

faith-based Ungodly Errors

Scholarly gripes about *The Da Vinci Code's* Jesus.

By Larry Hurtado

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In a climactic scene in the movie *The Da Vinci Code*, the supposed Holy Grail expert, Sir Leigh Teabing, lays out the conspiracy theory at the heart of the movie and the novel: "Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*," he declares. Actually, just about everything author Dan Brown puts in the mouth of Teabing is ludicrously false history. Catholics have responded to gratuitous accusations against the church. And other Christians have taken on Brown's utterly unsupported claim that Jesus married Mary Magdalene. My scholarly concern is the *Da Vinci Code's* errors regarding historical beliefs about the divinity of Jesus and the creation of the New Testament.

The belief that Jesus is somehow divine was not invented by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, as Brown and movie director Ron Howard have Teabing say. Instead, this belief is attested in first-century Christian texts, such as the Gospel of John, and dates back even earlier to the letters of the apostle Paul, whose New Testament writings between A.D. 50 and 60 are the earliest Christian texts we have. Faith in the divine glory of the resurrected Jesus appears to have emerged amazingly soon after his execution, most likely among circles of his Jewish followers. Scholars commonly regard particular passages in Paul's letters as preserving early hymns about Jesus, in which he is praised as the one through whom the world was created, and as sharing in God's nature and glory.

In fact, in pretty much the entire body of early Christian writings from the first three centuries, Jesus' divinity is taken for granted. Christians differed not over that basic assumption but rather over how to understand his divine nature. At the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, the crucial question was how to reconcile Jesus' divinity with Christian monotheism.

Curiously, *The Da Vinci Code* presents the so-called Gnostics, who regarded other Christians as lesser beings than they and were in turn treated as heretics, as the heroic defenders of a thoroughly human Jesus. But actually the historic Gnostics and the gospels often linked with their circles did not emphasize Jesus' human nature at all—quite the opposite. Typically, Gnostic Christians portrayed Christ as a heavenly being who came down to earth to awaken them from their spiritual slumber by disclosing their own divine inner nature. Regarding the physical world as a source of delusion and place of confinement, Gnostics were deeply negative about bodily existence, including their own. So, they tended to treat Jesus' body as simply the temporary vehicle for his revelatory mission, believing that he discarded it before returning to his heavenly status in the realm of pure light. It was actually the Orthodox Christians who made much of Jesus' full human nature and the reality of his death as the essential redemptive act.

In Brown's scheme, the Gnostics are also the suppressed source of the true account of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene. In reality, the Gnostics' negativity about the body includes a dim view of procreation and the sexual activity that went with it. Usually in their writings Jesus is the ideal ascetic who models for his followers a disdain for bodily appetites. So, the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene isn't just antithetical to Orthodox accounts. It goes against the Gnostic grain, too—if anything more so.

To clear up another piece of history on which *The Da Vinci Code* is completely unreliable, the New Testament was not created at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. The question wasn't even on the council's agenda. The formation of the New Testament had begun much earlier and continued on later than Nicaea. The familiar four Gospels, which scholars commonly regard as the earliest such texts, were treated as a completed set at least by A.D. 150 in many or likely most Christian circles. Still earlier,

Paul's letters were collected and circulated as scripture. In the early third century, the Christian scholar Origen listed the writings regarded by most Christians of his time as scripture, other writings that had largely been rejected, and others still under consideration. Among the texts regarded as scriptural, he included most of those that became part of the New Testament.

It's also important to emphasize that this question of which writings to treat as scripture, which to treat merely as edifying reading, and which to regard as heretical, was not decided at a single point by a church council, a pope, or a Roman emperor. Once again, in service of its conspiracy theory, *The Da Vinci Code* gets it wrong. The canonizing of scripture involved circles of believers spread across the many lands of the Roman Empire and beyond. The result wasn't a fiat foisted upon the Christian world. Essentially, the writings that commended themselves earliest and to the largest number of Christians came more quickly and securely to be part of the emergent New Testament. Some other writings, such as Revelation and the second book of Peter, were accepted later. A few writings, such as Didache or Shepherd of Hermas, were contenders that lost out in the end. They enjoyed favor in some circles but just didn't have sufficiently wide endorsement.

In the book and the movie, Teabing asserts that other texts, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Mary, were cast out of the New Testament because Constantine and those mean old Nicaean bishops wanted to impose their beliefs on the rest of Christendom. These texts, however, reflect an elitist attitude disdainful of ordinary Christians and their beliefs. It is unlikely that their authors ever sought to have them included with the writings of the emergent New Testament. In any case, they weren't chucked from the canon in an act of suppression. They just never won the confidence of a sufficient number of Christians to make the grade in the first place.

Oh, and one more matter on which *The Da Vinci Code* is bonkers. There were no two-way wars between Christians and pagans in the decades before Constantine. Instead, beginning with Nero's cruel pogrom against Roman Christians in the first century, there were occasional persecutions mounted by the Roman state, the most vigorous ones under Caracalla (A.D. 215), Decius (A.D. 249-51), Valerian (A.D. 253), and perhaps the most violent of all, Diocletian (A.D. 303-05). There is no record of Christians taking up arms against pagans in this period. They fought back by fervently articulating their beliefs and backing their professions to the point of martyrdom. So, Constantine's decision to legitimate Christianity (in A.D. 312, not 325, as Brown asserts) was not prompted by his desire to end pagan-Christian battles.

In the novel, in the scene in which Teabing lays out all the crazy assertions, the Harvard professor character, Robert Langdon, nods sagely in support of the whole scheme. At the same point in the movie, by contrast, Langdon strongly objects. The word is that Ron Howard made this change, as well as a few others, in hopes of placating historians. Nice try. By the end of the movie Langdon has undergone a conversion of sorts and acclaims Sophie as Jesus' last living descendant. Never mind that Teabing is revealed as a maniacal villain, his ideas carry the day. The movie can't escape the charge that it promotes the mischievous fictions that masquerade in the book as the revelation of historical secrets. Instead, of course, the film widens Brown's reach.

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