

## Historical truth takes much abuse

Historical truth takes much abuse in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. But even greater damage is done, I think, when the novel makes assertions about theological matters, especially relating to the person of Jesus Christ and early Christian beliefs.

### The Divinity of Jesus

Much attention has been given to the Code's claim that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. But an even more audacious claim is made by the character Leigh Teabing, a historian, who insists that until A.D. 325 and the Council of Nicaea, "Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet &hellip;" He later states: "Jesus' establishment as &lsquo;the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea."

There is clear and copious evidence that the early Christians, dating back to Jesus' time on earth, believed that Jesus of Nazareth was divine. John's Gospel, written between A.D. 80 and 100, contains some of the strongest statements about the divinity of Jesus. The densely theological prologue proclaims: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (Jn1:1-3); the Word is Jesus, the incarnate Son: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (Jn 1:14). Later, after upsetting some of the Jewish authorities because of his activities on the Sabbath, Jesus' life is threatened, "because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God" (Jn 5:18).

The testimony of the New Testament books alone&mdash;all written by the late first century or early second century at the latest&mdash;clearly refutes Teabing's statement that prior to Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, none of Jesus' followers believed He was anything more than a mortal. But there is also the testimony of numerous Christian writers between A.D. 100 and the fourth century to the belief in Jesus' divinity. In addition to proving what Christians really did believe about Jesus in the first three centuries of Christianity, these writings also provide invaluable context to the theological issues and battles that would eventually be addressed, at least in part, by the Council of Nicaea.

The Council of Nicaea did not define that Jesus, the Son of God, was divine (since that was accepted by Christians) or vote whether or not Jesus was "the Son of God". After all, that title is used over three dozen times in the New Testament to refer to Jesus! Rather, the Council of Nicaea addressed the issue of the exact relationship between the Son and the Father: Are they equal? One in substance? Two Persons? The Council specifically condemned the popular heresy of that time, called Arianism, which insisted that the Son was a lesser god, created by the Father at some point in time and not eternally existent.

### The Gnostic "Gospels"

One of the more outlandish claims of Brown's novel is that the early Christians "literally" stole Jesus and shrouded his "human message . . . in an impenetrable cloak of divinity," using it to expand their own power. The novel claims that the gnostic Jesus is far more human than the divinized Jesus of the four canonical Gospels contained in the Christian Bible. Teabing even says that the Emperor Constantine "omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike."

That might sound agreeable to some readers &mdash; unless they actually read the so-called "gnostic gospels" and compare them to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Jesus of the gnostic writings is rarely recognizable as a Jewish carpenter, teacher, and prophet dwelling in first-century Palestine. Instead, he usually described as a phantom-like creature who lectures at length about the "deficiency of aeons", "the mother", "the Arrogant One", and "the archons"&mdash;all terms that only the gnostic elite would comprehend, hence their secretive, gnostic character (the Greek word *gnosis* refers to secret or elite knowledge).

Dan Brown's depiction of the early Christians hijacking the truth about Jesus and making Him God while the gnostics emphasized Jesus' humanity is completely incorrect. In fact, it is the exact opposite of the actual case, for the depictions of Jesus in the four Gospels are filled with concrete, historical details, social and political information, and logical narrative, qualities sorely lacking in most gnostic writings.

The vast majority scholars agree that the earliest gnostic texts were written in the middle of the second century A.D., well after the four canonical Gospels. And it was in the second century that orthodox Christianity began to seriously grapple with gnostic heresies, including the idea that the material realm is evil and that salvation comes through special knowledge, not faith and grace. The nature of this struggle can be seen in the writings of orthodox apologist Irenaeus, who wrote his great polemic refuting certain gnostics, *Against Heresies*, around A.D. 180.

### Jesus and Mary Magdalene

Teabing and hero Robert Langdon tell Sophie Neveu, the young French detective, that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were

married and had children. This alleged marriage, Teabing states, "is part of the historical record" and is "the greatest cover-up in human history." As evidence, he quotes from a gnostic text, The Gospel of Philip, dated approximately 180-250 A.D., which describes Mary Magdalene as the companion of Jesus and depicts the two kissing one another. This is said to indicate a marital relationship.

But in the gnostic context, which disdained procreation and the material world, the love of the gnostic Jesus for Mary Magdalene is probably not romantic or sexual, but focused on spiritual insight and secret knowledge. Another gnostic text, The (Second) Apocalypse of James, contains a notable parallel to the story in The Gospel of Philip, in which the risen Jesus imparts his secret mysteries to James by kissing him on the mouth and calling him, "My beloved!" It is a non-sexual, symbolic act demonstrating James' privileged position as one who recognizes Jesus as teacher (or "Hidden One," in gnostic terms).

So the kiss between Jesus and Mary Magdalene most likely indicates her privileged position, a position due not to her being married to Jesus, but having spiritual insight into his teaching that exceeds that of the other disciples. And kissing is probably the means by which a special spiritual insight is given or symbolized. For the gnostics, the relationship between the two is spiritual only, with Mary being understood to be Jesus' spiritual counterpart.

If Jesus and Mary Magdalene really were married, why wouldn't the gnostics have made it even more obvious? A possible reply is that they were too afraid of orthodox persecution and so chose to be ambiguous and secretive in their communications. And yet the gnostic writings are full of teachings that are obviously incompatible with an orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ, His life on earth, and the Church He established.

Ultimately, an ambiguous third-century gnostic text read through the lens of anti-Christian, feminist ideology does not provide even modest proof that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married.

On and on it goes, with faulty and often blatantly incorrect statements about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the Vatican, paganism, early Christianity, medieval Christianity, modern day Catholicism, the life and work of Leonardo, secret societies, the origins of the English language, Constantine, and much more. by Carl E. Olson  
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