“I Would Become A Christian Except that It’s Based on Lies and Deception”

Mr. Zukeran:

I read your comparative essay on Buddhism and Christianity. It was very interesting. However, it is quite obvious to me that you are bias toward Christianity. You raised an interesting point that the Buddha’s writings were written hundreds of years after his death, therefore, are not accurate and somewhat vague. You go on to say that Christianity has a more solid foundation being that there is a recorded history of Jesus during his ministry. There is one important fallacy in your logic that you failed to mention and/or consider that the Jesus you speak of actually existed. And many historians would agree with me that the Gospels were not written until hundreds of years after the so called death of Jesus. I do not write this criticism to offend, but to develop dialogue. My family and my community have deep roots in Christianity and I myself want to be a Christian, but I cannot lie to myself and deny the knowledge that I have. Unfortunately, I have yet to meet someone who can present Christianity to me in a way that will allow me to embrace it. The reason being it is based on lies and deception.

Thanks for reading my article and your response. I appreciate your honesty regarding the writings of Buddha. I was raised in the Japanese Buddhist tradition and many members of my family are still active members of the Buddhist community. In my studies of Buddhism, that was a question I often wrestled with and would ask the priests at the temple. I came to believe in Christ because of the compelling evidence for Christ. I came to learn He was unique and indeed the divine Son of God.

The four Gospels present an accurate historical record of Christ. Your assertion that the Gospels were written hundreds of years after the death of Christ is incorrect. I believed that claim for many years until I studied the evidence. Presently, due to the evidence we have found, I do not think you will find many historians today agreeing with your assertion. There is strong internal and external evidence that the gospels were written by eye-witnesses in the lifetime of the eye-witnesses.

Here are just a few evidences. We have numerous ancient manuscripts that uphold a first century date. The Chester Beatty Papyri is a group of manuscripts that contains most of the New Testament and is dated 250 A.D. Since it is a copy of almost the entire New Testament, we can safely conclude the original books of the New Testament were written well before, probably in the late first or early second century A.D. The Bodmer Papyri date to 200 A.D. and contain most of the book of John, the last gospel written. Since this is a copy, the original was probably written earlier and since Matthew, Mark and Luke precede John, they are written even earlier. Finally, we have the Rylands Papyri which is a fragment of the book of John which dates 120 A.D. and this fragment was found in Egypt. We can conclude that John was written within the first century since he wrote from Asia Minor and this copy had made its way from there down to Egypt where it was found. Since Matthew, Mark, and Luke precede John, we can conclude these books were written within the first century A.D. The manuscript evidence alone silences the assertion that the gospels were written centuries after Christ’s death.

Then we have quotes from the early Church Fathers. Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the church in Corinth in 90 AD and quotes from all four Gospels. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch writes a letter from Rome in 115 A.D. and quotes all four Gospels. Polycarp writes to the Philippians in 120 A.D. and quotes from all the Gospels. I could go on but I will stop

here. The fact is, the Church Fathers from the first three centuries were already familiar with the writings of the Apostles and were already quoting them as inspired scripture.

So the assertion that the gospels are written hundreds of years after the death of Christ is a false assertion. For more information, please read my article titled "The Historical Reliability of the Gospels."

Sincerely,

Patrick Zukeran

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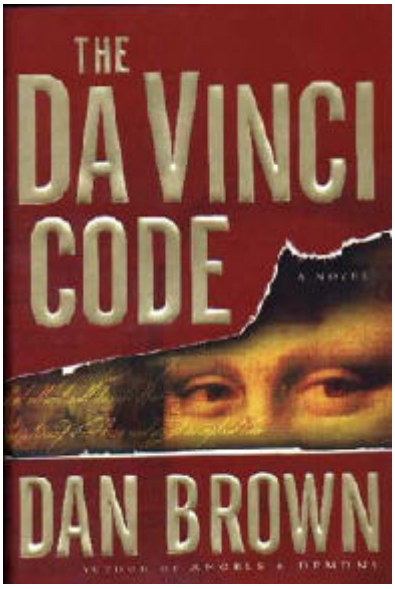
Redeeming The Da Vinci Code

This article is also available in Spanish.

Introduction to *The Da Vinci Code*



Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*,{1} has generated a huge amount of interest from the reading public. About forty million copies have been sold worldwide.{2} And Ron Howard and Sony Pictures have brought the story to theatres.{3} To help answer some of the challenges which this novel poses to biblical Christianity, Probe has teamed up with EvanTell, an evangelism training ministry, to produce a DVD series called Redeeming *The Da Vinci Code*. The series

aims to strengthen the faith of believers and equip them to share their faith with those who see the movie or have read the book.{4} I hope this article will also encourage you to use this event to witness to the truth to friends or family who have read the book or seen the movie.

Why so much fuss about a novel? The story begins with the murder of the Louvre's curator. But this curator isn't just interested in art; he's also the Grand Master of a secret society called the Priory of Sion. The Priory guards a secret that, if revealed, would discredit biblical Christianity. Before dying, the curator attempts to pass on the secret to his granddaughter Sophie, a cryptographer, and Harvard professor Robert Langdon, by leaving a number of clues that he hopes will guide them to the truth.

So what's the secret? The location and identity of the Holy Grail. But in Brown's novel, the Grail is not the cup allegedly used by Christ at the Last Supper. It's rather Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus, who carried on the royal bloodline of Christ by giving birth to His child! The Priory guards the secret location of Mary's tomb and serves to protect the bloodline of Jesus that has continued to this day!

Does anyone take these ideas seriously? Yes; they do. This is partly due to the way the story is written. The first word one encounters in *The Da Vinci Code*, in bold uppercase letters, is the word "FACT." Shortly thereafter Brown writes, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."{5} And the average reader, with no special knowledge in these areas, will assume the statement is true. But it's not, and many have documented some of Brown's inaccuracies in these areas.{6}

Brown also has a way of making the novel's theories about Jesus and the early church seem credible. The theories are espoused by the novel's most educated characters: a British royal historian, Leigh Teabing, and a Harvard professor,

Robert Langdon. When put in the mouths of these characters, one comes away with the impression that the theories are actually true. But are they?

In this article, I'll argue that most of what the novel says about Jesus, the Bible, and the history of the early church is simply false. I'll also say a bit about how this material can be used in evangelism.

Did Constantine Embellish Our Four Gospels?

Were the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which were later to be officially recognized as part of the New Testament canon, intentionally embellished in the fourth century at the command of Emperor Constantine? This is what Leigh Teabing, the fictional historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, suggests. At one point he states, "Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike" (234). Is this true?

In a letter to the church historian Eusebius, Constantine did indeed order the preparation of "fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures."{7} But nowhere in the letter does he command that any of the Gospels be embellished in order to make Jesus appear more godlike. And even if he had, it would have been virtually impossible to get faithful Christians to accept such accounts.

Before the reign of Constantine, the church suffered great persecution under Emperor Diocletian. It's hard to believe that the same church that had withstood this persecution would jettison their cherished Gospels and embrace embellished accounts of Jesus' life! It's also virtually certain that had Constantine tried such a thing, we'd have lots of evidence for it in the writings of the church fathers. But we have none.

Not one of them mentions an attempt by Constantine to alter any of our Gospels. And finally, to claim that the leaders of the fourth century church, many of whom had suffered persecution for their faith in Christ, would agree to join Constantine in a conspiracy of this kind is completely unrealistic.

One last point. We have copies of the four Gospels that are significantly earlier than Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (or Nicea). Although none of the copies are complete, we do have nearly complete copies of both Luke and John in a codex dated between A.D. 175 and 225—at least a hundred years before Nicaea. Another manuscript, dating from about A.D. 200 or earlier, contains most of John's Gospel.{8} But why is this important?

First, we can compare these pre-Nicene manuscripts with those that followed Nicaea to see if any embellishment occurred. None did. Second, the pre-Nicene versions of John's Gospel include some of the strongest declarations of Jesus' deity on record (e.g. 1:1-3; 8:58; 10:30-33). That is, the most explicit declarations of Jesus' deity in any of our Gospels are already found in manuscripts that pre-date Constantine by more than a hundred years!

If you have a non-Christian friend who believes these books were embellished, you might gently refer them to this evidence. Then, encourage them to read the Gospels for themselves and find out who Jesus really is.

But what if they think these sources can't be trusted?

Can We Trust the Gospels?

Although there's no historical basis for the claim that Constantine embellished the New Testament Gospels to make Jesus appear more godlike, we must still ask whether the Gospels are reliable sources of information about Jesus.

According to Teabing, the novel's fictional historian, "Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false" (235). Is this true? The answer largely depends on the reliability of our earliest biographies of Jesus—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Each of these Gospels was written in the first century A.D. Although they are technically anonymous, we have fairly strong evidence from second century writers such as Papias (c. A.D. 125) and Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180) for ascribing each Gospel to its traditional author. If their testimony is true (and we've little reason to doubt it), then Mark, the companion of Peter, wrote down the substance of Peter's preaching. And Luke, the companion of Paul, carefully researched the biography that bears his name. Finally, Matthew and John, two of Jesus' twelve disciples, wrote the books ascribed to them. If this is correct, then the events recorded in these Gospels "are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony."{9}

But did the Gospel writers intend to reliably record the life and ministry of Jesus? Were they even interested in history, or did their theological agendas overshadow any desire they may have had to tell us what really happened? Craig Blomberg, a New Testament scholar, observes that the prologue to Luke's Gospel "reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity." He further notes that since Matthew and Mark are similar to Luke in terms of genre, "it seems reasonable that Luke's historical intent would closely mirror theirs."{10} Finally, John tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they might have life in His name (20:31). While this statement admittedly reveals a theological agenda, Blomberg points out that "if you're going to be convinced enough to believe, the theology has to flow from accurate history."{11}

Interestingly, the disciplines of history and archaeology are a great help in corroborating the general reliability of the

Gospel writers. Where these authors mention people, places, and events that can be checked against other ancient sources, they are consistently shown to be quite reliable. We need to let our non-Christian friends know that we have good grounds for trusting the New Testament Gospels and believing what they say about Jesus.

But what if they ask about those Gospels that didn't make it into the New Testament? Specifically, what if they ask about the Nag Hammadi documents?

The Nag Hammadi Documents

Since their discovery in 1945, there's been much interest in the Nag Hammadi texts. What are these documents? When were they written, and by whom, and for what purpose? According to Teabing, the historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, the Nag Hammadi texts represent "the earliest Christian records" (245). These "unaltered gospels," he claims, tell the real story about Jesus and early Christianity (248). The New Testament Gospels are allegedly a later, corrupted version of these events.

The only difficulty with Teabing's theory is that it's wrong. The Nag Hammadi documents are not "the earliest Christian records." Every book in the New Testament is earlier. The New Testament documents were all written in the first century A.D. By contrast, the dates for the Nag Hammadi texts range from the second to the third century A.D. As Darrell Bock observes in *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, "The bulk of this material is a few generations removed from the foundations of the Christian faith, a vital point to remember when assessing the contents."{12}

What do we know about the contents of these books? It is generally agreed that the Nag Hammadi texts are Gnostic documents. The key tenet of Gnosticism is that salvation comes through secret knowledge. As a result, the Gnostic Gospels, in

striking contrast to their New Testament counterparts, place almost no value on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Gnostic Christology had a tendency to separate the human Jesus from the divine Christ, seeing them as two distinct beings. It was not the divine Christ who suffered and died; it was merely the human Jesus—or perhaps even Simon of Cyrene.{13} It didn't matter much to the Gnostics because in their view the death of Jesus was irrelevant for attaining salvation. What was truly important was not the death of the man Jesus but the secret knowledge brought by the divine Christ. According to the Gnostics, salvation came through a correct understanding of this secret knowledge.{14}

Clearly these doctrines are incompatible with the New Testament teaching about Christ and salvation (e.g. Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:3-11; Tit. 2:11-14). Ironically, they're also incompatible with Teabing's view that the Nag Hammadi texts "speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms" (234). The Nag Hammadi texts actually present Christ as a divine being, though quite differently from the New Testament perspective.{15}

Thus, the Nag Hammadi texts are both later than the New Testament writings and characterized by a worldview that is entirely alien to their theology. We must explain to our non-Christian friends that the church fathers exercised great wisdom in rejecting these books from the New Testament.

But what if they ask us how it was decided what books to include?

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

In the early centuries of Christianity, many books were written about the teachings of Jesus and His apostles. Most of these books never made it into the New Testament. They include such titles as The Gospel of Philip, The Acts of John, and The

Apocalypse of Peter. How did the early church decide what books to include in the New Testament and what to reject? When were these decisions made, and by whom? According to the Teabing, "The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by . . . Constantine the Great" (231). Is this true?

The early church had definite criteria that had to be met for a book to be included in the New Testament. As Bart Ehrman observes, a book had to be ancient, written close to the time of Jesus. It had to be written either by an apostle or a companion of an apostle. It had to be consistent with the orthodox understanding of the faith. And it had to be widely recognized and accepted by the church.{16} Books that didn't meet these criteria weren't included in the New Testament.

When were these decisions made? And who made them? There wasn't an ecumenical council in the early church that officially decreed that the twenty-seven books now in our New Testament were the right ones.{17} Rather, the canon gradually took shape as the church recognized and embraced those books that were inspired by God. The earliest collections of books "to circulate among the churches in the first half of the second century" were our four Gospels and the letters of Paul.{18} Not until the heretic Marcion published his expurgated version of the New Testament in about A.D. 144 did church leaders seek to define the canon more specifically.{19}

Toward the end of the second century there was a growing consensus that the canon should include the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, "epistles by other 'apostolic men' and the Revelation of John."{20} The Muratorian Canon, which dates toward the end of the second century, recognized every New Testament book except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. Similar though not identical books were recognized by Irenaeus in the late second century and Origen in the early third century. So while the earliest listing of all the books in our New Testament comes from Athanasius in A.D. 367, there was widespread agreement on most

of these books (including the four Gospels) by the end of the second century. By sharing this information "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15), we can help our friends see that the New Testament canon did not result from a decision by Constantine.

Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 1)

Mary Magdalene, of course, is a major figure in *The Da Vinci Code.* Let's take a look at Mary, beginning by addressing the unfortunate misconception that she was a prostitute. Where did this notion come from? And why do so many people believe it?

According to Leigh Teabing, the popular understanding of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute "is the legacy of a smear campaign . . . by the early Church." In Teabing's view, "The Church needed to defame Mary . . . to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail" (244). Remember, in this novel the Holy Grail is not the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. Instead it's Mary Magdalene, who's alleged to have been both Jesus' wife and the one who carried His royal bloodline in her womb.

How should we respond to this? Did the early church really seek to slander Mary as a prostitute in order to cover up her intimate relationship with Jesus? The first recorded instance of Mary Magdalene being misidentified as a prostitute occurred in a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591.{21} Most likely, this wasn't a deliberate attempt to slander Mary's character. Rather, Gregory probably misinterpreted some passages in the Gospels, resulting in his incorrectly identifying Mary as a prostitute.

For instance, he may have identified the unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7, who anointed Jesus' feet, with Mary of Bethany in John 12, who also anointed Jesus' feet shortly before His death. This would have been easy to do because, although there

are differences, there are also many similarities between the two separate incidents. If Gregory thought the sinful woman of Luke 7 was the Mary of John 12, he may then have mistakenly linked this woman with Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, Luke mentions Mary Magdalene for the first time at the beginning of chapter 8, right after the story of Jesus' anointing in Luke 7. Since the unnamed woman in Luke 7 was likely guilty of some kind of sexual sin, if Gregory thought this woman was Mary Magdalene, then it wouldn't be too great a leap to infer she was a prostitute.

If you're discussing the novel with someone who is hostile toward the church, don't be afraid to admit that the church has sometimes made mistakes. We can agree that Gregory was mistaken when he misidentified Mary as a prostitute. But we must also observe that it's quite unlikely that this was part of a smear campaign by the early church. We must remind our friends that Christians make mistakes—and even sin—just like everyone else (Rom. 3:23). The difference is that we've recognized our need for a Savior from sin. And in this respect, we're actually following in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18)!

Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 2)

What do our earliest written sources reveal about the real Mary Magdalene? According to Teabing, Mary was the wife of Jesus, the mother of His child, and the one whom He intended to establish the church after His death (244-48). In support of these theories, Teabing appeals to two of the Gnostic Gospels: The Gospel of Philip and The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]. Let's look first at The Gospel of Mary.

The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel presents an incredulous apostle Peter who simply can't believe that the risen Christ has secretly revealed information to Mary that He didn't reveal to His male disciples. Levi rebukes Peter: "If

the Saviour made her worthy, who are you . . . to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us" (247).

What can we say about this passage? First, we must observe that nowhere in this Gospel are we told that Mary was Jesus' wife or the mother of His child. Second, many scholars think this text should probably be read symbolically, with Peter representing early Christian orthodoxy and Mary representing a form of Gnosticism. This Gospel is probably claiming that "Mary" (that is, the Gnostics) has received divine revelation, even if "Peter" (that is, the orthodox) can't believe it.{22} Finally, even if this text should be read literally, we have little reason to think it's historically reliable. It was likely composed sometime in the late second century, about a hundred years after the canonical Gospels.{23} So, contrary to what's implied in the novel, it certainly wasn't written by Mary Magdalene—or any of Jesus' other original followers.{24}

If we want reliable information about Mary, we must turn to our earliest sources—the New Testament Gospels. These sources tell us that Mary was a follower of Jesus from the town of Magdala. After Jesus cast seven demons out of her, she (along with other women) helped support His ministry (Luke 8:1-3). She witnessed Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, and was the first to see the risen Christ (Matt. 27:55-61; John 20:11-18). Jesus even entrusted her with proclaiming His resurrection to His male disciples (John 20:17-18). In this sense, Mary was an "apostle" to the apostles.{25} This is all the Gospels tell us about Mary.{26} We can agree with our non-Christian friends that she was a very important woman. But we must also remind them that there's nothing to suggest that she was Jesus' wife, or that He intended her to lead the church.

All this aside, someone who's read *The Da Vinci Code* might still have questions about The Gospel of Philip? Doesn't this text indicate that Mary and Jesus were married?

Was Jesus Married? (Part 1)

Undoubtedly, the strongest textual evidence that Jesus was married comes from The Gospel of Philip. So it's not surprising that Leigh Teabing, should appeal to this text. The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel reads as follows:

> And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" (246).

Now, notice that the first line refers to Mary as the companion of the Savior. In the novel, Teabing clinches his argument that Jesus and Mary were married by stating, "As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse" (246). This sounds pretty convincing. Was Jesus married after all?

When discussing this issue with a non-Christian friend, point out that we must proceed carefully here. The Gospel of Philip was originally written in Greek.{27} Therefore, what the term "companion" meant in Aramaic is entirely irrelevant. Even in the Coptic translation found at Nag Hammadi, a Greek loan word (*koinonos*) lies behind the term translated "companion". Darrell Bock observes that this is "not the typical . . . term for 'wife'" in Greek.{28} Indeed, koinonos is most often used in the New Testament to refer to a "partner." Luke uses the term to describe James and John as Peter's business partners (Luke 5:10). So contrary to the claim of Teabing, the statement that Mary was Jesus' companion does not at all prove that she was His wife.

But what about the following statement: "Christ loved her . . . and used to kiss her often on her mouth"?

First, this portion of the manuscript is damaged. We don't

actually know where Christ kissed Mary. There's a hole in the manuscript at that place. Some believe that "she was kissed on her cheek or forehead since either term fits in the break."{29} Second, even if the text said that Christ kissed Mary on her mouth, it wouldn't necessarily mean that something sexual is in view. Most scholars agree that Gnostic texts contain a lot of symbolism. To read such texts literally, therefore, is to misread them. Finally, regardless of the author's intention, this Gospel wasn't written until the second half of the third century, over two hundred years after the time of Jesus.{30} So the reference to Jesus kissing Mary is almost certainly not historically reliable.

We must show our non-Christian friends that The Gospel of Philip offers insufficient evidence that Jesus was married. But what if they've bought into the novel's contention that it would have been odd for Jesus to be single?

Was Jesus Married? (Part 2)

The two most educated characters in *The Da Vinci Code* claim that an unmarried Jesus is quite improbable. Leigh Teabing says, "Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor" (245). Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of Religious Symbology, concurs:

> Jesus was a Jew, and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned. . . . If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible's Gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood (245).

Is this true? What if our non-Christian friends want a response to such claims?

In his excellent book *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, Darrell Bock

persuasively argues that an unmarried Jesus is not at all improbable.{31} Of course, it's certainly true that most Jewish men of Jesus' day did marry. It's also true that marriage was often viewed as a fundamental human obligation, especially in light of God's command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Nevertheless, by the first century there were recognized, and even lauded, exceptions to this general rule.

The first century Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria, described the Essenes as those who "repudiate marriage . . . for no one of the Essenes ever marries a wife."{32} Interestingly, the Essenes not only escaped condemnation for their celibacy, they were often admired. Philo also wrote, "This now is the enviable system of life of these Essenes, so that not only private individuals but even mighty kings, admiring the men, venerate their sect, and increase . . . the honors which they confer on them."{33} Such citations clearly reveal that not all Jews of Jesus' day considered marriage obligatory. And those who sought to avoid marriage for religious reasons were often admired rather than condemned.

It may be helpful to remind your friend that the Bible nowhere condemns singleness. Indeed, it praises those who choose to remain single to devote themselves to the work of the Lord (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:25-38). Point your friend to Matthew 19:12, where Jesus explains that some people "have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven" (NIV). Notice His conclusion, "The one who can accept this should accept it." It's virtually certain that Jesus had accepted this. He had renounced marriage to fully devote Himself to the work of His heavenly Father. What's more, since there was precedent in the first century for Jewish men to remain single for religious reasons, Jesus' singleness would not have been condemned. Let your friend know that, contrary to the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*, it would have been completely acceptable for Jesus to be unmarried.

Did Jesus' Earliest Followers Proclaim His Deity?

We've considered *The Da Vinci Code*'s claim that Jesus was married and found it wanting. Mark Roberts observed "that most proponents of the marriage of Jesus thesis have an agenda. They are trying to strip Jesus of his uniqueness, and especially his deity."{34} This is certainly true of *The Da Vinci Code*. Not only does it call into question Jesus' deity by alleging that He was married, it also maintains that His earliest followers never even believed He was divine! According to Teabing, the doctrine of Christ's deity originally resulted from a vote at the Council of Nicaea. He further asserts, "until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless" (233). Did Jesus' earliest followers really believe that He was just a man? If our non-Christian friends have questions about this, let's view it as a great opportunity to tell them who Jesus really is!

The Council of Nicaea met in A.D. 325. By then, Jesus' followers had been proclaiming His deity for nearly three centuries. Our earliest written sources about the life of Jesus are found in the New Testament. These first century documents repeatedly affirm the deity of Christ. For instance, in his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul declared, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (2:9; see also Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:5-11; Tit. 2:13). And John wrote, "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:1, 14).

There are also affirmations of Jesus' deity in the writings of the pre-Nicene church fathers. In the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote of "our God, Jesus the Christ."{35} Similar affirmations can be found throughout these writings.

There's even non-Christian testimony from the second century that Christians believed in Christ's divinity. Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan, around A.D. 112, that the early Christians "were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day . . . when they sang . . . a hymn to Christ, as to a god."{36}

If we humbly share this information with our non-Christian friends, we can help them see that Christians believed in Christ's deity long before the Council of Nicaea. We might even be able to explain why Christians were so convinced of His deity that they were willing to die rather than deny it. If so, we can invite our friends to believe in Jesus for themselves. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

If you want your church to be equipped to take advantage of such opportunities, consider our new study series, Redeeming *The Da Vinci Code*, available at Probe.org.

Notes

1. Read more about it at http://www.filmrot.com/articles/filmrot_news/004089.php (January 15, 2004).
2. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 1.
3. For example, see Sandra Miesel, "Dismantling the Da Vinci Code," at http://www.crisismagazine.com/september2003/feature1.htm and James Patrick Holding, "Not InDavincible: A Review and Critique of The Da Vinci Code," at http://www.answers.org/issues/davincicode.html.
4. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Reprint. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1952), 1:549, cited in Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A*

General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 282.

5. For more information see Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible,* 390.
6. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 25.
7. Ibid., 39-40.
8. Ibid., 40.
9. Darrell Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (n.p.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 52 (pre-publication manuscript copy).
10. Ibid., 62-63. See also *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter and The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* in Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78-86.
11. For example, The Coptic Gospel of Thomas (saying 1), in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures,* 20.
12. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code,* 63.
13. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles Over Authentication* (Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company: Course Guidebook, part 2, 2002), 37.
14. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures,* 341.
15. F.F. Bruce, "Canon," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels,* eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 95.
16. Ibid., 95-96.
17. Ibid., 96.
18. Darrell Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (n.p. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 25-26 (pre-publication manuscript copy). I have relied heavily on Dr. Bock's analysis in this section.
19. Ibid., 116-17.
20. Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 2003), 35.

21. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). On page 247 we read, "Sophie had not known a gospel existed in Magdalene's words."
22. An "apostle" can simply refer to "one sent" as an envoy or messenger. Mary was an "apostle" in this sense, since she was sent by Jesus to tell the disciples of His resurrection.
23. For more information see *Bock, Breaking the Da Vinci Code,* 16-18.
24. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures,* 19.
25. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code,* 22.
26. Ibid., 21.
27. Ibid., 20.
28. In this section I have relied heavily on chapter 3 of Dr. Bock's book, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code,* pp. 40-49 (pre-publication copy).
29. Philo, Hypothetica, 11.14-17, cited in Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code,* 43.
30. Ibid., 44.
31. Mark D. Roberts, "Was Jesus Married? A Careful Look at the Real Evidence," at http://www.markdroberts.com/htmfiles/resources/jesusmarried.htm, January, 2004.
32. Ignatius of Antioch, "Ephesians," 18:2, cited in Jack N. Sparks, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Robert M. Grant (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 83.
33. Pliny, Letters, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II, X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus,* 199.

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“Is the Bible Wrong About the Cleansing of the Temple?”

In John 2:13-25 is the story of when Jesus cleansed the temple. It immediately follows Jesus turning the water into wine, and immediately precedes the conversation with Nicodemus. In Matthew 21:12-16 is the same story immediately precedes the cursing of the barren fig tree. In Mark 11:15-18 the cleansing of the temple takes place immediately after the cursing of the fig tree.

Now, as I see it, there are only three possibilities.

1. The text in either Matthew and Mark or in John is in error about the time of the cleansing of the temple. And either the text in Matthew or Mark is wrong about the time of the cursing of the fig tree.
2. The gospels were not written in chronological order.
3. The same incident happened more than once (highly unlikely).

What is your take on this? Did I overlook something?

Thanks for your question! You have raised an important (and relatively common) difficulty in interpreting the gospels. Let me first say that the gospels were not necessarily written in chronological order. In fact, it is generally accepted that many of the incidents recorded in the gospels were NOT written in chronological order. As a general rule, the only exception to this is Luke’s gospel, in which he specifically states his intention “to write it out…in consecutive order” (Luke 1:3).

A good book which you may want to consult about some of these issues of gospel interpretation and harmonization is Craig Blomberg’s *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1987). Since this is not an area of personal expertise for me, I will simply give you

Blomberg's observations on possible ways in which the difficulties you have noticed might be resolved.

Concerning the cursing of the fig tree, Blomberg believes that Matthew has simply telescoped the events of two days "into one uninterrupted paragraph which seems to refer only to the second day's events." He points out that Matthew's introduction, "Now in the morning," does "not specify which day is in view, and there is no reason to exclude an interval of time between verses 19 and 20." He continues by noting, "Mark does not deny that the fig tree withered immediately, only that the disciples did not see it until the next day." He concludes by pointing out that the gospels leave out a wealth of detail (indeed, John states this explicitly in 20:30), and such omissions simply become more evident when compared with a more detailed account in another gospel.

Blomberg offers a couple of solutions to the problem of the cleansing of the temple. The first solution holds that John has simply woven this incident into his gospel thematically, rather than chronologically. In other words, there is only one cleansing and John, for thematic considerations, has simply chosen to relay this incident in a manner unrelated to its actual chronological occurrence in the life of Christ. He offers a couple of reasons in support of this view. The second solution (which commends itself to my mind) actually acknowledges two separate cleansings, one at the beginning and one near the end of Jesus' public ministry. He offers six arguments in support of this second position (172):

1. The details of the cleansing given in John's account are completely different from those given in the Synoptics (i.e. Matthew, Mark, Luke).

2. If Jesus felt strongly enough about the temple corruption to cleanse it once at the beginning of His ministry, it is not really too difficult to believe that He might do it again at the end of His ministry.

3. Since cleansing the temple was an overtly Messianic act, about which some of the Jews would have approved, it is not surprising that He could get away with doing this once at the outset of His ministry. However, when the Jews began to realize that Jesus was not really the sort of Messiah they were looking for, a second cleansing would have almost certainly sealed His fate (see Mark 11:18).

4. In the Synoptics, Jesus is accused of having said that He would destroy the temple and rebuild another in three days not made with human hands (Mark 14:58). But a similar comment by Jesus is only explicitly mentioned in John 2:19. Furthermore, since the witnesses in Mark's gospel get the statement slightly wrong, and cannot agree among themselves (Mark 14:59), it may be a confused memory of something Jesus said two or three years earlier, rather than just a few days earlier.

5. Jesus' statement in the Synoptics is more severe than that in John. Only in the Synoptics does He refer to the Gentiles need to pray at the temple, and only in the Synoptics does He refer to the Jews as "robbers."

6. In John 2:20 the Jews refer to the temple rebuilding project having begun 46 years earlier. This would mark the date of the cleansing at around AD 27 or 28. But Jesus was almost certainly not crucified until at least AD 30. And it is most unlikely that John would have simply made up such a figure. Therefore, it is quite likely that John is describing a distinct (and earlier) cleansing from the one mentioned in the Synoptics.

When I approach the gospel narratives with the attitude that they are innocent until proven guilty, keeping in mind that they have been thoroughly demonstrated to be generally reliable historical sources, the six arguments listed above strongly incline me to the view that there were in fact two temple cleansings in the life of Christ—one at the beginning

of His public ministry, the other at its conclusion. At any rate, that is my take on this particular issue.

Hope this helps!

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

Are the Essene Gospels Real?

Are the Essene gospels (Gospel of Peace) real? How can you witness to someone who believes these are truer than the Bible? I have a father who says he believes in Jesus, but not the Bible. He says a loving God will not condemn man as long as he does mostly good. He also rejects that Christ is the only way. I know we are saved by grace not works and that Jesus is the way, but how do I explain and share the truth without arguing? My referring to the Bible only aggravates him since he rejects it as one of religion and man's creation.

There are certainly many ancient "Gospels" that never made it into the Bible.

You can find out more about these on sites like the following: wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/index.htm and www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl.html.

A search on the latter site for the "Gospel of Peace" produced no matches and I've actually never heard of this one. Regardless, however, the real questions we must ask are:

1. Who wrote these documents?
2. When were they written?

3. Are they historically reliable or trustworthy sources of information about Jesus and the early church?

Many of these documents were written by groups (like the Gnostics) who were later declared heretical by church councils and synods. They were written AFTER the time of the New Testament Gospels – sometimes by hundreds of years, sometimes by decades. And with the exception of certain portions of the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, they're generally regarded as late, legendary, and historically unreliable sources of information about Jesus and His early followers.

If your father doesn't believe that the Bible is reliable, you might see if he's willing to read some books which give evidence that it is. A very good general introduction is "A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded" by Norman Geisler and William Nix. A book on the Old Testament is "The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable & Relevant?" by Walter Kaiser. And F.F. Bruce wrote, "The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?" Many other good books exist, but if your father would be willing to carefully read any of these, it would be a great start.

Regardless of whether he's willing to read such books or not, however, the best thing you can do is pray for him and model Christlike love toward him. The Lord can work wonderfully to soften men's hearts toward Christ and the Bible. Speak a good word for the Lord as you have opportunity, but mainly just pray for him and show him God's love. It's a powerful combination.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

Christ's Inner Circle – The Primary Apostles of Jesus

Don Closson examines the ministry and role of the four most prominent apostles, Peter, Andrew, John and James. He shows how these primary apostles were changed from fishermen into true fishers of men through the power of the Lord.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Matthew 10:2-4 records:

> These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Christians hold in high esteem (excluding Judas Iscariot) those who were personally called by Jesus and who walked with Him during His ministry on Earth. That is especially true of the twelve Apostles. The Greek words used for apostle convey both the notions of sending or dispatching (*apostolos*) as well as the idea of commissioning someone with divine authorization (*apostello*). The idea of apostleship might be traced back to the Hebrew notion of an envoy. This Jewish institution would have been familiar to Jesus and is well documented in the rabbinic writings where it refers to "one who has been authorized to carry out certain functions on behalf of another." A well-known Jewish adage is "a man's envoy is as himself."

It is interesting to note that Jesus called to Himself those

whom He wished (Mark 3:13-14). There were no volunteers. They were to travel, share food, and live with Jesus, experiencing firsthand His life and ministry. They were then sent out to proclaim that the Kingdom of heaven was at hand, and that they had been commissioned to act as Jesus' representatives with His authority.

Lists of the Twelve are found in four places in the New Testament, and comparisons of the lists can reveal important information about the apostles. Peter is always mentioned first and Judas Iscariot last. The twelve are also listed in three groups of four, the first four always being Peter, Andrew, James, and John. This group of four apostles had a special relationship with Christ and will be the focus of this article.

Another interesting insight into the make-up of the group can be found in the process used to replace Judas Iscariot after his death. The first chapter of Acts states that Judas' replacement must have accompanied the apostles from the beginning. In other words, he must have been present at John's baptism of Christ and still around to see Jesus' ascension into heaven. It was also noted that he must have been an eyewitness to the resurrection. The apostles were eyewitnesses to the life, teachings, miracles, and finally the death and resurrection of our Lord. This was essential for them to have a clear and accurate testimony of the Messiah.

In this article we will look at the inner circle of Christ's apostles: Peter, Andrew, James and John. We will see how God changed the lives of these ordinary men forever.

The Apostle Peter

In every one of the four lists of the Apostles found in the New Testament, Peter is always mentioned first. Peter is often called the *primus inter pares* or the first among equals. It is obvious that he plays a leadership role among his fellow

apostles and is recognized by Christ as a foundation of the church. Although we might debate what this leadership role is, we cannot deny its existence.

The New Testament gives Peter four names. His Hebrew name was Symeon, which in Greek is Simon. Peter was probably a bilingual Jew who was influenced by the Greek culture in Galilee at the time. John records that Jesus gave him the Aramaic name Cephas which translates as Peter in Greek and means “a rock.” This new name given by Jesus is an indication of how Peter would change while under the Lord’s influence. Peter’s early impetuousness would be transformed into that of a stable, charismatic witness for Christ.

Unlike many of the other Apostles, the New Testament gives us some background information about Peter’s family life. His father’s name was Jonah or John and we know that he was married. Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14), and Paul mentions that Peter took his wife with him on journeys to various churches (1 Cor. 9:5). Peter probably lived with his brother, Andrew, in Bethsaida and later moved to Capernaum as he followed Jesus in ministry.

Peter became a disciple in the very early days of Jesus’ ministry. John mentions an early encounter with Jesus after Andrew introduces the two. Later, perhaps a year or so, Matthew and Mark record Jesus calling Peter to full-time ministry as a fisher of men.

As an apostle, Peter plays a significant role among the Twelve. Peter is often singled out and the rest are mentioned as a group with him (Mark 1:36). He also acts as a spokesman for the group. In Luke 12 he asks Jesus about the meaning of a parable. In Matthew 16 he affirms Jesus as the Messiah, and then in chapter 19 he reminds Jesus of the sacrifices made by the apostles as a group. He is often the first to act as well. Matthew 14 records Peter’s attempt to meet Jesus on the water, even though he loses heart midway.

Peter’s leadership role lends added significance to a number of events in the Bible. For instance, the detail given of Peter’s denial of Jesus has its impact precisely because of Peter’s prominence in the group. Also, the account in John chapter 21 of Jesus questioning Peter’s love and admonishing him to “feed my sheep” takes on poignancy.

The Apostle Peter and His Brother Andrew

The Roman Catholic Church has long used Matthew 16:17-19 as justification for the office of the Pope and the succession of popes starting with Peter. Protestants have reacted by tending to downplay Peter’s significance as a leader among the apostles and any special office that he might hold in the body of Christ. As I mentioned previously, Peter is clearly represented as the leader of the apostles. However, the use of this passage in Matthew to justify the modern office of the Pope reads too much into the Scriptures.

For instance, Matthew 16 says nothing about Peter’s successors, their infallibility, or their authority. Part of the problem with ascribing these attributes to Peter’s successor is that he would have had authority over a still living apostle, John. Peter is the first to make a formal confession of faith (Matt. 16:16), but he continues on as a very fallible part of the team Christ has assembled. He is sent, along with John, by the apostles to Samaria, when word had come that some had accepted the word of God there. In Acts 11 the church in Jerusalem took issue with Peter’s entering a gentile’s home. Although they eventually agreed with his explanation, they still had the authority to question Peter’s actions. In Galatians, Paul writes that he rebuked Peter to his face for separating himself from the Gentiles when accompanied by Jews from Jerusalem (Galatians 2:11). The New Testament allows us to claim Peter as the leader of the apostles, but not the first in a line of infallible popes.

Where Peter is outspoken and prominent, his brother Andrew was

happy to play a background role among the Twelve. Andrew worked in his father's fishing business with Peter in Bethsaida and probably shared a home with Peter until Peter's marriage.

Although Andrew is listed as one of the inner circle closest to Jesus, we do not have a lot of information about his ministry. He is first mentioned as a follower of John the Baptist. When John directs his followers towards Jesus, Andrew is quick to seek time with the Lord. After listening to Jesus for a few hours, Andrew is convinced that Jesus is the messiah and immediately begins to tell others, starting with his brother Peter.

Andrew has been called "the apostle who shared Christ personally." Andrew was recorded as one who brought people to Christ. First he brings Peter to the Lord, then at Passover he introduces searching Greek Gentiles to Jesus. When food is needed to feed the multitude, Andrew brings a child with bread and fish.

Andrew may not have had the leadership qualities of his brother Peter. He is never noted for his eloquent speech or his bold actions. However, one can imagine Andrew's heart when his brother, whom he introduced to the Lord, preached in the power of the Spirit in Jerusalem, resulting in thousands of new believers. Andrew may have played a background role among the inner circle of Christ's followers, but it was a vital role just the same.

The Sons of Zebedee

James and John make up the other pair of brothers who were part of Christ's inner circle. Like Peter and Andrew, they were also from Bethsaida and worked together with them in the fishing industry. They were known as the "sons of thunder" because of their fiery temperaments, which would occasionally give rise to some awkward moments (Mark 3:17). Their father,

Zebedee, and mother, Salome, were probably well off materially. The family is mentioned to have had servants (Mark 1:20) and Salome ministered to Jesus with her resources (Matthew 27:55-56). John implies that Salome is Mary's sister, making James and John cousins to Jesus (John 19:25).

Both James and John are members of the first group of four apostles, always mentioned first in lists of the Twelve. But they are also part of what might be called the inner three, those into whom Christ poured special time and teachings.

It is widely recognized that the designation "the disciple whom Jesus loved" refers to the apostle John. John stands out among the apostles as being the only one to have witnessed the crucifixion and afterwards, took Jesus' mother home to live with him (John 19:25-27). He was also the first of the twelve to see the empty tomb.

John was first a follower of John the Baptist. That meant that he was seriously seeking God prior to meeting Jesus and was primed to make a commitment to the Messiah. He and Andrew had an early encounter with Jesus before becoming full time disciples. Both had spent time listening to the Lord and becoming convinced of His authenticity. While with Jesus, their temperaments became evident on a number of occasions. Luke describes an incident in which John asks Jesus if they should call down fire on a Samaritan village that had refused them hospitality (Luke 9:54). Having just experienced the transfiguration of Jesus, John was indignant at the lack of proper respect for his Lord.

There is also the well-known incident when Salome asks Jesus to place one of her sons at His right hand when He establishes His kingdom (Matthew 20:21). Jesus responds sharply to the request by telling them that they do not know what they are asking. He asks them, "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" (Matthew 20:22) With their typical bravado, they answer, "We can." They were still hoping that Jesus was about

to establish a political kingdom in Israel. They did not realize that His kingdom would begin with His sacrificial, atoning death on the cross. It is somewhat fitting that James becomes the first martyr from among the Twelve. Acts 12 records that Herod Agrippa had James put to death by the sword probably around 42 A.D. (Acts 12:2)

The apostle John was an interesting combination: the disciple Jesus loved, and yet one who could be intolerant and self-seeking. James would be the first to die a martyr, and yet his brother would live the longest of all the apostles. Next we will look at the legacy left by the inner circle of Jesus and what we can learn from their lives.

The Legacy of Those Closest to Jesus

John writes in Revelation 21:10, 14:

> And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. . . . The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Whether this verse refers to an actual city as many argue, or to the church or body of Christ, as others hold, it portrays the remarkable honor allotted to the Twelve Apostles. And among the Twelve, Jesus poured His life into an inner circle that had a key role in establishing the church. Peter, Andrew, James and John were privileged to be with Jesus when He healed Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37), and at the Transfiguration of Christ (Mark 9:2). They were the audience at the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13:3) and were with Jesus during His time of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37).

These four men left quite a legacy. Peter is credited with providing the material for the book of Mark and the two epistles given his name. He was the leader of the church in

Jerusalem during the first 15 years covered in the first twelve books of Acts, after which James, the brother of Jesus, took over. Peter then became a missionary to the Jews and to a lesser degree, the Gentiles. Although tradition gives Peter credit for leading the church at Rome, it is unlikely. Yet he did go there near the end of his ministry and probably suffered martyrdom there.

The last mention we have of Andrew is in the upper room with Jesus. The book of Acts is silent regarding him. Tradition has Andrew traveling as a missionary to Russia and meeting martyrdom by crucifixion at Patras in Greece around 60 A.D.

We know that James was the first of the Twelve to be put to death. Thus he left no writings. Tradition has it that the officer guarding James was so taken by his testimony that he repented and was beheaded with the apostle.

Finally, we have the apostle John. Along with internal evidence from the book of John, early church fathers Irenaeus and Polycrates identify the apostle John as the “disciple Jesus loved.” Having lived the life of an apostle the longest, John wrote the fourth gospel, the remarkable book of Revelation, and three epistles to the church. Of all Christ’s followers, John conveys the majesty of Christ the most clearly. According to tradition, John spent his last days in Ephesus, traveling there after the death of Domitian (who had exiled him to the Isle of Patmos). John’s followers, Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius, would become pillars in Christ’s church, just as John had been.

Ordinary fishermen, these four men are a testimony to the life changing impact that walking with our Savior can have on anyone who chooses to be His disciple.

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Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?

Aren't Miracles Impossible?

Of the four canonical gospels, there are two, Matthew and Luke, that provide details about the birth of Jesus. The accounts may reflect the unique perspectives of both Joseph (in Matthew's gospel) and Mary (in Luke's), for there are many differences between the two.{1} However, of the things they share in common, one cannot be missed. They both declare that Jesus was miraculously conceived through the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit in the womb of a young virgin named Mary.{2} Today, some scholars regard the doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth as simply a legendary development of the early church. The story is said to be myth—not history.{3} But if we ask why they think this, we may notice something very interesting. For the virgin birth is usually not rejected on grounds of insufficient historical evidence. Rather, it is more often rejected on the presupposition that miracles are simply impossible.{4} This is quite revealing. For if such scholars really believe that miracles are impossible, then no amount of evidence can convince them that one has actually occurred. Their minds are made up before they examine the evidence. In theory, they view miracle claims as guilty until proven innocent. In actual practice, however, they never reach a verdict of "Not Guilty"!

The belief that miracles are impossible often arises from a naturalistic worldview. Strict naturalism completely rejects any notion of the supernatural.{5} All that exists are atoms and the void.{6} If naturalists are right, it follows that

miracles are indeed impossible. While strange things that we do not fully understand may sometimes occur, there must, in principle, be a naturalistic explanation for every event in the universe.

But are such naturalists right? Since my aim in this article is to explore the historicity of Jesus' virgin birth, I will not attempt now to refute naturalism. Instead, I will simply point out that if a personal Creator God exists (and there is good evidence to believe that One does), then miracles are at least possible. For clearly, such a God might choose to intervene in His creation to bring about an effect for which there was no prior natural cause. And that is at least one way of describing a miracle.

Thus, if a personal Creator God exists, miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then Jesus' virginal conception and birth are possible. And if the virgin birth is possible, then the only way we can determine if it actually occurred is by carefully examining the evidence both for and against it. Next we will continue our inquiry by looking at an ancient prophecy that some think actually foretold Christ's virgin birth!

Didn't Matthew Misread Isaiah?

Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus was conceived through the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit while Mary was still a virgin.{7} He then goes further, however, by declaring that this miraculous event fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy in the book of Isaiah. He writes:

> *Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which…. means, "God with us."{8}*

Some scholars are unimpressed with Matthew's interpretation of Isaiah. John Dominic Crossan unequivocally states, "The prophecy in Isaiah says nothing whatsoever about a virginal conception."{9} Did Matthew misread Isaiah?

Let's acknowledge that the original context of Isaiah's prophecy may not be exclusively about the virginal conception of Jesus. The year is 734 B.C. and King Ahaz of Judah is terrified to learn that Aram and Israel have formed an alliance against him. Isaiah is sent to reassure Ahaz that God is in control and that the aims of the alliance will not succeed. Ahaz is told to request a sign from the Lord, a means of confirming the truth of Isaiah's message. But he refuses!{10} Annoyed at the king's stubbornness, Isaiah declares that the Lord will give a sign anyway: an *almah* (a maiden of marriageable age) will conceive a son and call his name Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey upon reaching an age of moral discernment. But before this happens, the land of the two dreaded kings will be forsaken.{11} Should this prophecy be understood to refer exclusively to Jesus' virginal conception? If so, how does it relate to the promise that the Aram-Israel alliance would soon be broken and their lands forsaken (a promise fulfilled within twelve years time)?{12}

It's quite possible that Isaiah's prophecy had a *dual fulfillment*:{13} initially, in Isaiah's day; and ultimately, at the birth of Jesus. In this view the *almah*, or young maiden of Isaiah's prophecy, is a type of the virgin Mary, who later conceived Jesus through the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit.{14} So although a young woman in Isaiah's day bore a child named Immanuel, Jesus is later recognized by Matthew to also be Immanuel, "God with us" in a new and unprecedented way. Thus, Matthew didn't misread Isaiah. And if this is so, we must continue to consider this prophecy in weighing the evidence for Jesus' virgin birth.

But even if we've correctly explained Matthew's use of Isaiah's prophecy, we must still consider the alleged

contradictions in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. We will address this issue in the next section.

Don't Matthew and Luke Contradict Each Other?

{15} Some scholars see the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke as contradictory. If so, their historical reliability is in doubt, along with their accounts of Jesus' virgin birth. But are these narratives really contradictory? Let's take a closer look.

First, some think Matthew implies that Mary and Joseph resided permanently in Bethlehem before Jesus' birth, whereas Luke says they lived in Nazareth and only came to Bethlehem for the census.{16} But Matthew never actually tells us the couple's residence before Jesus' birth. He simply says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just like Luke.{17}

But if Mary and Joseph resided in Nazareth prior to Jesus' birth, then why, after their flight into Egypt, does Matthew seem to suggest that they intended to return to Judea rather than their home in Nazareth?{18} It's helpful to recall that Jesus was "the promised king of David's line."{19} Might not his parents, then, have wished to raise Him in His ancestral home?{20} This is actually quite probable. But regardless of their original intention, let's not forget that Matthew goes on to write that Joseph, being warned in a dream not to settle in Judea, did take his family back to Nazareth after all.{21}

Finally, some think Luke's narrative leaves no room for Matthew's account about the visit of the magi and sojourn in Egypt. These events could only have occurred after Jesus' presentation in the Temple, forty days after His birth.{22} But Luke 2:39, which concludes this presentation, says that when Jesus' parents "had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to . . . Nazareth." This raises a question. Does Luke's statement prohibit an initial return

to Bethlehem, thus casting doubt on Matthew's account of the magi and flight into Egypt?

It's important to notice the emphasis in Luke 2:39. It's not so much on when Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth, but rather that they did not return until after they had fulfilled the requirements of the Law.{23} Strictly speaking, Luke 2:39 does not disallow the events recorded by Matthew. Luke may not have known of the visit of the magi and flight into Egypt, or he may have chosen to omit this information. Either way, however, "the silence of one narrative regarding events recorded in another is quite a different thing from actual contradiction."{24} Thus, the virgin birth cannot be dismissed on the grounds that the infancy narratives are contradictory—they're not.

But aren't we forgetting the most obvious hypothesis of all? Is the story of Jesus' virgin birth simply a myth, comparable to other such stories from the ancient world? We'll examine this question in the next section.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Pagan Myths?

Not long after Matthew and Luke finished writing their gospels, some scholars began contending that the story of Jesus' virgin birth was derived from pagan myths. Unfortunately, such ideas continue to haunt the Church even today. John Dominic Crossan cites parallels between the deification of Octavius by the Roman Senate and that of Jesus by the early church.{25} In each case, says Crossan, the decision to deify their leader was closely connected with the invention of a divine birth story. The official biography of Octavius claimed the god Apollo in the form of a snake impregnated his mother.{26} Jesus' biographers claimed the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary conceived Him. In Crossan's view, neither story is historically true: "The

divine origins of Jesus are…just as…mythological as those of Octavius."{27} The stories simply help explain why these men received divine honors.

Is Crossan's hypothesis plausible? One can certainly find scholars who embrace such ideas. But a careful comparison of the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth with the many miraculous birth stories in pagan literature reveals several important differences.

First, the accounts of Jesus' virgin birth show none "of the standard literary marks of the myth genre."{28} Matthew and Luke are written as history—not mythology. They mention places, people, and events that can be verified through normal methods of historical and archaeological inquiry. The beginning of Luke's gospel "reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity."{29} Thus, there is a clear difference in genre between the gospels and pagan myths.

Another difference can be seen in the religious atmosphere of these stories. The pagan myths are polytheistic; the gospels, monotheistic. The miraculous birth stories in pagan literature usually focus on a god's lust for some mortal woman.{30} Since this lust is typically gratified through sexual intercourse, the resulting conception and birth are hardly virginal. We are thus far removed from the description of Jesus' virginal conception in the gospels. There we find no hint that God's love for Mary in any way parallels the lust of Apollo for the mother of Octavius.

These are just two of many differences between the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and the miraculous birth stories in pagan literature. But even these differences make the theory of pagan derivation unlikely. Remember, this theory requires us to believe that strict moral monotheists, who claimed to be writing history, borrowed some of the crudest elements from polytheistic myths to tell the story of Jesus' birth! Frankly,

it's incredible. But could a theory of Jewish derivation still work? We'll conclude with this question.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Jewish Thought?

Some scholars have speculated that the story of Jesus' virgin birth may have been derived from an imaginative Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament.{31} The story is not historical; it is a literary fiction of early Jewish Christians. It may have resulted from reflection on Isaiah 7:14, which says in part, "Behold, a virgin will be with child." What could be more natural than this verse becoming the source of inspiration for a legendary tale about the virgin birth of the Messiah?{32}

But would this really have been natural? There's actually no clear evidence that pre-Christian Judaism understood Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the Messiah at all, much less his virginal conception.{33} Indeed, many contend that the Hebrew text of Isaiah says nothing whatever about a virginal conception and birth.{34} But if that is so, it would seem quite unlikely for early Jewish Christians to have read the verse in such a way!

Others believe the translation of Isaiah from Hebrew to Greek, known as the Septuagint, may have provided the initial impulse for such a reading. The Greek text of Isaiah 7:14 translates the Hebrew term *almah*, meaning "a young woman of marriageable age," with the Greek term *parthenos*, meaning "virgin". Could this translation have led some Jewish Christians to conclude that Isaiah was prophesying the virgin birth of the Messiah? And if so, might they have invented the story of Jesus' virgin birth as the alleged "fulfillment" of Isaiah's prediction?

While one can claim that they might have done so, there's no evidence that they actually did. But if not, what could account for early Christianity's understanding of Isaiah 7:14

as a prophecy of the Messiah's virgin birth? Well, the historical reality of Jesus' virgin birth could have done so! After all, it's one thing to think that early Jewish Christians, without any precedent in Jewish thought, would invent the story of Jesus' virgin birth from an imaginative interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy. But it's another thing entirely to think that by beginning with a historically reliable account of Jesus' virgin birth, they eventually concluded that Isaiah had indeed prophesied such an event.{35}

Only the latter hypothesis is supported by evidence. Particularly important in this regard are the gospels of Matthew and Luke. These sources have been shown to be quite historically reliable. Their accounts of Jesus' birth, though apparently written independently of one another, are free of contradiction. Indeed, apart from an unproven bias against the supernatural, there is little reason to doubt the accuracy of their reports. Thus, there do appear to be adequate grounds for believing that Jesus really was born of a virgin!

Notes

1. Such differences do not, of course, imply contradictions. See the third section for more information.

2. See Matt. 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-35.

3. For instance, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), writes, "I understand the virginal conception of Jesus to be a confessional statement about Jesus' status and not a biological statement about Mary's body. It is later faith in Jesus as an adult retrojected mythologically onto Jesus as an infant. . ." (23). And again a little later, "Jesus . . . was born . . . to Joseph and Mary." (26)

4. For example, in Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic*

Crossan (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 61, Dr. Craig questions Dr. Crossan about his anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions and whether they do not rule out the possibility of miracles a priori. Dr. Crossan admits that, insofar as miracles are concerned, "[I]t's a theological presupposition of mine that God does not operate that way."

5. Ibid. In fact, although it is difficult to pin him down this appears to be Dr. Crossan's position. At one point in the debate, Dr. Craig asks Dr. Crossan, "What about the statement that God exists? Is that a statement of faith or fact?" Dr. Crossan responds, "It's a statement of faith for all those who make it" (49). But suppose no human beings existed to make such statements of faith. In order to clarify Dr. Crossan's response, Dr. Craig later asks, "Was there a being who was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe during that period of time when no human beings existed?" Dr. Crossan's answer is quite revealing: "Well, I would probably prefer to say no because what you're doing is trying to put yourself in the position of God and ask…'How is God apart from faith?' I don't know if you can do that. You can do it, I suppose, but I don't know if it really has any point" (emphasis mine, 51). This answer appears to commit Dr. Crossan to an atheistic (and thus strictly naturalistic) worldview.

6. So said the famous Greek atomist philosopher, Democritus of Abdera.

7. See Matt. 1:20-25.

8. Matt. 1:22-23.

9. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,* 17. He goes on to say, "Clearly, somebody went seeking in the Old Testament for a text that could be interpreted as prophesying a virginal conception, even if such was never its original meaning"(18).

10. See Isaiah 7:1-12.

11. See Isaiah 7:13-16.

12. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978). Ryrie comments, “Within twelve years after this prophecy, Damascus was captured by Assyria (732) and Israel had fallen (722).” (1024)

13. Although some writers object to the notion of a “dual fulfillment” of prophecy, there appear to be other examples of this phenomenon in Scripture. For instance, in Joel 2:28-32 we find a promise of a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The prophecy is linked with various cosmic disturbances that will immediately precede the Day of the Lord. Later, in connection with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter declares, “This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel” (v. 16). He proceeds to quote almost the entire passage of Joel 2:28-32. However, it seems that only the first part of the prophecy, concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, was actually fulfilled in Peter’s day. What’s more, the book of Revelation seems to indicate that the cosmic disturbances mentioned by Joel await a yet future fulfillment (see Rev. 6:12). While scholars have offered various solutions to account for Peter’s use of Joel in Acts 2, it seems best to understand Joel’s prophecy as having some sort of “dual fulfillment”: an initial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost; an ultimate fulfillment before the second coming of Christ. The “dual fulfillment” view has the advantage of preserving the original integrity of the prophet’s message, while at the same time recognizing that some prophecies may be Divinely intended to include more than one fulfillment throughout salvation history. In light of this very real possibility, we should humbly acknowledge that Matthew’s use of Isaiah and Peter’s use of Joel confront us with complex interpretive issues. It is partly for this reason that very capable scholars reach different conclusions about the meaning of these passages. After careful consideration I was inclined toward the “dual fulfillment” position; however, I recognize

that others will want to adopt some other perspective.

14. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, 1024.

15. In this section I have relied heavily on the analysis given in J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1971), 192-97.

16. I have chosen to examine some of the more difficult "contradictions." But it's important to point out that some of the alleged difficulties are quite easily dealt with. For instance, Luke records that shepherds visited the baby Jesus in response to an angelic announcement (Luke 2:8-20). Matthew, however, tells not of shepherds but of magi, who responded not to an angelic announcement, but to an astronomical observation (Matt. 2:1-12). But surely there's no contradiction here. After all, it's entirely possible that both the shepherds and the magi visited Jesus! Doubtless the accounts are selective and have not recorded every detail, but this does not mean they are contradictory.

17. Matt. 2:1; Luke 2:1-7.

18. Matt. 2:19-23.

19. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 193.

20. Ibid.

21. Matt. 2:22-23.

22. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 196, explains: "The visit of the magi could hardly have taken place during this forty-day interval; for it would have been impossible to take the child into the Temple when the wrath of the king was so aroused…Evidently, therefore, the flight into Egypt took place immediately after the magi had come; no visit to the Temple could have intervened. If, therefore, the two narratives are to be harmonized, we must suppose that when the presentation in the Temple had been completed, Joseph and Mary returned

with the child to Bethlehem, received there the visit of the magi, and then fled into Egypt."

23. Ibid., 196-97.

24. Ibid., 197.

25. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 1-5, 26-28.

26. Peter Jennings, interview with John Dominic Crossan, "The Search for Jesus," ABC Special, June 26, 2000. More general information about this ABC special program can be found at the following URL: http://more.abcnews.go.com/onair/abcnewsspecials/pjr000626_jesus_promo.html. A conservative, evangelical response to Peter Jennings' ABC special was done by John Ankerberg, "A Response to ABC's The Search for Jesus: Part 1: Questions About His Birth," The John Ankerberg Show (videotape copy), 2001. More general information can be found at John Ankerberg's Web site at: www.ankerberg.com.

27. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 26-27.

28. Norman L. Geisler, "Virgin Birth of Christ," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 763.

29. Craig Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 39-40.

30. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 338.

31. This might be referred to as midrash, or midrash pesher, which "is an imaginative interpretation or expansion based on some OT text." B. Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 60.

32. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 287.

33. Witherington, “Birth of Jesus,” 64. See also Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 297.

34. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 288. See also, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 17.

35. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 286-87.

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