vinci Code's* claim that Jesus' divinity was a fourth century invention. But what does history tell us about the Council of Nicaea? Brown asserts in his book, through Teabing, that the majority of bishops at Nicaea overruled Arius's belief that Jesus was a "mortal prophet" and adopted the doctrine of Jesus' divinity by a "relatively close vote." True or false?

In reality, the vote was a landslide: only two of the 318 bishops dissented. Whereas Arius believed that the Father alone was God, and that Jesus was His supreme creation, the council concluded that Jesus and the Father were of the same divine essence.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were deemed to be distinct, coexistent, coeternal Persons, but one God. This doctrine of one God in three Persons became known as the

Nicene Creed, and is the central core of the Christian Faith. Now, it is true that Arius was persuasive and had considerable influence. The landslide vote came after considerable debate. But in the end the council overwhelmingly declared Arius to be a heretic, since his teaching contradicted what the apostles had taught about Jesus' divinity.

History also confirms that Jesus had publicly condoned the worship he received from his disciples. And, as we have seen, Paul and other apostles clearly taught that Jesus is God and is worthy of worship.

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

Firing On The Canon

The Da Vinci Code also states that Constantine suppressed all documents about Jesus other than those found in our current New Testament canon (recognized by the church as authentic eyewitness reports of the apostles). It further asserts that the New Testament accounts were altered by Constantine and the bishops to reinvent Jesus. Another key element of *The Da Vinci Code* conspiracy is that the four New Testament Gospels were cherry-picked from a total of "more than 80 gospels," most of which were supposedly suppressed by Constantine.⁵

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

Regarding the first issue, letters and documents written by second century church leaders and heretics alike confirm the wide usage of the New Testament books. Nearly 200 years before Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea, the heretic Marcion listed 11 of the 27 New Testament books as being the authentic writings of the apostles.

And about the same time, another heretic, Valentinus, alludes to a wide variety of New Testament themes and passages. Since these two heretics were opponents of the early church leadership, they were not writing just what the bishops wanted. Yet, like the early church, they still referred to the same New Testament books we read today.

So, if the New Testament was already widely in use 200 years before Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, how could the emperor have invented or altered it? By that time the church was widespread and encompassed hundreds of thousands if not millions of believers, all of whom were familiar with the New Testament accounts.

In his book *The Da Vinci Deception*, an analysis of *The Da Vinci Code*, Dr. Erwin Lutzer remarks,

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

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

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

“Because Constantine upgraded Jesus’ status almost four centuries after Jesus’ death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history. ...Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.”⁷

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

Secret "Knowers"

The Gnostic gospels are attributed to a group known as (big surprise here) the Gnostics. Their name comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge.” These people thought they had secret, special knowledge hidden from ordinary people.

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

As Christianity spread, the Gnostics mixed some doctrines and elements of Christianity into their beliefs, morphing Gnosticism into a counterfeit Christianity. Perhaps they did it to keep recruitment numbers up and make Jesus a poster child for their cause. However, for their system of thought to fit with Christianity, Jesus needed to be reinvented, stripped of both his humanity and his absolute deity.

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

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

Early Critics

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

Check out, for example, what the apostle John wrote near the end of the first century:

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

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

Christian theologian Origen wrote this in the early third century, more than a hundred years before Nicaea:

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

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

Who's Sexist?

Brown suggests that one of the motives for Constantine’s alleged banning of the Gnostic writings was a desire to suppress women in the church. Ironically, it is the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas that demeans women. It concludes (supposedly quoting Peter) with this eye-popping statement: “Let Mary go away from us, because women are not worthy of life” (114). Then Jesus allegedly tells Peter that he will make Mary into a male so that she may enter the kingdom of heaven. Read: women are inferior. With sentiments like that on display, it’s difficult to conceive of the Gnostic writings as being a battle cry for women’s liberation.

In stark contrast, the Jesus of the biblical Gospels always treated women with dignity and respect. Revolutionary verses like this one found within the New Testament have been foundational to attempts at raising women's status:

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

Mystery Authors

When it comes to the Gnostic gospels, just about every book carries the name of a New Testament character: the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary, The Gospel of Judas, and so on. (Sounds a little like roll call at a parochial school.) These are the books that conspiracy theories like *The Da Vinci Code* are based upon. But were they even written by their purported authors?

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

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

New Testament scholar Norman Geisler commented on two Gnostic writings, the Gospel of Peter and the Acts of John. (These Gnostic writings are not to be confused with the New Testament books written by John and Peter.):

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

The Gnostic gospels are not historical accounts of Jesus' life but instead are largely esoteric sayings, shrouded in mystery, leaving out historical details such as names, places, and events. This is in striking contrast to the New Testament Gospels, which contain innumerable historical facts about Jesus' life, ministry, and words.

Mrs. Jesus

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

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

A *Newsweek* magazine article, that summarized leading scholars' opinions, concluded that the theory that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were secretly married has no historical basis.¹⁵ The proposal set forth in *The Da Vinci Code* is built primarily upon one solitary verse in the Gospel of Philip that indicates Jesus and Mary were companions. In the book, Teabing tries to build a case that the word for companion (koinonos) could mean spouse. But Teabing's theory is not accepted by scholars.

There is also a single verse in the Gospel of Philip that says Jesus kissed Mary. Greeting friends with a kiss was common in the first century, and had no sexual connotation. But even if *The Da Vinci Code* interpretation is correct, there is no other historical document to confirm its theory. And since the Gospel of Philip is a forged document written 150-220 years after Christ by an unknown author, its statement about Jesus isn't historically reliable.

Perhaps the Gnostics felt the New Testament was a bit shy on romance and decided to sauce it up a little. Whatever the reason, this isolated and obscure verse written two

centuries after Christ isn't much to base a conspiracy theory upon. Interesting reading perhaps, but definitely not history.

As to the Holy Grail and the Priory of Sion, Brown's fictional account again distorts history. The legendary Holy Grail was supposedly Jesus' cup at his last supper, and had nothing to do with Mary Magdalene. And Leonardo da Vinci never could have known about the Priory of Sion, since it wasn't founded until 1956, 437 years after his death. Again, interesting fiction, but phony history.

The "Secret" Documents

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

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

And if Brown (Teabing) is referring to the apocryphal, or infancy Gospels, that cat is also out of the bag. They are not secret, nor do they disprove Christianity. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown has said of the Gnostic gospels,

"We learn not a single verifiable new fact about the historical Jesus' ministry, and only a few new sayings that might possibly have been his."¹⁸

Unlike the Gnostic gospels, whose authors are unknown and who were not eyewitnesses, the New Testament we have today has passed numerous tests for authenticity. (Click to read *Jesus.doc*) The contrast is devastating to those pushing conspiracy theories. New Testament historian F. F. Bruce wrote:

"There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament."¹⁹

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

"It is not right to say that the Gospel of Thomas was excluded by some fiat on the part of a council: the right way to put it is, the Gospel of Thomas excluded itself! It did not harmonize with other testimony about Jesus that early Christians accepted as trustworthy."¹⁷

History's Verdict

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

In spite of the lack of historical evidence, conspiracy theories will still sell millions of books and set box office records. Scholars in related fields, some Christians and some

with no faith at all, have disputed the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*. However, the easily swayed will still wonder; could there be something to it after all?

Award-winning television journalist Frank Sesno asked a panel of historical scholars about the fascination people have with conspiracy theories. Professor Stanley Kutler from the University of Wisconsin replied, “We all love mysteries-but we love conspiracies more.”²¹

So, if you want to read a great conspiracy theory about Jesus, Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, may be just the ticket for you. But if you want to read the true accounts of Jesus Christ, then Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John will get you back to what the eyewitnesses saw, heard, and wrote. Who would you rather believe?

Did Jesus Really Rise From The Dead?

The greatest question of our time is “Who is the real Jesus Christ?” Was he just an exceptional man, or was he God in the flesh, as Paul, John, and his other disciples believed?

The eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ actually spoke and acted like they believed he physically rose from the dead after his crucifixion. If they were wrong then Christianity has been founded upon a lie. But if they were right, such a miracle would substantiate all Jesus said about God, himself, and us.

But must we take the resurrection of Jesus Christ by faith alone, or is there solid historical evidence? Several skeptics began investigations into the historical record to prove the resurrection account false. What did they discover?

Endnotes

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 234.
2. Brown, 233.
3. Quoted in Erwin Lutzer, *The Da Vinci Deception* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2004), xix.
4. Brown, 233.
5. Brown, 231.
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17. Quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 1998), 68.
18. Quoted in Lutzer, 32.
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20. Linda Kulman and Jay Tolson, "Jesus in America," U. S. News & World Report, December 22, 2003, 2.
21. Stanley Kutler, interview with Frank Sesno, "The Guilty Men: A Historical Review," History Channel, April 6, 2004.

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