

## THE DA VINCI CODE: FICTION VERSUS FACT [Luke 1.1-4; 1 Cor 15.1-5]

When Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* first came out. I was one of the first to read it. Utter rubbish, I thought, but a jolly good yarn – just like so many other thrillers which I buy to read in my holidays.

But now, to my utter amazement, I find people taking the book seriously.

- So on the BBC web-site a person from Stafford says: “The claims in the Da Vinci Code are just as plausible as the claims in the Bible. No modern Christian has actually seen God, or Jesus, in the flesh, and yet they can claim their beliefs as truth. Why should the same not apply to the book? The trouble is, religious zealots are too closed-minded to accurately question their own views”
- On the same web-site a person from Dudley in the West Midland says: “The facts speak for themselves, as the saying goes, there's no smoke without fire”.

What utter tommy-rot! The fact is that there is no foundation, whatsoever, for the claims that Dan Brown makes.

But let me take a step back: in case there are some of you who have not read *The Da Vinci Code*, let me state the basic underlying premise of the book: viz.

Jesus did not die on the cross, but married Mary Magdalene, and had children whose bloodline continues today. This secret was kept by a group called the Kings Templar and a society called the Priory of Sion. They claimed that this explosive secret was suppressed by the church, for fear that its whole message would be under-minded.

The evidence for these claims is said to be found in the so-called Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Thomas; as also in Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper which allegedly depicts Mary Magdalene reclining next to Jesus.

The novel claims that the four New Testament Gospels were chosen late to be part of the Bible because unlike other Gospels they depicted Jesus as divine. According to Brown, the doctrine of the divinity of Christ emerged only at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD

### 1. DAN BROWN IS NOT TO BE TRUSTED

It is hard to know where to begin in refuting these claims, because without exception they are all false. And yet these claims appear to gain credibility because they along with the fiction there are elements of fact.

1. For instance, *it is a fact that Mary Magdalene had a special place of significance in the group who followed Jesus*: apart from Mary the mother of Jesus, she is referred to more times in the Gospels than any other woman; when lists of women are mentioned seven times out of eight her name comes first; according to the Gospels she was the first witness of the resurrection. Indeed, according to John, she tried to cling to Jesus, to embrace him if you like. All that is fact.

2. But ***it is a fiction to say that Jesus was married to Mary.*** The only evidence that the novel can cite is that in Jewish society it was unusual for men not to be married. But actually we know of a number of Jewish men at that time who were not married: John the Baptist wasn't married, the Apostle Paul wasn't married, many of the Essenes, a radical pietistic group around in Jesus' day, were not married either.
3. ***It is a fiction too to say that the church knew from the earliest days that Jesus & Mary Magdalene had a child.*** There is no ground for the novel's claim that at the time of the crucifixion Mary was pregnant. This story is a legend that started 800 years after Jesus!
4. ***It is a fact that other 'Gospels' besides those in the New Testament have been discovered in Egypt.*** These discoveries were made at Nag Hammadi in 1945 by a young Arab boy who unearthed 50 texts in a field in Upper Egypt. These texts contained a number of Scriptures, including the so-called Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth, and the Gospel of Philip. These Scriptures belonged to a deviant group of Christians called 'Gnostics': the word 'Gnostic' means 'one in the know'; the Gnostics somewhat like the Freemasons in that they had all kinds of secret rituals offering enlightenment to the initiated. It is important to stress that their Scriptures were late productions, based on Greek texts from the early 200s: i.e. much later than the four canonical Gospels.
5. ***It is also a fact that the Gospel of Philip tells us that Mary Magdalene kissed Jesus:*** but this Gospel does not say that Mary often kissed Jesus, nor does it say that Mary kissed Jesus on the mouth, nor does it say that Mary was his spouse. All that is fiction. So forget about French kissing and the like: almost certainly this is yet another example of a 'holy kissing' which is frequently referred to in the New Testament.
6. ***It is a fact that the bishops of the early church met at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD to discuss the divinity of Jesus.*** But the novel is wrong when it claims that the bishops voted on whether Jesus was divine and that the vote was only just carried. The fact is that the bishops met to discuss Arius' view that Jesus was a being created by the Father before the world began; and that 316 voted saying Arius was wrong, with only 2 voting that he was right. From that council came the Nicene Creed.
7. ***It is also fiction that prior to the Council of Nicea the church believed that Jesus was just a prophet,*** and not the Son of God. As a PhD student I spent three years of my life looking at some of the early Christian creeds and confessions of faith which Paul and others quote in the New Testament, all of which evidence faith in the risen Lord Jesus. In the words of my thesis: "Faith in the cosmic Christ is no mere Pauline phenomenon. It is rather the faith of the early church. From very early on – if not right from the very beginning – the confession 'Jesus is Lord' went beyond the boundaries of the cult to encompass the whole world". My PhD thesis may not have been a gripping thriller, but it certainly was a more truthful exposition of what the early Christians believed!
8. ***It is fiction that Leonardo Da Vinci was a member of the Priory of Sion, a secret society which knew about Jesus' child.*** For the Priory of Sion to which Dan Brown refers is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century hoax created by a Frenchman called Pierre Plantard, and who in 1993 confessed, under oath, that he had forged the documents relating to this Priory.

9. *It is also a fiction that in his famous painting ‘The Last Supper’ Leonardo Da Vinci depicted not John, but Mary Magdalene sitting at Jesus’ right hand.* For although the figure does indeed look somewhat feminine, the artists in Florence (where Leonardo lived) commonly painted John as a young somewhat feminine looking male, because he was believed to be the youngest of the disciples. Furthermore, if the figure on Jesus’ right was indeed Mary, then where is John? His absence would certainly call for some explaining. Incidentally, Leonardo’s picture has had to be restored so many times, that we can’t be sure what the figure originally looked like.

## 2. THE GOSPELS ARE TO BE TRUSTED

We don’t have the actual piece of papyrus on which the evangelists wrote their gospels - just as for that matter we don’t have the paper on which Shakespeare wrote his plays. All we have are copies. The question arises therefore: how reliable are these copies?

### (i) *We can trust our MSS*

When we ask that question, two factors become important:

1. How many copies do we have?
2. How old are these copies? And in asking such a question we want to know the time difference between the original document and the copies we now possess

### *A comparison of the Gospels with some other famous MSS*

ANCIENT WRITING	Thucydides' History of Peloponnesian War	Caesar's Gallic War	Tacitus' Histories	THE FOUR GOSPELS
(A) Original document written	430-400 BC	52-51 BC	AD 104-109	
(B) Oldest surviving copy	AD 900 (plus a few 1C fragments)	AD 850	AD 800	
Approx. time between A & B	1300 years (fragments 400 years)	900 years	700 years	
Number of ancient copies in existence today	8	10	2	

What are your estimates for the blank column for ‘the Gospels’?

## *Gospels*

(A) *Original documents written:* 65-80 AD

### (B) *Oldest surviving copies*

Two copies of NT (including Gospels) are dated *c. AD 350*, less than 300 years after the original:

- *Codex Sinaiticus*, bought by the British Government from Soviet Government on Xmas Day 1933. In British Museum.
- *Codex Vaticanus*, found in Vatican Library.

When it comes to the number of *fragments*, the evidence is all the more impressive. NB the famous John Rylands fragment, *P55*, (9 cm by 6 cm) containing John 18.31-33, 17-38; discovered in sands of Egypt & dated around *AD 130* (perhaps only 50 years after originally written). This fragment is one of 241 listed by Kurt Aland, a notable NT scholar.

*Approx time between (A) & (B):* less than 300 years

### *Number of ancient copies in existence today*

For the Gospels: *c.2000*, with hundreds upon hundreds prior to AD1000

For the NT as a whole, there are in existence *c.5000 MSS of NT* in whole or in part.

Not surprisingly JAT Robinson wrote: *“The wealth of MSS, and above all the narrow interval of time between the writing and the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best attested text of any ancient writing”*.

### (ii) *We can trust the Gospel-writers*

Given that we can get back to the original text, how certain can we be of the Gospels themselves?

The Gospel writers did not set out to write biographies of Jesus - they were in the business of putting over the essence of the Christian message.

Probably the Gospels were first preached before they were written down.

Nonetheless, the Gospel writers were not uninterested in history.

We see this not least in Luke’s preface: **“Dear Theophilus. Many people have done their best to write a report of the things that have taken place amongst us. They wrote what we have been told by those who saw these things from the beginning and proclaimed the message. And so, your Excellency, because I have carefully studied all these matters from their beginning, I thought it would be good to write an orderly account for you. I do this so that you will know the full truth about everything you have been taught”** (Luke 1.1-4)

I.e. Luke, as well as being an evangelist, presents himself as a historian.

His opening introduction is typical of the introductions used by the great historians of the ancient world. E.g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus: *“Before beginning to write I gathered information partly from the lips of the most learned men with whom I came into contact, and partly from histories written by Romans of whom they spoke with praise”*.

Certainly in no way could the evangelists have got away with fabrication. For as Luke himself records, there were plenty of *eye-witnesses* around... The fact that there were plenty of eyewitnesses about doesn't guarantee every item in the Gospels, but it does guarantee their general reliability in terms of what they have to say about Jesus.

Another pointer to the general reliability of the Gospels is *the absence of church concerns*. Had the early church booked up the contents of the Gospels, we would expect them to put into Jesus' mouth matters of burning concern to themselves. Thus we know from Paul's letter that circumcision was an issue in the early church, but that doesn't even get a mention

### *Why then do people not always trust the Gospels?*

*i) Prejudiced skepticism:* Some people are not always as open in their approach to the evidence as it first sight would appear. Aldous Huxley, e.g., became an atheist basically because he was not prepared to accept the demands of Christian living: "I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; I consequently assumed that it had not one, and was able to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics; he is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do, or why his friends should not seize power and govern in the way that they find most advantageous to themselves.... For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political" (Ends and Means 270ff).  
I.e. my mind is made up: please don't confuse me with the facts!

*ii) Ill-informed skepticism:* Far too many people have never seriously considered the evidence. JB Philips (Ring of Truth): "Over the years I have had 100s of conversations with people, many of them of higher intellectual calibre than my own, who quite obviously had no idea of what Christianity is really about. I was in no case trying to catch them out; I was simply and gently trying to find out what they knew about the New Testament. My conclusion was that they knew virtually nothing. This I find pathetic and somewhat horrifying. It means that the most important Event in human history is politely and quietly by-passed. For it is not as though the evidence had been examined and found unconvincing; it had simply never been examined"

### **3. HOLD TO THE REAL JESUS**

From the Gospels let me turn to what is probably the earliest Christian creed, and which is to be found in 1 Corinthians, one of Paul's earliest letters:

**"I passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures; that he was buried, and that he was raised to life three days later, as written in the Scriptures, that he**

## **appeared to Peteter (Cephas), and then to all the Twelve"**

It is generally agreed that 1 Corinthians was written sometime in AD 54, i.e. around some 20-25 years after the death of Jesus.

The creed here in 1 Cor 15, however, is even earlier.

Note the way in which Paul introduces it: "**I passed on to you what I received**" (REB: "I handed on to you the tradition I had received").

Paul is here using *technical language* to describe the official transmission and reception of what is termed "oral tradition".

We find the same kind of language in 1 Cor 11.23, where Paul introduces his account of the Last Supper with the words: "**For I received from the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed, took bread..**"

Both in 1 Cor 11 as in 1 Cor 15 Paul is drawing upon earlier Christian tradition. Indeed, scholars who have poured over these verses, tell us that what we have in 1 Cor 15.3-5 is obviously a Greek translation of an *Aramaic original*.

This, for instance, accounts for the fact that Paul here speaks of Jesus appearing to **Cephas**; for Cephas was the Aramaic form of Peter.

I.e. what we have here is a creed which goes back to the time when the earliest Christian community was still Jewish.

When was Paul taught these basic facts? Probably at his conversion.

Probably these verses form part of Ananias' basic baptismal instruction.

Now Paul was converted no more than three or four years after the death of Jesus. I.e. this tradition comes from the first year or so of the Christian era.

Here we have the real evidence of what the first Christians really believed. They believed in a Saviour who died for them, in a Lord who rose for them.

Forget Dan Brown and the Da Vinci Code: focus instead on the real Jesus, whom we can truly trust. Indeed, whom we must trust, if we would know forgiveness of our sins and hope that goes beyond the grave.

In the words with which the Apostle Paul prefaces this ancient creed: "**That is the gospel, the message that I preached to you. You are saved if you hold firmly to it**" (15.2).