


A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO *The Da Vinci Code*

BY DR. SCOTT C. SCHINDLEMANTLE



Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* has spent over three years on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list and it has sold at least 40 million copies worldwide. A movie based on the book starring Tom Hanks will open in May. Set in modern-day Europe, *The Da Vinci Code* is a fictional murder mystery that is well written and fast paced. In addition to its commercial success, the book has also had a significant impact on the religious landscape of America. The novel promotes two main themes that Christians should find troubling.

The first theme is the argument that Jesus Christ was actually married to Mary Magdalene and that they had a child together. The book claims that all Jewish men in the first century AD were *required* to marry, so Jesus must have been married.

The second theme in the novel is that Jesus' original message was closer to the message found in the Gnostic gospels and that this message was displaced by Constantine at the Council of Nicea.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

Question 1: Is it true that Jewish men were required to marry in the first century AD and that therefore Jesus must have been married?

The view of historic Christianity is that Jesus remained single and celibate during his entire life. This view, however, is taken to task by the antagonist in

the *The Da Vinci Code*, a character named Sir Leah Teabing. Teabing states, "Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor." Another character adds, "The social decorum during that time virtually forbid [sic] a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned."

This characterization of Judaism's view toward celibacy is simply not true. We need look no further than the Dead Sea Scrolls.

During the 1950s and 1960s archaeologists excavated 11 caves in the Judean wilderness that contained ancient scrolls apparently deposited around the time of the first Jewish revolt in 68–70 AD. These Dead Sea Scrolls, as they came to be known, and the subsequent excavation of the ruins of an ancient settlement near the caves that apparently housed the Jews that produced these scrolls, have revealed much about the diverse nature of first-century Judaism. The community of Jews that lived in this ancient settlement, today called Qumran, not only copied the Hebrew scriptures and placed them in these caves for safekeeping, but also produced its own documents—including its own constitution, which scholars have called *The Community Rule*.

The Community Rule reveals much about the Qumran community. It was a well-regulated, strict, closed community of Jews who apparently had great disagreements with the "Jewish establishment" running things in Jerusalem. *The Community Rule* was meant to regulate the process by which people could join the community, as well as to regulate the daily interaction of its members. Among other things, it shows that this group of Jews practiced celibacy.

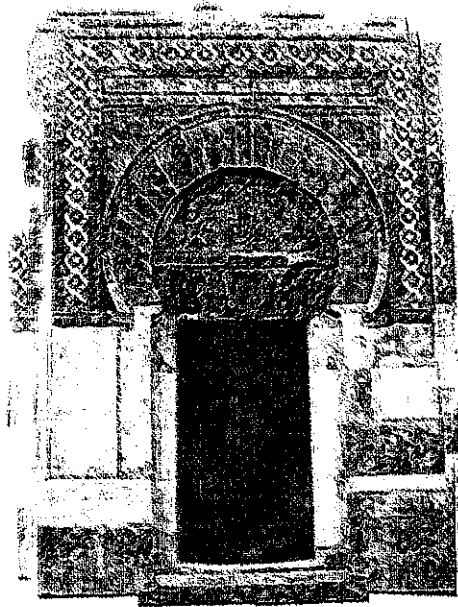
Scholars have noted that *The Community Rule* implies that only men lived in this particular community. Noted Dead Sea Scrolls scholar Geza Vermes states,

It has long been debated whether the Qumran sectaries were married or celibate. From the image of life projected so far, few will probably disagree that the idea of the presence of women among them appears to be incongruous. The impression received is that of a wholly masculine society. Indeed, they were actually enjoined "not to follow a sinful heart and lustful eyes, committing all manner of evil." Moreover, in support of the argument for celibacy, the word *isba*, [the Hebrew word for] woman, occurs nowhere in *The Community Rule*.

Archaeological excavations of the area surrounding the Qumran settlement have also indicated that only men lived

in this settlement during the first century. A large main cemetery dating from the first century BC to the first century AD with approximately 1,100 plots on the east side of the settlement has been partially excavated. Twenty-six tombs were opened at random; all contained male skeletons.

In addition, first century AD Jewish historian Josephus, among others, reported the practice of celibacy among some Jewish groups. These examples of first-century Jews practicing celibacy and singleness contradict *The Da Vinci Code* claim that Jewish men were required to marry.



Question 2: Is there any evidence that Jesus' original message was closer to the message found in the Gnostic gospels and that it was later displaced by Constantine at the Council of Nicea?

In the fourth century AD Constantine became the emperor of the Roman Empire. When he came to power, he declared that Christianity would be the official religion of the empire, and one of Constantine's first actions was to call Christian leaders together to settle some key issues that had been disputed in the early church. Two of these issues had to do with defining more clearly the doctrine of the Trinity and defining more clearly

the person of Jesus Christ. This first ecumenical council became known as the Council of Nicea, which produced the Nicene Creed.

The Da Vinci Code popularizes a view espoused by revisionist historian Elaine Pagels that the Council of Nicea and its resulting Nicene Creed were misguided and started Christianity down a theological road that was not intended by Jesus himself. At the heart of Pagels' perspective is that from the earliest years of Christianity there were "competing Christianities"—each of which had struggled against the others for dominance. Through the Council of Nicea and the Nicene Creed, Constantine established his favored Christian group over all the others. Constantine's favored group eventually became the "orthodox" form of Christianity that we have today—represented by the Nicene Creed and its view that Jesus is the God-man. A parallel group, Gnostic Christians, who had produced their own written gospel accounts of the life of Jesus such as the *Gospel of Phillip* and the *Gospel of Mary*, became one of the outlawed "unorthodox" Christian groups. In Pagels' view, Gnostic Christianity was actually closer to the original form of Christianity than the form of "orthodox" Christianity that emerged from the Nicene Creed.

What has prompted all this discussion about Gnostic Christians and their Gnostic gospels? In the early 1900s, in a site

in Egypt called Nag Hammadi, archaeologists discovered several manuscripts that recorded teachings of Jesus not found in our canonical gospels. This collection of documents came to be known as the Nag Hammadi library and included the *Gospel of Phillip* and the *Gospel of Mary*. Scholars knew that these documents existed: Irenaeus wrote against these groups in his late second century AD book *Against Heresies*, and other church fathers also denounced them. But these Gnostic gospels had been lost until archaeologists recovered them at Nag Hammadi.

Pagels believes that these Gnostic gospels should have as much right to represent the teachings of early Christianity as the canonical gospels. This claim, however, is dubious when you compare the history of the Gnostic gospels with that of the canonical gospels.

For the Gnostic gospels to truly represent the earliest form of Christianity we would have to establish at least two points. First, the Gnostic gospels and the theological perspective found in them would need to predate the canonical gospels and their theological perspective. Second, the theological perspective found in the canonical gospels would need to emerge out of the theological perspective found in the Gnostic gospels and alter the Gnostic theological perspective in some way.

In fact, the evidence points in the other direction. The evidence leads us to conclude that the canonical gospels represent the earliest form of Christianity. Gnostic Christianity came later and emerged as a deviant form out of orthodox Christianity.

The work of biblical scholar Edwin Yamauchi focused specifically on these issues, and what he discovered directly contradicts the idea that orthodox Christianity emerged out of Gnostic Christianity as its deviant form.

Yamauchi established the developmental timeline of Gnosticism in relationship to early Christianity and identified three stages that culminated in the development of full-blown Christian Gnosticism. The first and earliest stage can be characterized by the terms *gnostic* or *gnosis*. The term *gnosis* can be used to describe much of Greek philosophical thought after the time of Plato in which physical things like the body were thought to be evil and spiritual things were thought to be good. This body-spirit dualism became characteristic of much of Greek philosophical thought after Plato. At this stage, *gnosis* was more of a general, dualistic way of viewing life than it was a well-developed theological system.

A second stage of development, which Yamauchi refers to as "incipient Gnosticism," occurred shortly after the emergence of Christianity in the first century AD. As the Christian gospel spread throughout a Greek-speaking world that was dominated by dualistic thinking, some "converts" began to syncretize the

teachings of Christianity with their body-spirit dualistic thinking. It was this syncretization that the apostle Paul was most likely attacking in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Again, this second stage does not represent a sophisticated theological system. Rather it actually shows the earliest stages of Gnostic thinking attaching itself as a parasite onto orthodox Christianity.

The third stage brought about the development of the Gnostic gospels and a full-blown Christian Gnosticism in the third century. By this point, the syncretism had developed more fully. Not only had Gnostic Christianity syncretized Greek body-spirit dualism with orthodox Christianity, but it had developed an entire intricate theological system around that basic belief. This Gnostic Christianity taught that Jesus was a mediator figure

between humans and Yahweh, but it also had numerous other mediatorial figures known as aeons that stood between Yahweh and an ultimate transcendent divine being. The need for these numerous mediator figures was based on the idea that the divine could never expose himself to this dirty, evil world. Therefore, his contact with this world had to be mediated by

several mediating figures so as to avoid contamination.

Yamauchi's methodology for establishing this chronology was based on a close examination of all the Gnostic Christian texts available to him. He established that the earliest Gnostic Christian texts date back only to the third century AD, whereas the manuscript evidence for the New Testament books dates back much earlier than that. If one were to argue that orthodox Christianity emerged out of Gnostic Christianity, one would have to point to evidence that the Gnostic Christian texts were written before the orthodox Christian texts—or at least that there is evidence for Gnostic Christian texts written close to the same time as the orthodox Christian texts.

The fact is that there is no evidence for Gnostic Christian texts that predate the third century AD. Since none exists, orthodox Christianity couldn't have emerged out of Gnostic Christianity. This fact, coupled with the reality that some of the key theological concepts found in the Gnostic Christian texts cannot be found in any of the earlier New Testament texts, has established the view that Gnostic Christianity sprang out of orthodox Christianity and not the other way around.

On another note, *The Da Vinci Code* articulates the view, also held by Pagels, that Jesus was only a human being and that it was only under the influence of Constantine in the fourth century AD that Jesus was elevated to a divine status. "[Constantine] commissioned and financed a new Bible," Teabing says, "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." Constantine needed to forge an alliance between religion and state as a way to establish his own power across the empire—and that

The canonical gospels represent the earliest form of Christianity, and Gnostic Christianity came later.

religion needed a God-figure at its core, not a human figure. "Christ as Messiah was critical to the functioning of church and state. 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," Teabing says.

It is dubious to claim that the divinity of Jesus Christ was invented in the fourth century AD. The doctrine of Christ's divinity was alive and well long before then, and the Council of Nicea didn't "establish" the divinity of Jesus. Rather, the Nicene Creed emerged as an articulation of a view that was already widely held.


This is borne out by ancient Christian documents. The earliest manuscript fragment of the New Testament is a portion of John 18 that dates to between 90 AD and 125 AD, which establishes a very early date for the *Gospel of John*. Interestingly enough, one of the key passages that establishes the divinity of Jesus Christ is found in John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

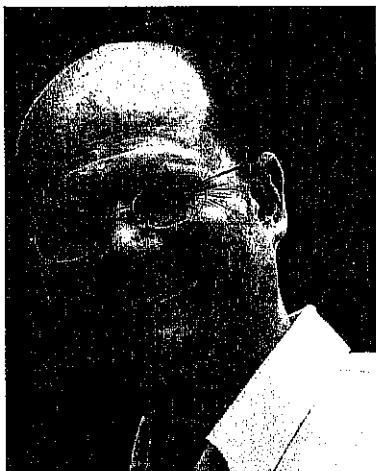
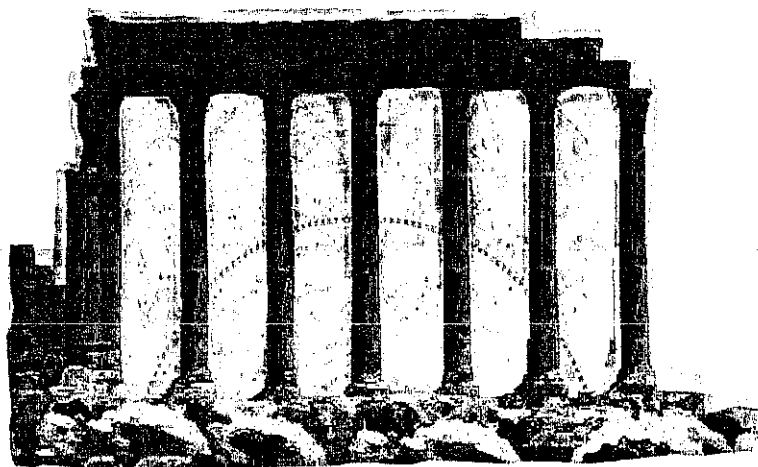
In this passage "the Word" is used to refer to Jesus Christ, who "was God." So, the *Gospel of John*, which is clearly in existence between 90 AD and 125 AD has passages in it that point to the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Other passages in the New Testament also establish the divinity of Jesus Christ, including Philippians 2:9-11 and 1 Corinthians 8:5-6. It is not hard to find evidence that many of the New Testament documents that explicitly established the divinity of Jesus Christ were accepted as authoritative by Christians before the fourth century AD. Before to the fourth century AD, Christian leaders, because of the rise of various heretical teachings, found it necessary to develop lists of the books that they accepted as authoritative. One of these lists was discovered in the mid 1740s by Ludovico Muratori, and the manuscript came to be known as the Muratorian Canon. It has been dated to around 190 AD, about 140 years prior to the Council of Nicea. In this list all four canonical gospels as well as the epistles of Paul are listed as authoritative.

Postmodernism and *The Da Vinci Code*

The Da Vinci Code as a cultural phenomenon gives us an opportunity to critique how many in our culture understand

truth. Gene E. Veith Jr., in his book *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, points out that in our postmodern era the truthfulness of a historical event tends to be established by how well that event is described, not by whether that event actually happened. In this postmodern age, since objective truth has been rejected, there is extreme skepticism regarding whether we can accurately explain an event that occurred in history. Thus, what we end up with is relativistic history, or worse, various "histories" of a particular event that compete with each other. The measure of truth becomes, as Veith puts it, "performance, not truth." As Patricia Waugh states in her book *The Postmodern Reader*, "History is a network of agonistic language games where the one criteria for success is performance not truth." This is exactly the phenomenon that we see with *The Da Vinci Code*. Within it we see a story about the origins of Christianity told very well in the form of a murder mystery. Borrowing the language of Waugh, we can say that *The Da Vinci Code* is successful in its portrayal of early Christianity because it performs well. Our task as Christians is for us, by the power of the Spirit, to find creative ways to move the dialogue from issues of performance back to this crucial question that Pilate asked of Jesus in the *Gospel of John*: What is truth? 



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This essay is an abridged version of a paper written by Shidemantle. The full version is available online at www.geneva.edu/magazine.