

The Da Vinci Code: Fact, Fiction, or Faith?

Mystery and suspense, secrecy and conspiracy, and murder.

And it's fiction, right? I mean, we certainly can't rely on Dan Brown/Ron Howard when it comes to third and fourth century history, can we?

Several historical references are made in this novel/movie that are simply wrong, yet are presented by a "scholar" in what seems like a scholarly discussion. Which historical documents are used for evidence? Various gnostic writings like the Gospel of Phillip, the Gospel of Thomas, and of course, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

Most of these gnostic writings were written in the second and third centuries while all four gospels in the New Testament date from 45-95 AD, depending on which gospel you are talking about.

While the *Da Vinci Code* maintains that these gnostic writings presented a mortal Jesus, the fact is gnostics typically portrayed Jesus not as a man, but as a phantom-like *super*-spiritual being. He did not feel pain, or hunger – he did not have any feelings, or *passions*, and he certainly would *not* have indulged in sexual relations. This view of Jesus was common and is referred to by scholars as *docetism*. Many Christian writers in the second and third centuries argue against this view.

While the gnostic texts typically over-emphasized the heavenly, or spiritual nature of Jesus, the early church certainly believed that Jesus was more than mortal. From Paul's text which states that "though he was in his very nature God, he lowered himself and took on the form of a servant," to the famous declaration of Thomas to the risen Jesus, "My Lord and my God." For those who try to claim that we are misrepresenting these first century documents, we have Ignatius of Antioch (cir. 107-120 AD),
"There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first possible and then impossible, even Jesus Christ our Lord." (Ephesians 7)
So we have a very early, nonbiblical witness agreeing with the New Testament.

But how can we trust the New Testament if Constantine had such political motivations for putting it together? First, there is not one single historical document that makes this claim – not even the gnostic writings! We have three ancient writers who tell us about the Council of Nicaea and none of them report any discussion about the selection of New Testament documents.

The New Testament was **not** finalized with a vote, it was **not** found in a clay jar like the Dead Sea Scrolls. The documents that became the New Testament were all written before the end of the first century. Most were embraced as inspired apostolic writings right away. As early as the second century we read writers like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria quoting most of these apostolic writings as "the scriptures." Probably 90-95% of the New Testament can be reconstructed from the quotations of these four early writers. These writers do not have 100% agreement on which documents are "inspired," but by 250 AD Christian writers are much more in agreement, and by 300 AD the agreement is almost complete. The agreement on which documents were included was a dynamic evolution – it was more about "lesser" documents gradually being dropped than a dogmatic insistence on the

“right” documents. Were documents ever collected and burned to suppress their influence? Yes, from time to time this happened, but never in the measured, systematic, and global fashion that it stated in the *Da Vinci Code*. The Roman Empire was unable to stamp out Christianity and the idea that the early Christian Church could systematically stamp out gnosticism is an overly simplistic and naive notion. Did the *winners* write Christian history as Teabing stated? Yes. Did the early Christian writers expunge all contrary opinion and thus *re-write* the history? If they did, there is no clear historical evidence for it – they did an unbelievably thorough job of it. Even the Nag Hammadi texts cannot be used to prove this conspiracy theory.

So in the end, what can we believe?

The clear historical evidence is that the New Testament accounts are the most reliable documents we have concerning the life, death, and resurrection of the human figure known as Jesus of Nazareth.

Whether or not you believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, ascended into heaven, and declared both Lord and God remains a matter of faith. It cannot be proven scientifically, but neither can it be proven false. It *can*, however, be proven through experience. Millions of people living in every nation of the world have experienced the reality of this faith.

You can know the forgiveness of sins.

You can know this resurrected Jesus

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