

Discerning Fact from Fiction in *The Da Vinci Code*

The Da Vinci Code opens with a murder in a Paris museum. In the novel, the curator of the museum, Jacques Sauniere, was the last member of a secret society, the Priory of Sion. He holds a secret passed down for centuries that is so devastating it could destroy the church. The secret, held for ages, is the Holy Grail. The secrets of the Grail have been preserved in codes, the foremost code being the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci.

In the gripping novel, Dan Brown creatively appears to present historical facts that shatter the foundational beliefs of Christianity. He asserts that the facts in the novel are accurate stating, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secrets in the novel are accurate." Brown's statement here can be misleading because he presents several historical facts that are true, but adds elements and his interpretations that are false. Therefore, Brown presents readers with facts laced with his fictional assumptions presented as truth. As a result, people who read his novel may be confused if they are unable to discern the truth from the author's assumptions. Dan Brown paints a picture that the traditional teachings of Christianity are false. Following are some excerpts from his book, *The Da Vinci Code*:

"The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book" (p. 231).

"Jesus Christ was a historical figure of staggering influence, perhaps the most enigmatic and inspirational leader the world has ever seen.... Understandably, His life was recorded by thousands of followers across the land... More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them" (p. 231).

"Who chose which gospels to include?" Sophie asked. "Aha! ... The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today was collated by the pagan Emperor Constantine the Great" (p. 232).

"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. I've written several books on the topic" (p. 233).

Teabing replied, "At this gathering (Council of Nicea), ... many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon - the date of Easter, the role of bishops, the administration of the sacraments, and, of course, the divinity of Jesus."

"I don't follow. His divinity?" Sophie asked.

"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 Nicea."

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

"A relatively close vote at that...(p. 233).

"The twist is this, ... 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." "An interesting note," Langdon added, "Anyone who chose the forbidden gospels over Constantine's version was

deemed a heretic” (p. 234).

“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 1950’s hidden in a cave near Qumran in the Judean desert. And of the course the Coptic Scrolls in 1945 at **Nag Hammadi**... these documents speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms. 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” (p. 234).

“What I mean,” Teabing countered, “is that almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false” (p. 235).

The Da Vinci Code Claims that the picture of Christ taught for centuries in the church is a false one for the following reasons:

1. The church created a picture of Christ that would portray him as the divine Son of God.
2. There are eighty secret gospels that reveal a Jesus contrary to the four that have been hidden by the Church.
3. The church chose only four of the gospels and these four present a distorted portrait of Christ as the Divine Son of God.
4. The idea that Christ is divine was not taught till the Council of Nicea in the 4th Century AD.
5. The miracles performed by Jesus were created because of the early church’s desire to glorify him and exaggerate the stories.
6. Jesus was not divine, but human, and married to Mary Magdalene and that the Kingdom teaching was to be through her.
7. There are contradictions and discrepancies that indicate the gospels are inaccurate and have been tampered with.
8. The late date of the writings allowed for myths to proliferate.
9. The apostles are not the authors of the gospels since they were written centuries after the death of Christ.

In the following articles, I will cover these issues: Are there secret gospels? How was the New Testament Canon created? Was Jesus married? How accurate are the gospels? I will address issues brought up by the novel and discern between what is truth and what is error. Is what we have known about Christianity true or false? Let’s begin our investigation.

Have We Found the Missing Gospels?

The Dead Sea Scrolls and The Nag Hammadi Texts

The Da Vinci Code claims there were eighty gospels but only four were chosen to be part of the New Testament.

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Dan Brown’s assertions are similar to those presented by the Jesus Seminar, a gathering of liberal theologians who have concluded that eighty percent of what is now written in our gospels were not part of the original text. Jesus Seminar leader John Dominic Crossan writes, “Those four gospels do not represent all the early gospels available or even a random sample within them but are instead a calculated collection known as the canonical gospels. This becomes clear in studying other gospels either discerned as sources inside the official four or else discovered as documents outside them.”¹

Brown and Crossan refer to the Nag Hammadi Texts, which Brown refers to in the novel as the “missing gospels.” Brown is correct in that ancient documents have been found at two famous sites, the Dead Sea and at Nag Hammadi. However, his commentary in the novel on these two sites strays off the mark.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1948, contained the ancient writings of the Essenes, a monastic group that lived in the Dead Sea region. They viewed the religious culture of Israel to be corrupt and chose to separate themselves from society and spend their days studying and copying the Old Testament. The Dead Sea Scrolls contained the rules and regulations of Essene life, but the Old Testament books were also found among the scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls provided valuable bibliographic evidence and demonstrated that our present day Old Testament is accurately preserved.

Recently, in Cave 7 of the Dead Sea discovery, New Testament documents dating to the first century have been discovered. Although still under debate, many feel these fragments could be further proof that the gospels were written well within the first century and not centuries later as skeptics assert. The Dead Sea Scrolls in no way provide proof that any secret gospels exist. Instead, they confirm the accuracy of the Old and New Testament.

The Nag Hammadi Texts, discovered in 1946, are named after the place they were found on the west bank of the Nile. A library was found containing forty-five texts written in the Coptic language. These were written from the early second century to the fourth century AD. Examples of texts included The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Philip, The Acts of Peter and others. These texts were Gnostic in character and found in a library of Gnostic works. Our knowledge of the Gnostics came only from the church fathers criticisms of the Gnostic texts, but now we can read them for what they say.

Gnosticism derives its meaning from the Greek word gnosis which means knowledge. Gnosticism

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus A Revolutionary Biography*, (San Francisco, CA.: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), p. X.

taught the secret knowledge of dualism; that the material world was evil and the spiritual realm was pure. Since the physical realm is evil, they taught that Jesus was not really human and he did not really die on a cross. They further taught that Jesus shared secret knowledge with a select few and that only those with keen insight into these secrets could truly release the divine within them.

The assertion by Brown that these are secret gospels is false. We have known of these for centuries. The early church fathers wrote about the texts and rejected them as uninspired and non-apostolic. Iraneaus (130-200 AD) and Tertullian (160-225 AD) mentioned the texts in their letters and stated their rejection of them. These texts were never considered part of the inspired writing of the Apostles for several reasons.

Many of the texts are dated well after the death of the apostles. The teachings are inconsistent with previous revelation of Jesus and apostolic teaching. The teaching of Gnostic dualism is what the gospels of John and Epistles appear to be reacting against. Additionally, the church fathers knew of these texts and never regarded them as equals to the gospels. The secret teachings for a select few goes against the nature of the gospel, Christ taught His followers to go and preach the teachings of Christ throughout the world in a honest and open manner. Furthermore, the Gnostics rejected orthodox Christianity and orthodox Christianity rejected the Gnostics. The two teachings were not compatible in any way. The four gospels were known to be apostolic writings but these others texts were not.

Following are some excerpts from several Gnostic Texts. From the Gospel of Philip, a second century AD document, we read this passage:

“Light and Darkness, life and death, right and left, are brothers of one another. They are inseparable. Because of this neither are the good good, nor evil evil, nor is life life, nor death death. For this reason each one will dissolve into its earliest origin. But those who are exalted above the world are indissoluble, eternal.”

The above passage teaches that good and evil, life and death, light and darkness exist in a harmonious relationship but this contradicts biblical teachings.

“In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it” (John 1:5).

“When Jesus spoke again to the people he said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life’” (John 8:12).

“God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all” (I John 1:5).

Passages from John’s writings teach that life and death, God and sin, light and darkness live in opposition to one another and one will overcome the other. There will not be a harmonious symbiotic relationship but a conflict in which God, who is light, life, and good, will triumph. Another passage from the Gospel of Philip states:

“This is quite in keeping with the truth. But you saw something of that place, and you became those things. You saw the Spirit, you became spirit. You saw Christ, you became Christ. You saw the Father, you shall become Father. So in this place you see everything and do not see yourself, but in that place you do see yourself - and what you see you shall become.”

The above passage also contradicts biblical teaching. Believers reflect the character of Christ, but will never become God or Christ. God remains sovereign over all His creation. Believers are taught to be holy not divine.

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene, a third century work, produces some deviant teaching as well. Verses 25-26 states,

"Peter said to him, 'Since you have explained everything to us, tell us this also: What is the sin of the world?' The Savior said, 'There is no sin, but it is you who make sin when you do the things that are like the nature of adultery, which is called sin.'"

Central to biblical Christianity is that we are all guilty of sin and in need of the saving work of Christ upon the cross (Romans 3:23 and First John 1:8-9). It is inconsistent for Christ to teach that he had to die for the sins of mankind when sin was not a reality, but a state of mind.

Chapter 10:39-42 from the Gospel of Peter dating from the second century AD, presents a story that would appear to be more myth than history. It states that the tomb of Christ was,

“...opened and both of the young men entered in. When therefore those soldiers saw that, they waked up the centurion and the elders (for they also were there keeping watch); and while they were yet telling them the things which they had seen, they saw again three men come out of the sepulchre, and two of them sustaining the other (lit. the one), and a cross following, after them. And of the two they saw that their heads reached unto heaven, but of him that was led by them that it over passed the heavens. And they heard a voice out of the heavens saying: Hast thou (or Thou hast) preached unto them that sleep? And an answer was heard from the cross, saying: Yea.”

In the above passage there is a walking and talking cross. Along with that the necks of the angels stretch far up into the heavens. In the gospels, there are miracle accounts that are supernatural, but not strange. This passage presents a story that is strange and mythical in character.

Finally, from the Gospel of Thomas verse 114, a second century work, appears the following passage:

“Simon Peter said to them, ‘Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life.’ Jesus said, ‘Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.’”

Scripture teaches that we are created in God's image, male and female (Genesis 1:27). 2 Peter 3:7 states, “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life...” The Bible teaches that women are also created in the image of God and are heirs to eternal life. Never do we find in scripture that women need to transform their gender to inherit eternal life.

Conclusion

As we discern fact from fiction in *The Da Vinci Code* we have learned that there are ancient documents discovered known as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Texts. However, what is not true is that these are secret gospels that reveal the true life of Jesus. The Dead Sea Scrolls actually confirm the accurate transmission of the Old Testament and appear to prove the first century dates of the gospels.

The Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi are not a secret and were never covertly suppressed by the early church. The church fathers knew of these writings and rejected them from the very beginning. The Gnostic teachings make them inconsistent with previous revelations. The Apostles in their writings, especially John, rejects Gnostic teaching. The church fathers knew of them and never considered them apostolic. The texts' unorthodox theology and stories leads one to conclude these are not inspired or apostolic in origin.

The claim that there are secret gospels is fiction.