The Da Vinci Code: Who is Jesus, Really?

The Da Vinci Code, the blockbuster novel that's now a major motion picture, makes some controversial claims: Jesus of Nazareth, a mere mortal, married Mary Magdalene and fathered her child. Their descendants live today.

Dan Brown's novel is an entertaining, artfully designed thriller filled with mystery, intrigue, and suspense. The film generally follows the novel's storyline. Reviews have been mixed. I enjoyed the film and feel that moviegoers are in for an adventure if they can follow the action and detail.

The novel raises healthy questions about Christian faith. The story's fictitious British scholar, Sir Leigh Teabing, says, "…almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*."{1}

Teabing says that the Roman emperor Constantine had history rewritten to cast Jesus as divine rather than mortal and convened the famous Council of Nicaea to debate Jesus divinity. He says the council upgraded Jesus to divine by a close vote.

The Greatest Story Ever *Sold?*

Teabing suggests that the greatest story ever told is, in fact, the greatest story ever *sold,*{2} a monumental cover-up. Was Jesus' divinity a clever fabrication?

University of North Carolina religion chair Bart Ehrman, not a theological conservative, found troubling Brown's assertion that "All descriptions of…documents…in this novel are accurate."{3}

Ehrman says, "Most of the descriptions of ancient documents,

in fact, are not factual—they're part of his fiction. But people reading the book aren't equipped to separate the fact from the fiction."{4}

Ehrman notes that Constantine called the Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.) not to debate whether Jesus was divine but rather what precisely that meant: Had he always existed as divine, or was he created as divine?{5} The council overwhelmingly affirmed the former.

Dan Brown gets an A-/B+ for dramatic writing but a C-/D for historical accuracy. Still, what do we really know about Jesus?

Tacitus, a Roman historian writing around 115-117 C.E., refers to Jesus' execution under Pontius Pilate.{6} The Talmud, a collection of Jewish laws and commentary, mentioned in the late first or second century a tradition that Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve.{7}

Jesus' contemporary biographers indicated that he claimed deity. For instance, one records a trial at which religious leaders asked, "Are You the Son of God, then?" Jesus' response: "Yes, I am."{8} Accusing him of blasphemy, leaders said he deserved to die.{9}

The Alternatives

What are the alternatives? If his claim was true, he would be the Lord. If it was false and he knew it, he was lying. If he didn't know it was false, he had serious delusions, perhaps paranoid schizophrenia or paranoia proper.

Jesus claim to deity sets him apart from great moral teachers. Either he was a liar, or a lunatic, or the Lord.

Was he a liar? If so, he died for that lie. Few, if any, would willingly die for something they knew was a hoax. Would you? Both believers and skeptics have considered Jesus a paragon of

virtue.

Was Jesus a lunatic? His teachings about love, forgiveness, respect, and interpersonal relationships are often used as a basis for mental health today. He had a genuine concern for others, a cool response under pressure, and a great love for his enemies as he said from the cross, Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.{10} If Jesus was insane, what must we be?

If he was not a liar and not a lunatic, were left with the alternative that he was the Lord, as he claimed. Evidence for his resurrection supports this claim.{11}

The Da Vinci Code touches many emotional chords. Clergy sex scandals have engendered mistrust. People like conspiracy theories. Feminist themes resonate with many. Deep hunger for spiritual experience is prevalent.

Who is Jesus, really? Why not examine the evidence and decide for yourself?

Notes

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 235; emphasis Brown's.
2. Ibid., p. 267; emphasis Brown's.
3. Ibid., p. 1.
4. Deborah Caldwell (interviewer), "Unpacking 'The Code': What's true in Dan Brown's *'Da Vinci Code'* and what's pure historical fiction?", p. 1, Beliefnet.com, http://www.beliefnet.com/story/167/story_16783_1.html.
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Tacitus, *Annals*, xv. 44.
7. Sanhedrin (43a); in F.F. Bruce, *Jesus & Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 55-56.
8. Luke 22:70 NASB.
9. Matthew 26:65-66.

10. Luke 23:34 NASB.
11. www.WhoIsJesus-really.com.

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