

# THE DA VINCI CODE

## ON TRIAL

FILTERING FACT FROM FICTION

STEPHEN CLARK

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**Stephen Clark**

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To Nina Beth, who let me finish it before she arrived.

May you come to know the real Jesus!

## Introduction

In a recent survey of ‘cool people’ J.K. Rowling was voted the world’s coolest author, with Dan Brown coming close behind her for his novel *The Da Vinci Code*. It was, presumably, because it has all the ingredients of a Harry Potter novel that *The New York Times* commented, ‘Not since the advent of Harry Potter has an author so flagrantly delighted in leading readers on a breathless chase.’

While there are undoubtedly similarities between Harry Potter and *The Da Vinci Code*, it would not be unfair to say that there is much more to Dan Brown’s blockbuster best-seller than anything offered us thus far by Ms Rowling. Whereas the creator of Harry Potter has been at pains to stress that her works are purely fictional and will not be the pathway by which unsuspecting children will be led into the occult, Dan Brown wants us to know that fact is interwoven with fiction in his book. Thus before the novel begins we are told, amongst other things, the following, on a page headed ‘Fact’: ‘the Priory of Sion — a European secret society founded in 1099 — is a real organization... All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.’ Since one of the secret rituals described is of an explicitly sexual nature, if this is like Harry Potter, it is very much Harry Potter for adults!

Fact may be stranger than fiction but fact mixed with fiction is stranger still, especially when you do not know which is which. And that is why this *New York Times* Number One Best Seller holds a particular fascination for some. I refer not to the tantalising sense of mystery which keeps you guessing throughout the book and wanting to read on, nor to the consummate skill displayed by the author in drawing the different characters and sub-plots into the main storyline. These factors are what make the book such a rattling good read and what account for its success. The particular fascination — dare I say, fatal attraction? — of the book for many lies in the way that it seems to undermine the integrity of the New Testament documents and their testimony to Jesus Christ by the claim that the real Jesus married Mary Magdalene, had a child by her, and left to Mary the task of continuing the real message of Jesus.

What is new in all this is not the attempt to discredit the New Testament nor the claim that Jesus married Mary and had a child by her: as we shall see, anyone with a modicum of knowledge of certain popular works that have come out over the last twenty years will have a sense of *déjà vu* on reading parts of *The Da Vinci Code*. What is new is the blending of these allegedly factual claims into a novel that has been hugely successful, and the impression that is conveyed that they are based on solid evidence which is recognised by accomplished scholars. The result will almost certainly be that many will assume that there is a compelling case against Christianity according to the New Testament. (Note: the ‘New Testament’ is that part of the Bible which deals with the events of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the spread of Christianity, and letters written to the early churches and to certain Christians. The ‘Old Testament’ is that part of the Bible which deals with the history of Israel and events before the coming of Jesus.)

It is the fact that a number of people known personally to me have found *The Da Vinci Code* to be convincing or persuasive, and that there are probably many others who have been influenced by it, that has led me to write this book. I have a number of aims. First, I shall seek to separate fact from fiction and demonstrate that many of the so-called ‘facts’ which, it is claimed, would undermine the integrity of the New Testament, are not facts at all. Indeed, some of them are demonstrable inaccuracies. This is an essentially negative aim: to clear away those parts of *The Da Vinci Code* which might make one sceptical of New Testament Christianity. But this is only preparatory to a second, positive purpose which lies behind my book, which is this: to set out the basis for believing that the New Testament presents an accurate and authentic account of Jesus Christ and of the early church.

This positive aim is important for two reasons. First, the best way of demonstrating that something is false is by calling attention to the truth. Given that Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* is certainly not the first book — and will undoubtedly not be the last — which claims to show that New Testament Christianity is false, something more is needed than simply to expose its inaccuracies and errors. What is needed is a presentation of the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament; for it is essential to grasp the fact that New Testament Christianity is *not* a matter of faith against reason, or of faith against history. There are *reasons* for believing the New Testament to

## *Introduction*

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be true. I shall say more about this later in the book. This leads on to the second reason for the positive aim behind this book. I wish to put before doubters and sceptics, as well as those whose faith may have been unsettled, the case for believing the New Testament to be true. Too frequently have those who have no Christian faith wrongly assumed that faith is simply a matter of upbringing, temperament, or even wishful thinking. Indeed, *The Da Vinci Code* fosters such a view. I wish to demonstrate that real Christian faith is passionate about truth. Far from encouraging or confirming a closed mind, the exact opposite is the case: real Christianity *engages* the mind and intellect, it opens up new vistas, and asserts that true faith is impossible without the mind being thus engaged.

So I shall begin with some demolition, in order to move on to construction. But before either of these can be attempted, we must first survey the terrain and the site by giving a brief overview of what Dan Brown's book is all about.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Da Vinci Code: A bird's eye view**

(Since the purpose of this chapter is to outline the plot and the characters of *The Da Vinci Code* for the benefit of those who have not read the book or seen the film, and to refresh the minds of those who have forgotten some of the details, those who are familiar with *The Da Vinci Code* may go to the next chapter.)

It will come as no surprise if *The Da Vinci Code* becomes a box office bonanza. It has all the ingredients for it to become a Hollywood blockbuster.<sup>1</sup> The two main characters, a middle-aged Harvard symbology professor called Robert Langdon and a young French cryptologist named Sophie Neveu, are drawn together after the mysterious murder in the Louvre of its elderly curator, Jacques Saunière. Langdon, who was in Paris to give a symbology lecture, is called to the crime scene by the police because they have learned that he had been due to meet Saunière earlier in the day and, we are led to believe, because the police think that he may be able to throw light on a series of baffling codes which Saunière left in his dying moments.

But nothing is as it seems. With the arrival at the crime scene of young Sophie Neveu from the police cryptology department, the story takes the first of its many intriguing twists. Sophie secretly informs Langdon that the officer in charge of the investigation, Monsieur Fache, believes that Langdon is the murderer. To Langdon's astonishment Sophie informs him that there was something else which Saunière wrote before he died, which Fache has kept from Langdon: 'P.S. Find Robert Langdon'. But why should a cryptologist working for the police inform the prime suspect that Fache is intending to arrest him? Here is another of the fascinating twists which make the book compulsive reading.

Saunière, we learn, was Sophie's grandfather. They have been estranged for ten years, ever since Sophie witnessed her grandfather's involvement in a ritual which so sickened her that she severed all links with him. Sophie is convinced that the dying man, knowing that his granddaughter worked in the police cryptology department and would therefore get to see a photo of the crime scene, intended his series of coded messages specifically for her.

Saunière had been fascinated with codes and had often played code games with Sophie when she had been a child. For some reason he had been desperate to communicate to her before he died that *she* must find Robert Langdon. Indeed, since the elderly curator had referred to her when a child as ‘Princess Sophie’, even the letters P.S. are a code for her name.

Thus begins a breathless helter-skelter of an adventure, with Sophie and Langdon piecing together the meaning of Saunière’s coded message, finding a hidden key with a Paris address written on it, and escaping from the crime scene and the police to make their way to the mysterious address. It turns out to be a Swiss bank, but not *any* Swiss bank: this is the ultimate in the secrecy and security for which Swiss banks are rightly famed. It is here that Saunière deposited a secret of such enormous importance that he had gone to such lengths in his dying moments to ensure that only his granddaughter, together with Robert Langdon, would be able to lay her hands on it. And it is imperative that she do so: for just before he had been shot in the stomach by a strange, tall albino, Saunière had learned from his killer that the three others who alone shared this secret — the *sénéchaux* — had all been murdered earlier in the evening. Others — *they* — had somehow penetrated the mysterious brotherhood to which Saunière belonged and were now within dangerous reach of the secret which the *sénéchaux* had so closely guarded. If Saunière, the sole remaining guardian of the secret, did not pass it on to the one person worthy to possess it, it would be lost forever. But he must pass it on in such a way that *they* will not be able to get their hands on it. So, in the five minutes which he knew he had left, the five minutes it would take for his life to ebb away, Saunière had mustered all his dying strength to pass on a message which, he knew, only Sophie would decipher. But she would need Robert Langdon to help her make sense of it all.

But *they* too are after the secret. Who are they? Enter another group of characters, who belong to the strange world of *Opus Dei*. As those who have only first-year Latin will know, this translates as ‘work of God’ or ‘God’s work’. Those who know a little bit about the Roman Catholic Church will recognise it as the name of an organization to which certain Roman Catholics belong. And to it Silas, the big albino gunman, belongs. Indeed, it was through his links with Bishop Aringarosa, a high-ranking member of *Opus Dei*, that meaning and purpose had come into Silas’s life many years earlier.

He had been a fugitive, after the prison in Andorra where he had been incarcerated had been shaken by an earthquake. Hungry, lonely, and bewildered, he had lain down to die, when Aringarosa, then a priest in Spain, had taken him in to care for him. It was while the fugitive albino was being cared for by the kindly priest that thieves would have killed Aringarosa but for the intervention of the priest's erstwhile prisoner. Thus a mutual bond was forged between the two of them, and Silas — for so Aringarosa named him, after the Silas in the biblical account of Paul and his companion Silas being set free from jail by an earthquake — felt himself to be reborn and gladly dedicated himself to God's work: *opus Dei*.

But the world of *Opus Dei* is a murky world. Its members, we are told, practise 'corporal mortification'. Silas wears a *cilice*: this is a belt around the thigh which has barbs on it. Tighten the strap and the barbs cut more deeply into the flesh. *Pain is good*, Silas thinks. And so is discipline. But 'the discipline' for members of *Opus Dei* is not early rising and an ice-cold shower, but the whipping, the flagellating of oneself. If Silas's gun spilt a lot of *sénéchaux* blood in one night, what with his *cilice* and 'the discipline' he also shed quite a lot of his own that same night.

But all in vain. The *sénéchaux* had vowed that should the unthinkable ever happen and their ranks somehow be penetrated, they would *not* disclose their secret but would tell another secret instead: one which would be guaranteed to put any interloper or intruder on the wrong scent. Not that in their worst nightmares did they ever conceive that the identities of all four of them would ever become known to outsiders. But that is one of the mysteries running through *The Da Vinci Code*: somehow Silas knows who they all are. Since, looking down the barrel of his gun, they have all told him the same secret, the *sénéchaux*, Silas triumphantly concludes, have failed in their courage and told him the true secret. Unfortunately, he then has had to kill them all the same. But it *is* God's work and must be done. But to kill in God's name? Well, that's why a bit of corporal mortification, a tightening of the *cilice* and some self-flagellation, are necessary. *Pain is good*.

Sophie and Langdon get the secret from the Swiss bank, only to discover that the secret is itself a secret, another code which has to be cracked. But this is a very special code: it is a *cryptex*. The word had possibly been invented by Saunière and is a combination of *cryptology* and *codex*. Cryptology is the study

of codes and a codex is a scroll. The cryptex consists of a cylinder with five disks, each disk having the letters of the entire alphabet. Inside the cylinder will be a scroll and on the scroll will be written a secret message. But one will only be able to open the cylinder and gain access to the scroll if one knows the right combination of letters on the five disks. A bit like a combination lock. To break the cylinder will destroy the secret forever: for inside the cylinder is a glass tube of vinegar, around the outside of which is rolled the scroll. Break the cylinder and the glass tube will break, causing the vinegar to run onto the scroll, thus deleting the writing. Like much in this book it is indeed ingenious. But not, we are told through the words of Sophie Neveu, original: Sophie had been told by her grandfather that the blueprint for such a thing is found in one of Leonardo Da Vinci's secret diaries. And at this point you think that you have the reason for the book's title, *The Da Vinci Code*.

What is the secret that Jacques Saunière so desperately wanted to convey to Sophie and why must she involve Robert Langdon? It is the answer to this question which appears to undermine the Christian message as found in the New Testament. But before all the beans on this are spilled, we must meet another character to whom Dan Brown introduces us in his book: Sir Leigh Teabing. Teabing is a wealthy and eccentric English aristocrat who has a castle on the outskirts of Paris. He is a renowned historian, having written a history of the British royal family. He is also an authority on religious history and an expert on the arcane world of 'the Holy Grail' and its links with The Priory of Sion. (Remember that at the beginning of the book we are told that it is a fact that this organisation has existed since 1099 and that parchments discovered in 1975 in Paris's *Bibliothèque Nationale* identified certain famous people, including Leonardo, Botticelli, and Sir Isaac Newton, as members of this society.) Langdon had met him in a professional capacity some years earlier. Now, together with Sophie Neveu, a fugitive from justice, Langdon makes for Teabing's castle in the hope of finding a safe haven from the police. The fact that he and Sophie have the cryptex and that Sophie is Saunière's granddaughter will be more than enough to persuade Teabing to give them refuge: for Teabing has been desperate to crack the secret of The Priory of Sion, which is the whereabouts of the Holy Grail.

Sophie's grandfather, it becomes clear, had been the Grand Master of The Priory of Sion. The Priory was founded in 1099 by a French king, Godefroi

de Bouillon, because he feared that a secret which he possessed — a secret which had been in his family since the time of Christ — would be lost when he died. The purpose of The Priory was to guard this secret. During their years in Jerusalem The Priory learned that there were documents hidden beneath the ruins of Herod's temple which, they believed, would corroborate Godefroi's secret. This secret was of such a nature that the Church would stop at nothing to get these documents. In order to retrieve the documents The Priory set up a military wing, known to history as The Knights Templar. Making out that they were in Jerusalem to protect Christian pilgrims, they had, in fact, dug for some years around the ruins of the temple and had eventually unearthed a number of very heavy chests. Shortly afterwards they became fantastically wealthy and were given the liberty by the pope to be virtually a law unto themselves. Then in the fourteenth century one of the popes secretly arranged for them all to be murdered on the same day on trumped-up charges. The pope's object had been to get his hands on the chest of documents and on the secret which was also housed with the documents. But the Knights had already handed these over to The Priory which, to the present, continues to guard the secret and knows the whereabouts of the chests. Secret? Well, not altogether: for Dan Brown's book tells us what was in the chests and what it was that made the Knights Templar so rich, made one pope grant them great liberties, and led another pope to have them killed. What is not known, and what different people in *The Da Vinci Code* are trying to discover, is the whereabouts of these chests.

What is this great secret? It is all unfolded to Sophie Neveu in a twenty-four-hour period (which is the period during which the bulk of the book takes place). Bits are told to her by Robert Langdon, then more is told at Sir Leigh Teabing's castle, both by Langdon, by Teabing, and by the two of them together. It is really this. A massive 'cover-up' has been perpetrated by 'the Church' for the best part of two thousand years. The message that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is really the fabrication of a group of people who were not faithful to the message of the real Jesus. The real Jesus was a royal descendant of King David and married Mary Magdalene, who was of the tribe of Benjamin and also of royal descent. (King Saul, who had been David's predecessor as King of Israel, was descended from the tribe of Benjamin.) Mary bore Jesus a child who, coming from the line of two royal families, was clearly 'royal blood'. Jesus' message accorded a high place to

women and it was to Mary that He entrusted the task of carrying on His teaching. His teaching was in line with the idea, very prominent in the ancient world but stamped out by ‘the Church’, of ‘the sacred feminine’. Disciples such as Simon Peter were jealous of Mary. At the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, His uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, helped Mary and her child to escape to France. There she was held in very high esteem by the Jewish community, given that she was the mother of the rightful heir to the Jewish throne. The Merovingian dynasty of French kings traced their line of descent from Mary’s child. This, in fact, is what the words ‘holy grail’ actually mean. In French, holy grail is *saint gréal*, but this is actually a corruption of the words, *sang réal* or ‘royal blood’. The Holy Grail is not, therefore, a cup but the ‘royal blood line’ of Jesus Christ.

The simple message of Jesus was ‘lost’ when the Roman Emperor Constantine was ‘converted’ to Christianity in the fourth century. Constantine never really embraced the teaching of Jesus but, in view of the numbers throughout the empire who were followers of Jesus, Constantine realised that it would be politically advantageous to identify himself with the Christian message. However, he then set about to suppress this message, with the high value which it placed upon women and on ‘the sacred feminine’. Since history is written by the winners, Constantine and ‘the Church’, which was very much male-dominated, suppressed and destroyed the documents which contained the true message of Jesus and rewrote the Gospels in the New Testament in order to shoot their own line. Thus, the true message of Jesus was lost. In its place the ecclesiastical power-brokers placed a divine Son of God, a teaching which was simply the result of there being more ‘votes’ from more powerful people at the Council of Nicea than there were for the true message of Jesus. Just as a portrait may be painted over so that the original painting is utterly distorted, so ‘the Church’ has added its own ideas to the teaching of Jesus. What we are left with is something very different from the true life and teaching of Jesus. However, the true message was passed on secretly and it was in order to safeguard this secret that Godefroi de Bouillon — a king in ‘the blood line’ of Jesus and Mary — founded the secret society, The Priory of Sion.

It is left to Sir Leigh Teabing to inform the utterly astonished Sophie Neveu that these things are no longer a secret known only by a select few. In the

1940s very ancient documents were found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, many of them being Gospels, Gospels which tell a very different story from that which the four Gospels of the New Testament tell. Teabing shows Sophie a large atlas-like book, entitled *The Gnostic Gospels*, which consists of photocopies of these documents together with an English translation. Taking her to *The Gospel of Philip* ('always a good place to start', he tells her), he shows her a passage which speaks of Jesus kissing Mary often on the mouth, loving her more than the others, and of Mary being His 'companion', which, Teabing assures her, any Aramaic scholar knows is another word for 'wife'. Though all of this comes as something of a revelation to Sophie — indeed, it is presented as something of a 'moment of truth' with sexual undertones — she is assured that all of this has been well known for some time by numerous scholars and reputable historians.

But there is more to come. This secret of 'the sacred feminine' and of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene has been preserved in various works of art. Teabing has a large copy of Leonardo's *The Last Supper* and points out to Sophie that it is *Mary Magdalene* who is sat next to Jesus, while other disciples, especially Peter, look menacingly at her. This is the *double entendre* of the book's title, *The Da Vinci Code*.

This is why the church gave Mary Magdalene a bad name, making her out to be a whore: she had to be discredited so that male dominance could be preserved. And this is why *Opus Dei*, a reactionary, chauvinist group, is desperate to get its hands on the cryptex: for the cryptex will reveal not only where the documents are held but also — and this is the secret which was hidden with the documents — the resting place of the bones of Mary Magdalene. They, of course, wish to destroy the secret for ever. Sir Leigh Teabing wishes to discover the secret location so that he can publish it to the world. His concern is that The Priory of Sion will forever keep this secret amongst its *sénéchaux*. On learning from Sophie and Langdon that *all* the *sénéchaux* have been murdered, he realises that he, Langdon and Sophie are the only people in the world who have the key to discovering the whereabouts of the great secret.

The story takes another extraordinary twist when Silas discovers that he has been duped. For his murderous 'work of God' on this night, he has contact only with a mysterious person called 'the Teacher'. The Teacher is able to

inform him by phone that all is not lost because Langdon and Sophie are at Sir Leigh Teabing's castle. How the Teacher knows this is part of the mystery which keeps us guessing. Silas is directed there, breaks in and holds Teabing, Sophie, and Langdon at gunpoint, only to be overpowered and taken prisoner by Teabing. Teabing and Langdon are able to work out that it is to England that they must go to find the secret, and so they make off to a private airfield, only moments before the police, who had been able to track Sophie and Langdon, arrive at the castle. The pace and excitement at this stage are breathtaking.

Sophie, Teabing, and Langdon make off for London, together with Teabing's servant Rémy Legaludec, with Silas trussed up as their prisoner. They are able to work out the combination to the cryptex, only to discover that another one is contained inside it. This is a cryptex which will not give up its secret easily! After a number of other 'narrow escapes' Sophie, Langdon, and Teabing arrive at the famous Temple Church in London, founded by the Knights Templar, where, they believe, they will find what they are seeking. At this point, there is yet another twist. It appears that Legaludec is, in fact, working against Teabing and, while waiting for the trio to emerge from the Temple Church, releases Silas, explains that he knows who 'the Teacher' is and then enters the church with Silas and, at gunpoint, obtains the cryptex from Langdon, and then leaves with Silas, taking Teabing as prisoner.

It turns out that there are yet more twists to this extraordinary tale. It transpires that Teabing is, in fact, 'the Teacher'. Space will not allow me fully to unravel all of the remarkable twists that take place at this point in the book. Suffice it to say that Teabing liquidates Legaludec, Silas dies after mistakenly shooting Bishop Aringarosa, and Sophie and Langdon eventually make it to Westminster Abbey, which is where the real 'secret' will be revealed. Teabing has got there before them and they now learn of his duplicity. Langdon, however, outwits him, Teabing is arrested, and the book is fast moving to its climax at Rosslyn Chapel, near Edinburgh, an edifice built by the Knights Templar.

The secret message has led Sophie and Langdon to this location. But Sophie remembers having been taken there when a child by her grandfather. She also remembers him leaving her there for a little while, when he went to the chapel house to speak with someone, and coming back to her, somewhat upset at

having to say goodbye to someone. The ‘guide’ to the chapel has a box similar to the one in which the cryptex had been placed and he explains to Sophie and Langdon that he had been given it by his grandmother, with whom he lives alone in the chapel house. Sophie runs to the house and sees an elderly lady weeping, who, on seeing Sophie, calls her by name and expresses thankfulness that *her granddaughter* is safe.

Sophie and her brother were in the ‘royal blood line’ of Jesus and Mary and, when their parents had been mysteriously killed in a road accident, the grandparents made out that the two children had also been with their parents. Then, for their safety, the grandmother moved to Scotland with the boy, and Jacques Saunière brought up Sophie in Paris. This was the secret that Saunière had wanted to convey to Sophie all along: to tell her about her family. And that is why he had called her *Princess Sophie*.

But why did he want her to find Robert Langdon? Because of Langdon’s vast knowledge of symbology and certain pagan rituals. What had sickened Sophie years earlier and had led her to sever links with her grandfather was her having stumbled into, unbeknown to Saunière or anyone else, a secret ritual in which he had been involved. In front of androgynously masked, chanting men and women, he and a woman were involved in sexual intercourse. Sickened by the sight, Sophie had written to let him know what she had seen and told him that she never wanted contact with him again. Langdon is able to explain to her that this was *not* a sex ritual but was the enacting of a very ancient practice called *hieros gamos* or ‘sacred marriage’. It is a way in which, in the ultimate blending and joining of the male and female principles, union with the divine is achieved.

Langdon leaves Sophie to catch up with her grandmother, but before the night is over the inevitable has happened and, yes, you guessed it, the romance that has been bubbling away beneath the surface since their first meeting breaks through, there is a tender kiss, and a date arranged for them to meet up in Florence.

What of the secret documents and the bones of Mary Magdalene? Sophie’s grandmother knows enough to tell them that they are not at Rosslyn. The book ends with Langdon, back in Paris, suddenly seized with an idea. He rushes to the Louvre and looks carefully at the glass pyramid structure built

during President Mitterrand's time. The male and female symbols are there and it seems to match one of the coded messages. Langdon is overcome with a sense of reverence and falls to his knees. We, the readers, are left wondering and can only await the next novel to come from Mr Brown's pen to discover how things will work out with Sophie and Langdon, and if there will be yet more secret revelations which will 'overthrow' Christianity according to the Bible.

## Notes

- 1 The film is scheduled to be released on 19 May, with Tom Hanks in the lead role.

## **Chapter 2**

### **How to write a best-seller**

Dan Brown is evidently an extremely gifted writer: he knows how to create believable characters, maintain suspense, and hold interest all the way through. He is also a master of intrigue and knows how to create certain expectations in his readers, only to subvert them by inserting into his tale a new twist. *The Da Vinci Code* maintains narrative thrust right to the very end. It is no ordinary novel.

#### **The medium is the message**

Good novelists know how to employ literary devices and stylistic techniques to achieve effect. This is what makes for good writing. What puts Dan Brown's book into a somewhat different category from that of other best-selling novels is the fact that he employs these devices and techniques in such a way as to render his readers more susceptible than they otherwise might be to believe the claim that the New Testament portrait of Christ is a cover-up perpetrated by 'the Church'. This effect is achieved in a number of ways. Take the main characters. Who would willingly identify with Silas? There is something decidedly weird about him: he believes that he is justified in murdering people in the service of God. Any evil that attaches to his actions can be compensated for by the tightening of the *cilice* and by whipping himself afterwards. How on earth has he become like this? Well, he was clearly something of an inadequate person to begin with, but then, through Aringarosa's influence, he believed himself to be 'reborn' and found a purpose and meaning to his life.

A not so subtle message is being conveyed by this characterisation and it is this: people who believe themselves to be born again are likely to come from the ranks of the dispossessed, the marginalised, the inadequate and vulnerable, and then to become extreme, fanatical and dangerous. In our post 9/11 world it is not hard to see similarities between Silas and Islamic extremists. It is then an easy step from this to the belief that anyone who believes in 'new birth' and who believes Jesus to be the Son of God is, if not exactly given to the extremes of religious terrorists and their ilk, not exactly the sort of person that

you would want your daughter or sister to marry or to have as your next-door neighbour.

The contrast with Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu could hardly be more complete. Langdon is the cool-headed, rational professor from an Ivy League institution, and he has long since exploded many of the ‘myths’ of Christianity. He is quick-thinking and resourceful, as is the smart and attractive Sophie Neveu. And when she hears Langdon’s exposé of the ‘bogus claims’ of Christianity, well, though she is quite staggered by the revelations, a smart young woman like her has no difficulty in integrating this new information into her world view. Who would you rather be? Who would you rather have as a friend? Silas or Langdon? Silas or Sophie? The answer is obvious. Dan Brown is already well on the way to making his readers sceptical, if not hostile, to New Testament Christianity.

And then there is Bishop Aringarosa. He is the stern reactionary, the conservative who wishes to hold back the currents of enlightenment. If he ever does come into the modern world, he will have to be dragged, kicking and screaming. He is the archetypal clerical misogynist. So there in the blue corner are Silas and Aringarosa, representing ignorance, superstition and bigotry, while in the red corner are Sophie and Langdon, all sweet reasonableness and light. Sir Leigh Teabing is, admittedly, a bit odd and quite nasty to boot. Does he fit in any corner? Not really, but then, there are plenty of eccentrics who, pursuing their obsession, become a touch unhinged. Plenty of oddballs have been able to exploit power-hungry and greedy ecclesiastics who were too foolish to realise that they were being outsmarted. In any event, he gets his come-uppance from Langdon.

### **Image, not substance**

Now novels would be very dull and dreary affairs if their authors did not bring their characters to life in the way that Dan Brown does. But we need to realise that the belief that he may well be right in what he says about a Christian ‘cover-up’ of the truth is created *not* by adducing solid evidence but, rather, by creating a certain image and impression. When the facts and the evidence are carefully examined, it will be seen that it is what Langdon and Teabing believe that really represents a refusal to be open to the truth and that is wilfully obscurantist. The faith that takes the New Testament seriously

is not the blind prejudice and wishful thinking of those for whom truth is otherwise too painful to bear: rather, it is the very fact that the New Testament itself is an authentic record of the most important truth of all that is the basis of genuine Christian faith.

In the next chapter I shall set out the essence of that faith: what the New Testament says about Jesus and why He is of such importance and relevance. The stakes could not be higher: if Dan Brown is right in what he says about Jesus and the New Testament, then the sooner that Christianity is banished from the earth, the better for us all. But if he is wrong...

## **Chapter 3**

### **Who is the real Jesus?**

Whatever one's personal religious beliefs or lack of them, no one can deny that the figure of Jesus Christ has had enormous influence in the world. Some regard Him as the greatest, or one of the greatest, religious and moral teachers of all time, while others view Him as a social revolutionary. To some He is a great inspiration, but to others He remains an enigma. To millions throughout history and throughout the world today, He is none other than the Son of God, who came into this world as a real man, died a very special kind of death, rose from the dead, and is the Saviour who gives purpose to life, pardon from guilt, and who will one day return in great glory. Who is right? Will the real Jesus please stand up?

#### **A vital question**

How do we go about finding the answer to this question? And does it matter anyway? Let me begin with the second question. If someone were suddenly to discover that the world had got it wrong about, let us say, Julius Caesar, not many people's lives would be affected. No doubt classical scholars would be fascinated and a number of academic reputations would be ruined or enhanced. But the world would still go on. While the average person might notice a news item about it, paying the mortgage, getting on with life and making the most of it would still be the main thing. What, after all, has Julius Caesar got to do with us today?

If Jesus is just another great figure of history, then what people say about Him is of about as little consequence as what may be said about Julius Caesar. But if He is who the New Testament says He is, then the situation is very different indeed: for then we are not simply studying the life of another man — however remarkable He may have been — who lived and died and whose corpse was left to rot through the centuries; rather, we have to do with the most important person there has ever been or ever will be. Why? Because the New Testament clearly teaches that Jesus, while a real man in every sense of the word, was a unique man. Indeed, it teaches that He was more than a man.

## **No skeletons in this cupboard**

In what ways was He unique? To begin with, there was the sheer authenticity of His life. His private life did not call into question His public profile or His public pronouncements. How refreshing to find someone who set standards which He kept! His standards are such that if everyone were to live by them, this world would be a veritable Paradise. There would be no wars, no racism, no injustice, no unhappy marriages, no family breakdowns, no fractured friendships, no greed, and no discontent. Love for others would abound and the world would be an extraordinarily happy place. The problem is that although His standards are so wonderful, they are impossibly hard to keep. *He* kept them: His freedom from hypocrisy and doublespeak was one of the things which left the religious power-brokers of His day feeling extremely vulnerable and exposed by Him. The authentic quality of His life and the reality of His teaching exposed the moral shabbiness of the religious and political leaders of His day. It still exposes hypocrisy and moral failure, but not only the hypocrisy of political and religious leaders. Have we not all, at some point, failed to keep our own standards? And since the standards of Jesus are so wonderful that if adhered to the world would be a very different place, why do we find it so difficult to live the kind of life He commended? The answer must surely be that moral shabbiness is a bigger problem in our lives than we have perhaps hitherto realised. If we are really to grasp the significance of what the New Testament says about Jesus, then we need to stay for a few moments and probe just what this moral shabbiness really is.

## **The human volcano**

The story is told of a schoolgirl who wrote the following in a history essay: ‘Armistice was signed on November 11 1918, and since then we have had two minutes of peace once a year.’<sup>1</sup> The sentence might have led to a wry smile on the face of her teacher, but the fact of the matter is that it is far too near the truth to be funny. Genocide, ethnic cleansing, rapacious greed: these things are the staple diet of our news bulletins. Of course, the problem is always ‘other people out there’. But is that really so? Fay Weldon, in a short story entitled *Inspector Remorse*, has a character who is suppressing a sense of guilt for a suicide which resulted from an affair which she had had with the dead woman’s husband. She poses herself two questions, questions which expose

the hollowness of the belief that the problem is always with ‘others’ who are ‘out there’:

*Everyone I meet believes they’re good, does the best he or she can in the circumstances. But if everyone’s good why is the world in such a state? And why should I not suffer from the same common delusion, that of my own goodness?<sup>2</sup>*

Human beings can be compared to a volcano: all may be quiet and appear peaceable, but deep down there is the potential for moral devastation. Something is wrong within us. While not for one moment denying that environmental and social factors may influence us for good or ill, Jesus is emphatic that the root of the ‘human problem’ lies within our own hearts.<sup>3</sup> It is why the problem of evil in the world is both age-old and contemporary. It is also the reason why we cannot deal with it ourselves.

The problem, however, is much worse than we might think. A man has a ‘fling’ with his secretary. He may, like film star Hugh Grant, have ‘a moment of madness’ with a prostitute, or, like the former French soccer star Eric Cantona, ‘lose it’ with a member of the crowd and ‘let fly’. They may each wish to walk away from what they have done and forget about it. The problem is that there are consequences. So Hugh Grant’s girlfriend was hardly enamoured with him when the newspapers published the story. Their relationship ended. Many a marriage has split on the rocks of that ‘one-night stand’.

## **‘Relational justice’**

Curiously, we accept that our actions affect our relationships with other people, but we may hardly give a thought to the fact that what we say, do, and are may have consequences for our relationship with God. For some, the idea of a ‘relationship with God’ may seem bizarre. Believe that He exists, maybe. Sit on hard pews to hear long, monotonous sermons — perhaps that’s got something to do with God. But a relationship? It’s a bit like a person who has been born deaf and has only ever known people who are deaf. Not surprisingly, he or she may assume that this is normal. And it is because our evil has broken our relationship with God and we are all in the same boat that we may not realise that anything is *seriously* wrong with our lives. We may,

from time to time, experience moments of what can only be termed ‘transcendence’. It may be a beautiful sunrise or sunset. It may be the overwhelming sense of wonder when a baby is born, or the hearing of a piece of music which we regard as being utterly sublime. In such a moment we may become profoundly aware of the fact that there is another dimension. But the moment quickly fades and, like the children returning from Narnia, we re-enter our everyday world.

There *is* a transcendent realm and we are meant to enjoy a relationship with a transcendent God. The problem is that our evil has severed that relationship. God has ‘put eternity in our hearts’.<sup>4</sup> We can experience something of what Wordsworth called ‘intimations of immortality’. But we cannot, because of our evil, penetrate the veil which separates us from a relationship with God. And it is not just that there is a problem on our side. The personal God of whom the Bible speaks is utterly fair and just. (This is not to deny that there are injustices in the world. To deal adequately with the ‘problem’ of injustice in a world made by a just God would take us way beyond the subject of this book. Suffice it to say that *part* of the problem lies in the problem of *our* evil.) This being so, God can no more ignore the problem of the evil in our hearts and our ‘guilt’ before Him (not a ‘guilt complex’, which may be utterly unrelated to real guilt), than a judge could ignore the guilt of someone very precious to him who is convicted of a crime.

### **Samuel Beckett and waiting for God**

This is why the message of the New Testament is so relevant and so inexpressibly wonderful. Its message is ‘good news’ (which is what the word translated as ‘gospel’ means). This good news centres upon Jesus: upon who He is and what He did. The good news is concerned with the identity of this unique person, Jesus of Nazareth. In Samuel Beckett’s famous play *Waiting for Godot*, two characters await the appearance of the mysterious Mr Godot. Will he appear or won’t he? Many people raise questions such as, Why doesn’t God ‘appear’? If there is a God, why does He not make Himself known? The New Testament answer is that He already has: Jesus is God and man. At one specific period in history and at one specific place on earth, God entered into this world in a form that was accessible to ordinary men and women. When Jesus said, ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’,<sup>5</sup> He was

claiming to be the unique revelation of God. When He likened the relationship of His disciples to Himself with that of the Old Testament prophets to God, He was implicitly identifying Himself with God in such a way as to be indirectly claiming to be God.<sup>6</sup> When He forgave people their sins,<sup>7</sup> claimed to be the ‘good shepherd’,<sup>8</sup> to have lived before Abraham and to have been eternal,<sup>9</sup> and to have shared God’s glory,<sup>10</sup> He was claiming to be none other than God. In countless places the New Testament, in one way or another, tells us that Jesus *is* God.<sup>11</sup>

It is this which makes His claims to be so different from those of other leaders and teachers. Here is one who claims to lead us to the meaning of life itself. Here is one who claims to be the way, the truth, and the life,<sup>12</sup> and to be able to give us the kind of life for which we were made and for which many, perhaps wistfully and confusedly, are searching.<sup>13</sup> The implications of such a claim can hardly be exaggerated. In our contemporary context, it sounds the death knell for the ‘hard’ pluralism which is so prevalent. By ‘hard’ pluralism I mean that view of truth which says that all views are equally valid and that I have my truth and you have your truth. If Jesus is who the New Testament says that He is, then clearly ‘hard’ pluralism has got to be wrong.

### **He stooped to conquer**

The uniqueness of Jesus resides not only in His unimpeachable character and His identity as the God-man. It rests also on what He came to achieve. Strange to say, that achievement was not accomplished in His life, but by His death. Most biographies of great men tell us something about their background and birth, the major events in their lives and the things which they achieved. Then towards the end we are told something about the last days and death of the biographer’s subject. The book will probably end with an assessment of the person’s character and lasting influence. How different are the New Testament accounts of Jesus! While some of them touch on background and birth, and then deal with His words and works, they seem to have a fascinating preoccupation with His death. This comes out in the amount of space which they devote to the last week of His life and the detail with which they describe the events leading up to His crucifixion. What is going on here?

The answer is supplied many times by Jesus *before* His death. He tells His disciples that His death will be no accident and that, though men will cruelly crucify Him, He would voluntarily lay down His life.<sup>14</sup> Why? The gospel accounts supply the answer. Both Matthew and Mark relate that on the cross Jesus cried out, in the opening words of Psalm 22, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ These words are placed in the context of a terrible darkness that came over the land. The darkness was symbolic of the judgment of God, and the experience of being forsaken by God was the reality of that judgment which Jesus experienced. For the essence of evil, of what the Bible calls ‘sin’, is to go our own way, to rebel against God’s claims upon us. With terrifying logic, the essence of God’s judgment is to grant us the very thing we have desired: separation from God. But utter, total separation from God, the consciousness that we have lost Him, finally, irrevocably, eternally is the most dreadful thing that can ever befall a human being. It is what the Bible refers to as the result of final judgment, hell itself. Jesus died to experience that terrible separation from His heavenly Father. He received the judgment and punishment of God upon human sin. Why, if He was so blameless? Because He was doing so in the place and on the behalf of others. This is the most amazing plan that has ever been conceived, far more amazing than the intricate plot of *The Da Vinci Code*. And, unlike *The Da Vinci Code*, it is true. God the Father and God the Son agreed that, by this means, our fractured relationship with God could be restored *and* God remain just and fair. For God to be other than just would not only be impossible, it would be unbearable. For God to be only just would mean that the gap between Him and us on account of our broken relationship would be unbridgeable.

### **All things new**

They say forgiveness is costly. It can be. But no forgiveness is as costly as God’s forgiveness. Costly to God, that is. And because of that, it is wonderfully free to us. As a result of what Jesus did, we can have a *new slate*: all the guilt on our record can be wiped clean. Wonderful. More than this, we can have a *new status*: not only are we forgiven, but the relationship with God is restored and we can rightly relate to Him and He to us. But there is more: we have a *new start*. It is as if we start life all over again, but now on the right basis and footing. But it is not like making New Year’s resolutions: for God gives us a *new spirit*. ‘Oh for a man to arise in me, that the man I am may

cease to be!' So wrote the poet Tennyson. But that is precisely what Jesus Christ can do for us. He puts His Holy Spirit within us to help us to live as we should. We also become part of a *new society*. *The Da Vinci Code* paints a pretty grim picture of 'the Church'. Without in any way wishing to be disrespectful, I would have to say that much that passes in the Roman Catholic Church *is* grim and is light years removed from the New Testament conception of what the church is to be. The New Testament speaks of 'the church', but it means a society of people whose lives have been put right with God through faith in Jesus Christ. It has far more to do with *relationship* than institution: relationship with God and with others who have such a relationship. Finally, there is a *new sequel*: death will not be what Dylan Thomas called, 'the dying of the light'. No: it will be the gateway into the presence of God, where the joy of experiencing 'transcendence', of being perfectly at one with our Creator and Saviour, will be ours forever.

This is what is so special about Jesus. This is why we need to respond to Him aright. Momentous issues hang upon how we respond to Him. And this is why *The Da Vinci Code* and all other books which distort the message of Jesus are so dangerous. This is the reason why I have written this book: so that you might be helped to sort out fact from fiction and respond aright to Jesus. Respond to Him? How can you respond to someone who died two thousand years ago? That is one other great thing which makes Jesus so different from great teachers and leaders of the past, whose tombs become monuments and whose memories are revered. Unlike them, Jesus did not stay in the grave. Three days later He rose from the dead. Given who He is and what He has done, this should hardly be surprising. Indeed, it would be far more surprising if His body had decomposed. But *did* He rise from the dead? It is all very well to explain what the New Testament teaches. But is it true? Can we trust the New Testament documents? Are they reliable? This will be the subject of the final chapter, but before we consider the evidence for the historical reliability of the New Testament and for the resurrection of Jesus, we need first to examine and sift through some of the claims made by Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*. This is what the next chapter is all about.

## Notes

- 1 I owe this story to Vaughan Roberts, *Turning Points* (Authentic Lifestyle, 2003), p.20.
- 2 Fay Weldon, 'Inspector Remorse' in *A Hard Time To Be A Father* (Flamingo, 1998). Quoted in Mark Meynell, *Cross Examined: The Life-Changing Power of the Death of Jesus* (IVP, Leicester), pp. 47-48.
- 3 *Mark's Gospel* 7:14-23.
- 4 *Ecclesiastes* 3:11.
- 5 *John's Gospel* 14:9.
- 6 *Matthew's Gospel* 5:11-12.
- 7 *Mark's Gospel* 2:5-7.
- 8 *John's Gospel* 10:11-18.
- 9 *John's Gospel* 8:58; 17:5.
- 10 *John's Gospel* 17:5.
- 11 e.g., *John's Gospel* 1:1; *Hebrews* 1:8-10.
- 12 *John's Gospel* 14:6.
- 13 *Matthew's Gospel* 16:25; *John's Gospel* 10:10.
- 14 e.g., *Matthew's Gospel* 16:21; 20:17-19; *John's Gospel* 10:14-18.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Fact, fiction, and *The Da Vinci Code***

#### **The devil is in the detail**

Charles Spurgeon, a well-known figure in nineteenth-century London, once told the following amusing and true story of a spiritualist medium. Her command of the English language was not all that it might be and it was this fact which led to her being exposed as a charlatan. A mischievous individual, who knew that the spiritualist's English was not very good, attended a *séance* and requested the spiritualist to 'call up' the soul of the late Charles Dickens. After a while the lady began to speak with a man's voice. The mischievous individual knew that the moment of truth had come and put the question to 'Dickens', 'Are you Charles Dickens?', to which 'the voice' replied, 'I *are*'! No further proof was needed that the whole thing was a farrago of nonsense. It was far easier to believe that the medium was making her money by impersonating the voices of the dead, than to believe that death had inflicted upon the soul of Charles Dickens a kind of grammatical amnesia! As every lawyer knows, it is the little details which often give the game away.

Dan Brown gives the game away in lots of little details. It would be tedious in the extreme to list all of the inaccuracies in his novel. However, since some of these are central to *The Da Vinci Code's* 'debunking' of New Testament Christianity, I shall seek to identify some of the more significant errors of which he is guilty and to demonstrate how these errors undermine his 'revisionist' account of Christian origins.

#### **Dan Brown and the Dead Sea Scrolls**

A good place to begin is with the claim made on page 234 by Sir Leigh Teabing:<sup>1</sup>

*Fortunately for historians... some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1950s hidden in a cave near Qumran in the Judean desert.*

These two sentences bristle with inaccuracies. To begin with, it is simply untrue to say, ‘The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1950s hidden in a cave near Qumran’. The simple fact is that the first ‘cache’ of scrolls was discovered in 1947. Over the next decade a further eleven caves were found and in one of these, Cave 4, a large number of fragments were found. Anyone with the most basic knowledge of the Scrolls knows that 1947 was a key date. To put the date of their discovery in the 1950s is akin to saying that Britain declared war on Germany in the 1940s, or that Japan bombed Pearl Harbour in the 1950s. Even a GCSE student would drop marks for such a gaffe. If a professed expert on the Second World War were to say such a thing, then one would have to conclude either that he/she were a charlatan or that some form of dementia was setting in. Since Dan Brown appears to be in full possession of his faculties, one can only conclude that he has, quite simply, not done his homework. If he is so wrong on such a basic matter as an important date, we can expect him to be wrong about other matters connected with the Dead Sea Scrolls. And this is exactly what we find. (From now on I shall refer to the Dead Sea Scrolls as DSS, which is the conventional abbreviation for them.)

The second basic error concerns the fact that whatever DSS are, they most certainly are *not* gospels. Indeed, they do not relate to Jesus at all. It is virtually the unanimous opinion of Scrolls scholars that these documents belonged to an ascetic Jewish community which existed in the desert from about 150 BC to AD 66-70.<sup>2</sup> The Scrolls are extremely important for what they tell us about this community and the light which this sheds upon certain aspects of Jewish thinking and the background to the New Testament. But they tell us nothing about Jesus or the early church. (In passing, it is worth pointing out that, contrary to what *The Da Vinci Code* claims when it says that it would have been unthinkable for a Jewish man to be unmarried, one of the Scrolls, *The Manual of Discipline*, suggests that the community it describes was celibate, though an appendix to this document and another document, entitled *The Damascus Document*, suggests that some members may have been married. In other words, rather than undermine the New Testament, as Teabing claims, DSS actually remove one of the central planks in the argument for the claim that Jesus had to be married.)

The suggestion runs through Brown’s novel that ‘the Church’ tried to conceal documents which have now come to light. Hence, Teabing’s words,

'Fortunately for historians... The Dead Sea Scrolls were found'. The idea that there has been a 'conspiracy' to keep the Scrolls from being published was popularised by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*, published in 1991. At the time of writing, Baigent and Leigh are suing Dan Brown for plagiarism of contents of their 1980s book *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail*, which they co-authored with Henry Lincoln. Interestingly, as they point out, Leigh Teabing is an anagram of Leigh and Baigent.<sup>3</sup> The real, but somewhat more prosaic, reason for the delay in their publication is given by one of the world's leading authorities on the Scrolls, Geza Vermes, who is Emeritus Professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford University. He is *not* a Christian. He has produced translations of the Scrolls, and in his *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective* he points to the real reason for the delay in their publication:

*It should be evident to anyone with a modicum of good sense that a group of seven editors was insufficient to perform such an enormous task on any level.<sup>4</sup>*

Whereas the original team consisted of seven, by 1994 there were sixty scholars involved! One of the original team was a Dr Millar Burrows, a scholar who did not espouse many of the beliefs associated with 'traditional' Christianity. Yet he had this to say of the Scrolls:

*It is my considered conclusion... that if one will go through any of the historic statements of the Christian faith he will find nothing that has been or can be disproved by the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is as true of things that I myself do not believe as it is of my most firm and cherished convictions.<sup>5</sup>*

## **Gnostics and agnostics**

We move from DSS to what Leigh Teabing says about *The Nag Hammadi* documents on pages 245-246:

*These are photocopies of the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea scrolls... The earliest Christian records. Troublingly, they do not match up with the gospels in the Bible.*

This is just plain nonsense. *The Nag Hammadi* documents consist of thirteen leather-bound papyrus books (which are known as 'codices'), discovered in a

red earthenware jar by an Arab peasant near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945.<sup>6</sup> Fifty-two texts were eventually recovered and these were published in English in 1977 and then reissued in revised form in 1988.<sup>7</sup> The earliest at which most scholars date these documents is approximately AD350. This immediately puts them later than extant copies of parts of the New Testament. The oldest surviving fragment of the New Testament which we have is a fragment of a papyrus which contains part of the Greek text of John's Gospel. This fragment, which is housed at the John Rylands University Library, Manchester, is dated at about AD 125 to 130. The Bodmer Papyrus of John's Gospel, Geneva, which has some gaps in chapters 14–21, is dated c. AD 200. The documents known as the Chester Beatty papyri, Dublin — which contain large parts of the Gospels of Luke and of Mark, somewhat less of Matthew and John, and considerable portions of the majority of Paul's letters — date from the period c. AD 200 to 250.<sup>8</sup> This being the case, it is simply not true that *The Nag Hammadi* documents are the earliest Christian records. For the same reason Teabing's claim on page 234 that the Emperor Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible is manifestly untrue. I shall say more about Constantine a little later. The important point to note at this stage is that, since Constantine's dates were c. AD 274-337, we have large parts of the Gospels which predate Constantine.

Of course the point may be made that although *The Nag Hammadi* documents come from about AD 350, they are copies of earlier documents. Indeed, given that these Coptic documents are probably translations of documents in Greek, this must be so.<sup>9</sup> It needs to be remembered, however, that the earliest extant documents of parts of the New Testament are copies of documents which were written much earlier and, as we shall see in a later chapter, earlier than *The Nag Hammadi* documents. The *Gospel of Philip*, for example, which is one of *The Nag Hammadi* documents and to which reference is made in *The Da Vinci Code* to support the claim that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, is dated to the second half of the third century AD.<sup>10</sup> Given that it can easily be demonstrated that much of the New Testament was written in the first century AD, the idea that something which was written two hundred to two hundred and fifty years after the death of Jesus is one of the 'earliest Christian records' is, quite simply, untrue. (In the next chapter I shall adduce the evidence for the claim that much of the New Testament was written in the first century AD.)

The one thing about which Teabing is correct in the quotation I have made from pages 245-246 is the fact that *The Nag Hammadi* documents ‘do not match up with the gospels in the Bible’. The question is, Why? Although there is a considerable scholarly literature on this question and although some complex issues are involved, I shall seek to distil the essence of the answer as simply and as briefly as possible. *The Nag Hammadi* documents mostly convey some form of what is known as *Gnosticism*. Gnosticism, as we shall see, was a pretty weird and not-so-wonderful belief. The word comes from the Greek word *gnōsis*, which means ‘knowledge’. (Our English word ‘agnostic’ comes from this root: the prefix ‘a’ has a negative meaning. Thus, an *agnostic* is one who ‘does not know’.) If an agnostic is someone who does not know, then the Gnostics were ‘the know-olds’ of the ancient world, for that is certainly how they viewed themselves. They had ‘arrived’ because they had special access to a certain kind of ‘truth’ which ordinary mortals and the lesser ‘plebs’ were denied. This knowledge consisted in knowing the secrets whereby, after the divine spark which was imprisoned within the body would escape at death, it would have the right ‘passwords’ to find its way past certain monstrous-type beings and the planets back to its original home. It was a kind of *Star Trek* of the soul! The Gnostics, you see, believed that this earth was a ‘mistake’, that material things (including the body) were evil, and that the ‘spirit’ had become imprisoned within the body. The Gnostics regarded themselves, therefore, as a somewhat superior breed. How different from New Testament Christianity, which regards every person as possessed of innate worth and which regards us all as equal before God! How different from the New Testament message, which has a positive view of the material world, including the body, because it has been created by God! And how different from the New Testament emphasis that salvation consists *not* in deliverance from the body but, rather, from guilt and the power of evil, and which is to be offered to all people!

Prior to 1945 our knowledge of Gnosticism was *largely* dependent upon criticisms of it made by certain early Christian leaders, the most notable of whom was a man called Irenaeus. From the description of some teachings which parts of the New Testament seek to counter, it would appear that some people were trying to twist the original Christian message into a kind of Gnosticism, an incipient or ‘proto-Gnosticism’, during the New Testament

period. The significance of *The Nag Hammadi* documents lies not so much in what they tell us about early Christianity but, rather, in the first-hand knowledge which they give us of Gnosticism. What we learn of it from *Nag Hammadi* does not contradict what we already knew from the writings of the early Christian teachers; rather, *The Nag Hammadi* documents fill out that picture. The following points seem to be fairly well established.

First, the ‘Gnostics did not hesitate to make use of the documents of the New Testament’.<sup>11</sup> The author of the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth* (a Gnostic ‘gospel’) ‘used practically the same books as constitute our present New Testament... [and] the manner in which he treats these documents proves that they had authority for him’.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the author of the *Gospel of Philip* (one of the *Nag Hammadi* documents) treats ‘the greater part of our New Testament... as authoritative’.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Gnosticism, while it differed radically from New Testament Christianity, was ‘parasitic’ upon it. It was an attempt to ‘hijack’ Christianity and make it into something quite different.

Secondly — and this follows from the first point — Christopher Tuckett, an Oxford scholar based at Pembroke College, Oxford, has offered ‘convincing evidence that where the Synoptics [that is, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke] can be paralleled in some measure by the gnostic documents from Nag Hammadi, the movement is *from* the Synoptics *to* Nag Hammadi’ (italics mine)<sup>14</sup>. This demonstrates the *priority* of the New Testament Gospels to the ‘Gnostic gospels’.

Thirdly, neither Leigh Teabing nor Robert Langdon appears to have much idea as to what these Gnostic documents really teach. Certainly the claim that they teach the idea of the ‘sacred feminine’ flies in the face of what they actually say. Take the following extract, for example, from the *Gospel of Thomas*:

*Simon Peter said to them: ‘Let Mary depart from our midst, because women are not worthy of the [true] life.’ Jesus said: ‘See, I will so draw her as to make her a man, in order that she may become a living spirit like you men. For every woman who becomes a man will enter into the kingdom of Heaven.’<sup>15</sup>*

This is hardly the ‘liberated’ view of women which Sir Leigh Teabing claims is presented in *The Nag Hammadi* documents.

## **Eighty into twenty-six won't go!**

Thus far we have seen that DSS tell us nothing about the person of Jesus, while *The Nag Hammadi* documents present Gnostic teaching, which was a parasite upon authentic New Testament Christianity. One of the reasons for what is known as the pseudonymous Gospels (that is, documents *claiming* to be gospels and written by people by whom they were not written) of *The Nag Hammadi* documents was that they were attempting a ‘hijack’ of authentic Christianity. The scenario is entirely different from that which *The Da Vinci Code* paints. This is hardly surprising because Dan Brown evidently holds to the strange theory that ‘facts’ are not necessary to ‘truth’. Why else would he have Teabing say the following to Sophie on page 231:

*More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relatively few were chosen for inclusion — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John among them.*

With all respect, this is nonsense. The evidence for documents which are called ‘gospels’ which are not in the New Testament is set out fully in the Oxford University Press publication *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Clarendon Press, 1999), which is edited by Professor Elliott of Leeds University. (This book sets out an English translation of fragments, of books, and of works which may have been lost but which are cited or quoted by various church leaders of the early centuries. While they do not contain *The Nag Hammadi* documents, they do list all the relevant works found at Nag Hammadi.) At a stretch, which includes possibly double-counting some works which are cited in ancient writers under one title but which may also be known by another title, and including some works which are not even called gospels, I can count only twenty-six. (Some of these are just fragments.) I shall say more about them a little later. The point here, however, is that *eighty* is a wildly erratic figure. This is of a piece with mistaking the date of the discovery of DSS. Readers of *The Da Vinci Code* need to realise that if Dan Brown can be so wide of the mark on matters as basic as dates and numbers, the superstructure which he erects upon his ‘data’ is going to be, to say the least, decidedly wobbly and insecure. No credence should be given to his reconstructed version of Christian origins.

### **The ‘DIY history kit’**

Another element in *The Da Vinci Code*’s history of Christian origins according to Langdon and Teabing is the claim that Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible. The claim is found on page 234:

*‘The twist is this,’ Teabing said... ‘Because Constantine upgraded Jesus’ status almost four centuries after Jesus’ death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke... 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. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.’*

This is palpable nonsense. To begin with, as we have already seen, we have extant copies of parts of gospels, Paul’s letters, Hebrews, Revelation — books which are part of our New Testament — which were in existence *before* Constantine was even born. Add to that the fact that the whole copies of the New Testament which we have (the oldest of which goes back to the fourth century) can be compared with those parts which we have from before the time of Constantine and be seen not to support what Teabing says, and it will be seen just what a preposterous claim this really is. Yet the average reader of *The Da Vinci Code* is hardly likely to know much about the history and transmission of the New Testament text and may therefore be taken in by this misinformation. One of the leading names in this area, namely that of the history of the transmission of the New Testament text, is Professor Bruce Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary. His works are full of solid scholarship yet accessible to the non-specialist. He gets no mention in *The Da Vinci Code*, while books such as *The Templar Revelation* and *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* are cited as examples of works by ‘historians’ (page 253). (I shall say more about these ‘historians’ a little later.)

Part of the ‘stock-in-trade’ of the textual scholar of the New Testament is to compare extant manuscripts of New Testament material with quotations from the New Testament by Christian teachers in the ancient world. Such ‘textual criticism’ is not a discipline confined to the New Testament, but is employed in the study of other ancient works. When one finds that passages

from later copies agree with older extant copies and agree with quotations made by Christians who were writing even earlier, it rather throws a spanner in the works of the theory of ‘the Bible according to Constantine’.

Another problem with this ‘revisionist’ approach to Christian origins is the fact that there was always agreement about the four Gospels which we have in our New Testament. And as for them presenting a Jesus who was not really human, I can only wonder if Dan Brown has read the New Testament or the ‘Gnostic gospels’. The New Testament Gospels constantly emphasise the real humanity of Jesus: He gets hungry, thirsty, tired, eats, drinks, sleeps, weeps, and, most importantly of all, dies. By contrast, the Gnostic gospels present what is known as a ‘docetic’ Christ (from the Greek verb, *dokeo* = ‘I seem’): that is, someone who only ‘seemed’ to be human but who was, in fact, not human at all. This being so, He did not really die. The evidence for this is overwhelming in some of *The Nag Hammadi* documents, and it can only be either ignorance or sheer deceit that leads Brown to have a character who is supposed to be so knowledgeable about these things talking such manifest nonsense.

### **A bit of ancient history**

The facts about Constantine are as follows. Diocletian had been emperor from AD 284 until AD 305. Under Diocletian, persecution of Christians broke out in the East and on 24 February 303 all Bibles and liturgical books were to be surrendered and all meetings for worship were forbidden. The persecution was strongest in the East. The destruction of Christian books, therefore, predates the time of Constantine, and had nothing to do with a ‘cover-up’ of the truth. This is the background which it is necessary to understand if we are to place Constantine’s subsequent actions into their proper historical context. Professor Henry Chadwick, an authority on this period of history, puts Constantine’s actions into that proper context:

*Constantine’s benefactions to the Church were on a large scale. The ravages of persecution he made good by financing new copies of the Bible and by building churches...<sup>16</sup>*

The idea that Constantine was attempting a rewrite of the Bible and the creation of a ‘canon’ of books which would suit his own purposes is belied by

facts such as the following: men writing towards the end of the first and the beginning of the second century AD show knowledge of many of the New Testament books; Polycarp, writing in the second century, refers to a New Testament letter as ‘Scripture’; and *Clement’s Second Letter to the Corinthians* (c. AD 150 or a decade before) refers to the apostles as being on a par with the Old Testament, and quotes a saying which is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke as ‘another Scripture also says’.<sup>17</sup>

Teabing is even more off the mark when he says that it was the Council of Nicea which ‘voted’ Jesus to be the Son of God and that hitherto He had been regarded as a mortal prophet (page 233). I shall demonstrate in an appendix to the next chapter that the title ‘Son of God’ is one which goes right back to Jesus; that it is used of Him very early indeed in New Testament documents; that the title has roots which go right back to the early history of the nation of Israel under Moses, and that this title acquired particular significance after David became king. The claim that until the Council of Nicea,

*Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal (page 233)*

has to be one of the most misleading statements in the entire book. I shall elaborate and explain why.

The New Testament, as I have already indicated, presents Jesus as a real man in every sense of that word, though without any evil or sin within Him. It also presents Jesus as the Son of God. In the next chapter we shall see that the title ‘Son of God’ means that He is both God and man. The Council of Nicea did *not* invent this. The Council was called to deal with a teaching which has come to be known as ‘Arianism’, after the man most responsible for promoting it, Arius. Arius believed that there was only one God and, this being so, Jesus could not be God. But this did *not* mean that Arius believed that Jesus was simply a mortal man, though a great man. Arius believed that the Son of God, the ‘Word’, referred to the very first being that God created and that through this being God then created everything else. Therefore, the Son of God, the Word, was, though involved in creating all other things, himself a created being. It was he who came into the world as Jesus. The point at issue at Nicea, therefore, was not whether Jesus was just a man: Arius

believed that he was more than a man; rather, the issue was whether ‘the Word’ was eternal and was God, or whether he was a being created by God through whom God then created all other things. The point at issue arose because of differences of understanding of certain passages in the Bible. In other words, the Council had nothing to do with a plan to get rid of the kinds of writings unearthed at Nag Hammadi and then to rewrite the Gospels which are found in our New Testament; rather, it was concerned with how certain statements in the New Testament were to be interpreted. The Council of Nicea came to a strongly anti-Arian conclusion. Contrary to what Teabing says, (‘A relatively close vote at that’, page 233), 218 out of 220 bishops signed the creed!

Arianism is still around today: you are most likely to meet it when two people come to your door and, after some initial pleasantries, move the subject to religion and produce *The Watchtower* magazine. They are, of course, Jehovah’s Witnesses. What do Dan Brown’s Leigh Teabing and Jehovah’s Witnesses have in common? Just this: they both say that it was at the Council of Nicea that the teaching was created that Jesus is God. If you have ever got into serious conversation with a Jehovah’s Witness, you will soon discover that they are invariably repeating what they have been told or what they have read in ‘Watchtower’ publications. Free enquiry of historical matters, which involves going back to the sources and reading the scholarly works, is not their *forte*. Nor, so it seems, is it Dan Brown’s.<sup>18</sup>

This is not to deny all that Dan Brown has his characters say about Constantine. Indeed, this is the problem: to unravel what is fact from what is fiction is a bit like having to untie thin laces which are knotted and wet. It can be a somewhat tedious task. So let me briefly enumerate some of the things which Brown has got right about Constantine, though even where he is right on his facts, he can still be guilty of misinterpreting their significance because of failure to view them in their proper historical context.

### **The ‘sun’ emperor: inconstant Constantine**

First, Constantine was a worshipper of the sun, and there is no doubt that after he professed an allegiance to ‘Christian’ things, he sought to fuse aspects of sun worship with Christian worship. A moment’s reflection, however, should soon dispel any idea that Christianity *according to the Bible* is an

amalgam of the teachings of Jesus with pagan religions. Think of the British monarch who, according to our constitution, is Governor of the Church of England. (The fact that we do not have a written constitution does not mean that there is no constitution: volumes have been written on English Constitutional Law.) Now there is absolutely nothing about such an idea anywhere in the Bible. It is a simple fact that many people have got hold of the idea that Britain is a ‘Christian country’ (whatever that is supposed to mean) and, given that it is usual to see the Royal Family and British prime ministers attending ‘church’ functions, many people, both from within Britain and from other lands, conclude that these are all ‘Christians’ attending ‘Christian gatherings’. Again, it is a simple fact that some of the Royal Family and some prime ministers attend ‘multi-faith’ services, and it is becoming increasingly common to hear Prince Charles speak of being a defender of ‘faith’ or of ‘faiths’, rather than defender of *‘the faith’*. What all this means, of course, is that a kind of ‘civic religion’ is being practised, which really has very little to do with biblical Christianity. To be true, aspects of the Christian message may be taken on board. But then aspects of many other things may also be taken on board. One is left with a kind of religious Irish stew. One can see the same kind of thing in American politics, even though in the USA there is a constitutional separation of state from church. ‘Uncle Sam’ and Jesus; the Bible and The Constitution; the kingdom of heaven and the United States; democracy and the law of God: these all get mixed and shaken together and it can be a pretty heady, not to say toxic, brew. And that is undoubtedly what happened with Constantine. So Constantine passed laws that were the result of, and thoroughly consistent with, Christian teaching, such as laws ‘protecting children, slaves, peasants and prisoners. An edict of 316 directs that criminals may not be branded on the face “because man is made in God’s image”.’<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, a law of Constantine passed in 321 ‘closed law courts “on the venerable day of the sun”, except for the pious purpose of freeing slaves, and deprecated Sunday labour except where necessary on farms’.<sup>20</sup>

This kind of thing happens when there is a superficial acceptance of aspects of Christianity but not a wholehearted embrace of Jesus and His message. Given the prevalence of sun worship, both before and after Constantine, it is hardly surprising that it was onto sun worship that Constantine sought to graft aspects of Christianity. Indeed, Tertullian (*c.* AD 160 to after 220), years

before Constantine was on the scene, had noted that ‘many pagans imagined the Christians worshipped the sun because they met on Sundays’.<sup>21</sup> When at a later date pagans followed the emperor’s lead and made a superficial commitment to the Christian faith, it is hardly surprising that a practice that went right back to the New Testament (meeting on ‘the first day of the week’ because it was on that day that Jesus had risen from the dead and was, accordingly, called ‘the Lord’s Day’) was then rationalised by linking it with the worship of the sun on ‘Sunday’. But to say, as does Robert Langdon (pages 232-233), that Christianity honoured the Jewish Sabbath but that ‘Constantine shifted it to coincide with the pagan’s veneration of the sun’, is simply to demonstrate a loss of all sense of historical perspective, as well as to betray ignorance of the historical details. The development of Christianity from its Jewish roots, like a plant from the seed, is a dominant theme in the New Testament. The implications of this development for the Christian view of the Jewish law is a massive theme in the New Testament and has formed the core of study for literally umpteen Ph.D. theses and been the subject of many scholarly volumes, as well as of more popular books. Dan Brown, it seems, knows nothing of all this, and we are served up, instead, with the kind of thing that would pass muster as propaganda for the Seventh Day Adventists.

### **Mary, Mary, not contrary, but how the legends grow!**

And so one could go on with other misleading statements about Constantine, even when some of the details are right. But to keep this chapter within manageable limits, a line needs to be drawn beneath Constantine. Those who wish to know more about him may consult the relevant works listed in the notes at the end of this chapter. We need now, however, to address what Dan Brown writes about Jesus being married to Mary Magdalene and his general remarks concerning the Christian attitude to sex, before commenting upon the interpretation of Leonardo’s painting *The Last Supper*. It will then only remain to tie up a number of loose threads. By then it should be clear — it should already be clear: by then it should be unmistakably clear — that no reliance at all can, or should, be placed upon what Dan Brown writes about Jesus, the New Testament, or Christian origins.

On page 245 Teabing says to Sophie:

*...the marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene is part of the historical record... Moreover, Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor.*

In reply to Sophie's question as to why this should be so, Langdon says:

*Because Jesus was a Jew... and the social decorum during that time virtually forbade a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned, and the obligation for a Jewish father was to find a suitable wife for his son. 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.*

On page 246 Teabing points Sophie to the section in the *Gospel of Philip* which reads:

*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?'*

Teabing explains to Sophie that the word 'companion' in that passage, 'As any Aramaic scholar will tell you... in those days, literally meant spouse'.

There is an element of truth in what Teabing and Langdon say about it being the custom for a Jewish man to marry. But it is only *an element of truth* and, as in other areas of life, so here, the adage holds that a little knowledge can be dangerous. It *would* have been unusual for a Jewish man not to marry. It would not have been impossible. Jesus Himself refers to men who were born eunuchs, men who were made eunuch by others, and those who would make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>22</sup> (We are not to understand Jesus' words here in the way that a man called Origen did, who literally castrated himself! Jewish teachers, and Jesus especially, used graphic, 'concrete' and figurative language to express spiritual principles. The reference is to someone who willingly forgoes marriage.) This point notwithstanding, what Jesus was saying *was* unusual; but then, Jesus' teaching is often

surprising. There is, nevertheless, an element of truth in the assertion that if Jesus were not married, it might be expected that at least one of the Gospels would have explicitly stated this: otherwise, a Jewish reader would interpret silence upon this as implying that Jesus was, as was usual, married. It is all about what is known as ‘hermeneutics’: that is, how we interpret texts and the ‘pre-understanding’ which we bring to a text. The average Westerner assumes, when reading the New Testament, that Jesus was not married because the four gospels do not say that He was married. The average first century Jew would assume that He was married because the four Gospels do not say that He was not. This is the element of truth in what Brown writes. There is nothing new in this: in a book which I wrote a few years ago on the Bible’s teaching on divorce and remarriage, I refer to this very fact.<sup>23</sup> What Dan Brown does *not* say, however, is that there may be circumstances where such a silence would be perfectly explicable and would not lead a Jewish reader to conclude that Jesus was married. And one of those circumstances is most certainly present in the New Testament account of Jesus. I shall explain.

At the time of Jesus, a child who was declared to be ‘illegitimate’ was known as a *mamzer*. ‘Considerable proof was needed before deciding that someone was a *mamzer*, including two witnesses of illegitimacy, neither of whom could be the parents’.<sup>24</sup> The Gospel of John hints that some of Jesus’ contemporaries had their suspicions that He was not quite ‘legitimate’.<sup>25</sup> The New Testament Gospels, however, say enough to tell us that Jesus had not been declared a *mamzer*: ‘such individuals were not allowed in the temple courts and were not allowed to take an active part in synagogue worship’.<sup>26</sup> The fact that Jesus did take part in synagogue worship and was not only allowed in the temple courts but also taught there tells decisively against Him having been declared a *mamzer*. A *mamzer* could not marry a non-*mamzer*.<sup>27</sup> Given the ‘widespread suspicion that Jesus was of questionable birth... [it] would have made it almost impossible for him to marry since no respectable family would want to give their daughter in marriage to him. One who was illegitimate [but had not been declared to be a *mamzer*] could offer a large dowry to secure a wife, but there is no indication that Jesus’ family was wealthy’.<sup>28</sup> In fact, we are specifically told that His family was poor.<sup>29</sup>

So the facts are these: both Matthew’s Gospel and Luke’s Gospel tell us that Jesus was miraculously conceived by Mary, after she had been engaged but

while still a virgin and before she married. (The fact that in the West today many women will have lost their virginity long before engagement, and of those who have kept it until engagement, many will lose it before marriage, should not blind us to the fact that this would have been quite rare in the kind of society to which Mary belonged. I shall have more to say about the virgin conception and the miraculous later on.) While still pregnant, she married Joseph but gave birth to Jesus away from her home town of Nazareth while she was in Bethlehem, a town not far from the main city Jerusalem, at a time when many visitors would have been there to enrol for a census. It does not require much imagination to realise that the average person would have been unlikely to have believed that Mary had conceived miraculously and that the average person would have concluded that Joseph's desires had got the better of him, that a hasty marriage would have been arranged and the baby born while Joseph and Mary were away from home. In these circumstances, while Jesus would have not have been perceived to have been illegitimate and would not have been formally declared to be a *mamzer*, some would have referred to His birth with a 'nudge nudge, wink wink, you know what I mean' kind of attitude. The Jewish person reading the Gospels would read the signals as to why it would have been extremely unlikely for Jesus to have been married. These considerations, together with Jesus' words about making oneself a eunuch, demonstrate not only the possibility of a man going against the prevailing custom of marrying but also how well the single state of Jesus 'fits' into the circumstances as recounted by Matthew and Luke. This explains why it would not have been odd for someone in Jesus' position to have remained unmarried. Quite apart from these considerations, there are, also, other reasons why Jesus would not have married, reasons which have everything to do with His mission. But these do not need addressing in this book.

The *Gospel of Philip*, as we have already seen, was written much later than the New Testament Gospels and was shooting its own 'Gnostic line'. Teabing's words that any Aramaic scholar would tell Sophie that 'companion' literally meant 'wife' in those days are quite extraordinary. To begin with, as Teabing has already rightly noted (on page 234), the documents discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945, amongst which were the *Gospel of Philip*, were in Coptic. So what is the relevance of the meaning of the Aramaic word? The average reader probably knows as little of the Nag Hammadi documents as did

Sophie Neveu. This being so, he or she will probably miss the sleight of hand that is being practised by Teabing when he tells Sophie what the Aramaic word originally meant. Of course, Dan Brown might reply that the original of this document had been written in Aramaic. But this raises even bigger problems. First, there is no evidence that there was an Aramaic version of the *Gospel of Philip*. Secondly, there are good reasons for believing that it had been translated from Greek.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Teabing is reading from the *English* translation. I shall not weary the reader with the technicalities involved in identifying what linguists call *the semantic range* of a word and the differences that exist between a word's *sense* and its *referent*, and how all this massively complicates what Teabing is saying. Anyone with a modicum of knowledge of even modern languages will get the point. It is more complex with ancient languages. And in any event, it is *not* true that *any* Aramaic scholar will tell you that 'companion' literally meant 'wife'. Professor Dr Craig Blomberg, for example, an extremely accomplished biblical scholar, writes: 'no Aramaic or Hebrew words for "companion" normally mean spouse'.<sup>31</sup> I trust that this scotches the nonsense that is talked about Jesus having married Mary Magdalene.

## **Sex, sin, and the Scriptures**

Before turning to Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, I should say a few things about the Christian attitude to women and to sex. If Constantine had commissioned and financed 'gospels' which were to remove the significance of women — which he certainly did not — I can only say that he would have wasted his money, for the New Testament is full of references to the significance and importance of women. Jesus numbered women amongst His disciples, spoke with them openly and taught them as being equal with men before God.<sup>32</sup> They are told to report to the other disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead,<sup>33</sup> a remarkable fact given that a woman's testimony was not valid in a Jewish court.<sup>34</sup> (In passing it is worth pointing out that this is one of those features which indicates the authenticity of the accounts of the resurrection in the Gospels.) Paul teaches that in terms of one's standing before God there is neither master nor slave, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female,<sup>35</sup> while in another place he confirms what Luke has already indicated concerning the legitimacy of a woman prophesying.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, in the final chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul is lavish in his commendation

of many women whose Christian service is placed alongside that of various men whom Paul mentions. This means that the New Testament's account of the differences that exist between male and female are nuanced and must be understood in this context and against this background.

When we turn to what the Bible has to say about sexual relationships, we discover that it is very different from the popular misconceptions, misconceptions which are further compounded in *The Da Vinci Code*. In one of the earliest New Testament documents, the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul deals with this area of life and does so by stressing that sexual relations are a normal part of married life: neither the husband nor the wife should hold back from each other. He goes so far as to say that the husband's body does not belong to him alone but to his wife, and the wife's body does not belong to her alone but to her husband.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the Old Testament background to this teaching is one which celebrates the erotic aspect to marriage. The Book of Proverbs, for all its 'down-to-earthness', is pretty forthright in its celebration of the sexual element within marriage,<sup>38</sup> while the Song of Solomon, whatever else it is, is amongst the most elevated love poetry to be found in the world of literature.<sup>39</sup> As with Paul, it emphasises the mutuality of the relationship and is entirely positive towards the sexual element within marriage.

This, of course, is light years removed from the ritual of *hieros gamos* or 'sacred marriage' described in *The Da Vinci Code*. The way in which the novel seeks to justify such a practice beggars belief. It is precisely because Christianity has such an elevated view of sex, regarding it as the expression of the love to be enjoyed in a relationship that is lifelong in its commitment — which is what the Bible means by 'marriage' — that it is so concerned to stress that sex is to be reserved for marriage. Sex may be compared with nuclear power: it may be used for good or it may devastate lives. The Bible's view of sex is essentially positive; for that reason certain negatives need to be emphasised. This does not mean — what many outside of the Christian faith assume — that Christianity is especially 'hung up' about this and regards sexual sin as unforgivable. We have seen that Jesus offers forgiveness and new life to all, whether they have been sexual sinners or not. What it *is* saying is that failure in this area can have all kinds of psychological, emotional and social consequences, not to mention physical ones.

## **Leonardo and the monks of Milan**

The title *The Da Vinci Code* derives partly from the interpretation given in the book of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Whether Leonardo actually painted Mary Magdalene as being sat next to Jesus in *The Last Supper* is, of course, strictly irrelevant in determining what actually happened at the Last Supper. The reason for this is that Leonardo painted this great work between fourteen hundred and fifteen hundred years after the event. With respect to the claim that Leonardo was, in his own way, keeping alive the 'secret' which is revealed in the *Gospel of Philip* and preserved by The Priory of Sion, the following comments are in order. First, we have already seen that the Gnostic gospels are late works and we shall see in the next chapter that they are, quite simply, 'outflanked' by the New Testament Gospels in terms of historical reliability and trustworthiness. In the second place, Leonardo was hardly keeping something a secret if he was splashing it all over the wall of the refectory where Dominican monks ate their food each day! Thirdly, a few things need to be said about Leonardo's *Last Supper*. (Having never seen the original painting, I am indebted, in what follows, to a colleague in the Christian ministry, Dr David Green. Dr Green was formerly lecturer in the History of Art at Oxford Brookes University. I have had the benefit of personal conversations with him, as well as numerous e-mail exchanges. In what follows I have drawn heavily from his comments on Leonardo's great painting. Dr Green's area of research for his doctorate was in Renaissance painting. This makes him particularly qualified in this area. Any inaccuracies will be mine, not his.)

*The Last Supper* is painted on the refectory wall of The Dominican Friary of S.M. delle Grazie in Milan. The Friary, which enjoyed special patronage from the Sforza Dukes of Milan, was erected, with the church, between the years 1464 and 1482. Lodovico 'il Moro' Sforza chose it as the burial place for his family. He commissioned his best court artists, Bramante and Leonardo, to work on the building. The commission for the painting of *The Last Supper* for the refectory probably dates from 1494 and painting began probably the following year. It was far advanced by 1497 and completed in 1498. There are eyewitness accounts of Leonardo at work on the painting (dating from 1497).

Leonardo experimented with a ground of gesso (lime plaster), pitch and mastic. This was a new technique. The pigment soon began to break loose and, as early as 1517, only nineteen years after it had been completed, it was noted that it was beginning to decay. Someone who saw it in the mid-sixteenth century called it ‘half-ruined’ (*mezzo guasto*), and Vasari, in 1556, speaks of it as ‘so badly affected that nothing is visible but a mass of blots’. There is more of Leonardo’s work than this description would imply, but much is lost and there has been much over-painting down the centuries, removed during recent restoration.

There was a well-established tradition of painting ‘Last Suppers’ in refectories, and it was conventional to depict Judas sitting on the opposite side of the table from Christ and the other eleven disciples. Leonardo’s preliminary drawings for the composition adopt this device, but he abandoned it for the final painting and placed Judas on the same side as the other disciples. This was an innovation.

The two clean-shaven apostles are Philip (a preliminary drawing for his head is at Windsor) and John. There was a well-established practice at this stage of painting John without a beard. There is also a drawing for the head of St James, also clean-shaven, although he may have a short beard in the painting. Leonardo’s most immediate precedent for the composition was the painting by Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Florentine church of S. Marco (also Dominican). In this painting, three of the disciples also appear clean-shaven, suggesting a convention. Leonardo himself said this about narrative paintings:

*There ought to be people of varied temperaments, ages, flesh colours, attitudes, fatness, leanness, heavy and thin, great, small, corpulent, lean, fierce, meek, old, young, strongly muscled, weak and with small muscles.*

In the light of the above observations on *The Last Supper*, Dr Green’s comments, in his personal communication to me on *The Da Vinci Code’s* ‘thesis’, that Leonardo painted Mary Magdalene as sat next to Jesus, almost ‘joined at the hip’, are as follows:

*Given this, it cannot be said that there is a female figure in the Last Supper, unless it is alleged that one of the beardless male figures is actually the Magdalen in disguise. If this were so, which*

*of the twelve disciples has Leonardo missed out? Are we also to assume that previous paintings of the Last Supper with beardless apostles also contain this coded heresy? I find it hard to imagine this escaping the notice of Dominicans as they sat down to eat. They were traditionally the guardians of the Catholic Church's doctrine!*

It should also be added that Renaissance conceptions of beauty were somewhat different from our own and that it was not uncommon for men to be painted in such a way as to appear somewhat ‘feminine’. For Sir Leigh Teabing’s interpretation of Leonardo’s painting to be right, it would mean that many of the world’s leading art historians have completely missed what Sophie Neveu, with Teabing’s help, is able to identify in a matter of moments. For this to be so, they would have to be either singularly inept or part of the same conspiracy to suppress the truth about Jesus and Mary Magdalene. By this point one begins to wonder if one is living in a surreal world or a parallel universe! As for Langdon’s explanation of it being *skitoma* (that is, our preconceived notions mean that we block out something which would be incongruous to us), this of course cuts both ways: those who are into conspiracy theories may well be blocking out what is patently obvious to others. And are we to say that the other beardless apostle is also a woman? This would leave us with only ten apostles! In spite of these criticisms of Brown’s interpretation of *The Last Supper*, the fact remains that even could it be proven that Leonardo intended to have Mary Magdalene next to Jesus, this tells us nothing about what originally happened, and by no stretch of the imagination can it validate or vindicate the Gnostic gospels.

### **The Bible: words of men and Word of God**

It only remains to tie up three loose ends, which really belong in ‘the rag bag’. The claim that 25 December as the birth date for Jesus was taken from other religions, and that the idea of the resurrection of Jesus was taken from Mithraism and other religions, will be dealt with in the appendix to this chapter. But now to the loose ends. First, Teabing says to Sophie on page 231:

*The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven... The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of*

*tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book.*

The first thing to say about this is that nobody claims that the Bible fell magically from the heavens. The Bible itself announces on page after page that it was written by men. But that does not mean that it has not come specially from God in a way in which *The Times* newspaper or Shakespeare's plays have not come from God. Teabing is committing a basic fallacy, the fallacy that is known as *reductionism*: because men wrote the Bible, it cannot have come from God. Why not? The fallacy can be simply illustrated in the following way. In the early twentieth century, physicists were puzzled about the nature of light. Some experiments appeared to suggest that light consisted of a series of particles, a bit like a stream of bullets. Other experiments suggested that light was a wave motion. According to the classical understanding of physics, it had to be one or the other. Eventually physicists realised that their whole understanding of the nature of reality needed to be expanded and they began to speak of the wave/particle duality. Similarly, the Bible's own account of itself is that God 'superintended' the writers of the Bible, so that although they were fully involved in what they wrote, exercising free agency and expressing their own personalities, God so superintended them that what they wrote was exactly what He wanted them to write. Thus, it is appropriate to call the Bible, 'God's Word'.

As for the claim that it has 'evolved through countless translations, additions and revisions', I make the following comments. First, unless everyone becomes extremely competent in Hebrew and Greek, the Bible will remain a closed book unless we have it in translation. All a translation does is to communicate the message of the original document into the language of the reader. The belief that the Bible is God's Word is that it is God's Word 'as originally given'. If I own a print works and print ten thousand copies of a modern English translation of the Bible and through some oversight miss the word 'not' in one of the Ten Commandments, I have, *at that point and at that point alone*, produced a copy that is not faithful. A comparison of my ten thousand copies with the earlier edition will soon point up 'the error'. But the error is in no way the error of the original biblical writers but is simply a printer's error. It in no way impugns the veracity of the original. Indeed, the

error will soon be spotted and when the next batch of Bibles are printed, the word ‘not’ will be inserted and the ‘error’ removed. Such an addition and revision is to a copy which was flawed at that point. Teabing’s throwaway remark displays almost total ignorance of what textual criticism and translation are all about.

### **Winners, losers, and history**

The second loose end concerns the cliché, which gets honourable mention in *The Da Vinci Code*, that history is always written by the winners (page 256). Teabing suggests that history is never more than a fable and that, by its nature, it is always a one-sided account. This is not the place to give an in-depth analysis of the scepticism about history which can be traced back to the views of men such as Lessing in the eighteenth century and Troeltsch in the nineteenth century, or to the way in which postmodernism has changed the way in which we approach accounts of past events. It is the place, however, to draw attention to the very simple fact that people who have been fed ‘the winners’ version of a story’ have frequently evidenced an ability to stand apart from the propaganda which they have been fed and thereby have arrived at a more balanced and objective understanding of the past. As we shall see in the next chapter, there were writers in the ancient world who were not at all sympathetic to Christianity but whose description of it fits with what we find in the New Testament. This gives the lie, somewhat, to what Dan Brown would have us believe. Indeed, that he can preface his novel with a page headed ‘Fact’ rather shows that he does believe that we can know about the past. It is a classic case of wanting to have your cake and eat it. The pity is that he can get his facts so wrong.

### **Catholic or Christian?**

The third, and final, loose end which needs to be gathered up is this: Dan Brown’s identification of biblical Christianity with the Roman Catholic Church and its teaching. It is as if he has never heard of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. One of the great criticisms which the Reformers levelled at the Roman Catholic Church was that it had seriously departed from the teaching of the Bible, both in its belief and in its behaviour. Therefore, the Reformers did their utmost to ensure that the Bible was translated into the language of the people and made available for the people

to read. The Reformers objected to the Roman Catholic Church's insistence that it was the sole custodian of the teaching of Christ and that its 'tradition' preserved teaching of Jesus not found in the Bible or teaching which was a legitimate extension of Jesus' teaching. Since the pope declared himself to be Christ's representative on earth and the Roman Catholic Church regarded itself as the divinely approved custodian of the teaching of Jesus, it then effectively said that what it endorsed as true tradition was endorsed by God Himself. The Reformers cut through all this, exposing it for the fraud that it was. They pointed out that by overpainting the biblical portrait of Christ with men's traditions, the real Jesus was being hidden from view. The history of all this is well documented and widely known. It is a serious historical gaffe on Brown's part not to know the difference between the Roman Catholic version of Christianity and Christianity according to the Bible pure and simple.

The irony of the situation is that *The Da Vinci Code* suggests that 'the Church' has hidden the true Jesus underneath the New Testament. The reality is that over the years the Roman Catholic Church has buried large parts of the *biblical* message beneath its own 'tradition'. As a result, *that* 'church' has indeed presented a massive distortion of Jesus and His message. There is even greater irony than this. One of the features of some of the Gnostic gospels discovered at Nag Hammadi is their claim to have preserved secret teachings of Jesus which He had not given openly to all the apostles. Is the *form* of such a claim that different from what the Roman Catholic Church says about its tradition? In other words, Dan Brown is right to put the Roman Catholic Church in the dock, but he has charged it with the wrong offences. Had he known his history better, he might have indicted it for the fact that there was a time — 1229 — when it forbade anyone who was not a priest from having a Bible. He has also failed to indict the Gnostics. A lawyer is left feeling that if he can be so muddled about the charges, it is hardly surprising that he does not deal properly with the evidence.<sup>40</sup> I shall seek to demonstrate the historical reliability of the New Testament and of its message about Jesus, and why this is to be preferred to the account which Dan Brown gives of it. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

## **Appendix**

An example of Brown's mixing of inaccuracy and confusion is to be found on page 232, where Teabing claims that the idea of Christ's resurrection comes from the pre-Christian God Mithras, and that Mithras, Osiris and other 'deities' had their birthday on 25 December, and that the new-born Krishna was presented with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. With respect to the significance of 25 December as being the date of Jesus' birth, the Bible says nothing about this at all. Any Christian who is reasonably familiar with his or her Bible is well aware of the fact that that date has no real significance for Christianity. 25 December was 'the birthday of the Sun-god at the winter solstice' and 'early in the fourth century there begins in the West (where first and by whom is not known) the celebration [of this date]... as the date for the nativity of Christ' (Chadwick *op. cit.*, p. 126). This was all part of the tendency to seek to 'Christianise' certain pagan festivals, a tendency which can be clearly seen in Roman Catholicism. But it has nothing to do with biblical Christianity. Most Bible-believing Christians and churches use the opportunity afforded by the Christmas period to focus on the Bible's message concerning the birth of Jesus: the reason for this is due to the fact that many visitors, who know little about Christianity but who have some vague ideas about Jesus' birth, may attend churches at such a time and it would, therefore, be absurd to be dealing with, for example, the reason why gambling is wrong, when such visitors have obviously come to hear something connected with 'Christmas'. But this does not mean that those who take the Bible seriously believe that Jesus was actually born on 25 December.

Teabing's other remarks in this paragraph are also muddled. One of the most interesting studies of Mithraism is Professor David Ulansey's *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries* (OUP [New York], 1991). Ulansey wrote a summary of that book in his article *Solving The Mithraic Mysteries*, which was published in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Vol. 20, issue 5 (Sept. / Oct. 1994). The older view was that Mithraism came from the East into Roman life in the first century BC. The basis of this belief was that the god Mitra was worshipped in Iran and this was the origin of the Mithraism that became widespread in the Roman Empire. Ulansey has challenged this view and has argued that Mithraism arose as a result of the discovery made by Hipparchus in 128 BC of the precession of the equinoxes. The precession of the equinoxes refers to the

slow but continual shifting of the equinoctial points. Whereas we know that this is attributable to a ‘wobble’ on the earth’s rotation on its axis, in the geocentric view of the cosmos which was held in the ancient world this was believed to have been caused by a new god, a god who must have been outside the cosmos, since he was powerful enough to move it. Before the Greco-Roman period the spring equinox had been in the realm of Taurus the Bull, but in the Greco-Roman period it was in the constellation of Aries the Ram. This is, according to Ulansey, the reason for the well-known iconography of Mithras slaying a bull. Ulansey argues his case with great clarity and persuasiveness. The older view was that Mithraism, like the cult of Osiris and Dionysus, belonged to those religions which were concerned with the fruitfulness of the earth, and references within them to ‘dying and rising’ gods were essentially mythical accounts of the coming to life of things after the winter months. This, of course, was linked with the sun and light and, in certain respects, can be seen as aspects of Sun-worship.

Whichever view is taken — whether it is understood to have come from the East and to have had similarities with the cult of Osiris or whether it is understood as a religion which resulted from the precession of the equinoxes — it is easy to see that it was intimately linked with the sun. I have been unable to locate any original reference to the significance of 25 December in Mithraism or in the other religious cults mentioned here by Teabing, other than the worship of the Sun-god. But if there are such references, it simply means that what was celebrated as part of the winter solstice in sun-worship was likewise celebrated in these mystery religions, though under a different name. I have also been unable to locate any reference in the literature on mythology to Mithras dying, being placed in a rock tomb, and then rising from the dead three days later. What is fairly common in Mithraic iconography is *the birth* of Mithras from a rock, which, Ulansey convincingly argues, represents the cosmos. Has Dan Brown here muddled two very different things? If Ulansey’s understanding of Mithraism is correct, then while one can understand the importance of the birth of Mithras, there would hardly seem to be any place in the scheme of Mithraism for his dying and rising again. If the older view is correct — that is, that Mithraism originated in the East with the worship of Mitra — then one is in the realm of a mythical account which describes the annual cycle of the ‘dying’ of the natural world and its coming back to life each year.

Whichever view is accepted, the following things are clear. First, that because Mithraism was such a secretive religion, there was very little that was written about it *by its devotees*. Secondly, its rites and rituals — and one thing that does seem to be fairly clear is that it was very much a ritualistic religion — were confined to men. This certainly marks it out as fundamentally different from Christianity. In the third place, it is essential to grasp that the whole concept of immortality amongst the gods of the mystery religions is in an entirely different world of thought from the biblical account of resurrection. For the Greeks, immortality consisted in being set free from the body: the idea of resurrection was not only preposterous in their eyes (see Acts 17:32), but quite foreign to their thought world. As for the Roman world, Roman emperors were thought to attain divinity at their death: but this was evidently a different idea from that of a man being bodily resurrected from the dead and relating to people in this space-time universe before removing to another dimension. Indeed, Ulansey argues that the popularity of Mithraism amongst the Romans was part of the belief in the ancient world in ‘astral immortality’: that is to say, as Ulansey succinctly expresses it, ‘after death the human soul ascends up through the heavenly spheres to an afterlife in the pure and eternal world of the stars. In time, the celestial ascent of the soul came to be seen as a difficult voyage, requiring secret passwords to be recited at each level of the journey’ (Ulansey, *op. cit.*). This belief could easily mix into ‘the Irish stew’ which was Gnosticism, but it is entirely different from the biblical account that Jesus rose bodily from the dead three days after having been crucified. The fourth thing to say is that the birth of Mithras is also to be seen as part of the cosmological mythology of the ancient world. The account which Luke gives of the birth of Jesus is the exact opposite of mythology: the account abounds in geographical and historical details, details which indicate that Luke is intent on demonstrating that the birth of Jesus was a real event which occurred at a particular place and at a particular point in time. In other words, any imagined parallels between the mystery religions, the religious beliefs of Greeks and Romans, and Christianity are found, on examination, to be more in the nature of differences than similarities. This whole approach at explaining the rise of Christianity — really, it is an attempt at ‘explaining away’ — is what is known as the ‘history of religions’ approach to Christian origins. It was popular at the beginning of the twentieth century but, as Carson notes, ‘Much of the power of this movement has drained away’ (D.A.

Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 31). On the ‘history of religions’ approach, see also J.G. Machen, *The Origins of Paul’s Religion* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1925). For the older view of Mithraism, see the relevant entries in *The New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* (Hamlyn, 1968), pp. 314, 316, 328. For the newer view, reference should be made to Ulansey, *op. cit.* Machen, *op. cit.*, also deals with Mithraism (pp. 235-237), and Dunn has interesting observations on why alleged parallels between Christianity and the mystery religions break down (J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* [Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38A] (Word Books, Milton Keynes, 1991), pp. 308-311). On Osiris, see *Larousse, op. cit.*, pp. 16-17, and N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (SPCK, 2004).

Finally, I have been unable to locate any reference to gold, frankincense and myrrh being presented to Krishna. But even if there were such a reference — and Teabing’s other throwaway remarks do not lead one to have much confidence in this one — what would be its significance? Hardly any: for the point here, surely, is that if these were the kinds of gifts that were offered in the ancient world to those who were born into royalty, it would just emphasise that the wise men really believed what Matthew’s Gospel tells us of what the wise men thought of Jesus, that is, that He was ‘born king of the Jews’ (Matthew 2:2).

## Notes

- 1 All page references to *The Da Vinci Code* are to the hardback edition published in 2003 by Bantam Press.
- 2 See F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1974), pp. 35, 48, 66 ff., 189; N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (SPCK, 1992), pp. 25-26; R.T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1986), pp. 46-49, 55-57, 144-145, 161, 170, 174-175; Alistair I. Wilson, ‘The Dead Sea Scrolls on the High Street’ in *Foundations*, ed. K. Brownell (BEC), vol. 42, pp. 26-31; vol. 43, pp. 45-49; Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective* (SCM, London, 1994).
- 3 *Sunday Telegraph*, 3 October 2004, p.5.
- 4 Vermes, *op. cit.*, p. 5, quoted in Wilson, *op. cit.*, vol. 43, p. 49.
- 5 Quoted in Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

- 6 Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism*, trans. Carol Harrison (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1991), p.1.
- 7 Douglas Groothuis, *Revealing the New Age Jesus* (IVP, Leicester, 1990), pp. 77-78; John Dart, *The Jesus of History and Heresy* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, California, 1988), pp. 1-49.
- 8 Kurt Aland & Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987), pp. 84, 87; Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (OUP, New York, 1964), pp. 36-42; Tim Dowley (Ed.), *The History of Christianity* (Lion Publishers, Berkhamsted, Herts., 1977), p. 89; J.D. Douglas (Ed.), *The New Bible Dictionary* (IVP, London, 1965, p. 1264).
- 9 *The Nag Hammadi* document which has attracted most scholarly attention is *The Gospel of Thomas*. After it was discovered, it became clear that parts of it were the same as fragments of Greek papyri which had been discovered at Oxyrhyncus between 1897 and 1904. See R.T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1986), pp. 60-61; J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*; vol. 1, *Christianity in the Making* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK, 2003), p. 63 note 191.
- 10 W.W. Isenberg in James M. Robinson (Ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1977), p. 131, cited in N.T. Wright *op. cit.*, p. 105.
- 11 David G. Dunbar, 'The Biblical Canon' in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (ed. D.A. Carson & J.D. Woodbridge (IVP, Leicester, 1986), p. 330.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 330.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 330.
- 14 Christopher Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition: Synoptic Tradition in the Nag Hammadi Library* (T. & T. Clark, 1983), quoted in D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (IVP, Leicester, 1991), p. 33. There is a considerable body of scholarly literature on the relationship between the Christian message as found in the New Testament and the Gnosticism which is found in *The Nag Hammadi* gospels. An important question is whether, on the one hand, Gnosticism predated Christianity or was contemporary with it, and, on the other hand, whether it was some kind of cancerous growth, a mutated form of Christianity, which must, therefore, have come after it. It is important to distinguish two different questions: first, whether there was a 'melting pot' of religious ideas of a Gnostic *kind* which existed before or at the time of Jesus; secondly, whether the Gnostic ideas represented by *The Nag Hammadi* gospels were parasitic upon Christianity. Whatever answer is given to the first question (and there are scholars who take differing positions on this — Simone Pétrement *op.cit.*; cf. P Perkins, *Gnosticism and the New Testament*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1993), what is clear is that the Gnostic ideas represented in *The Nag Hammadi* gospels, insofar as they use 'Christian' terminology (e.g. references to Jesus, books claiming to be 'Gospels') are, indeed, distortions of

original Christianity. These ‘Gnostic Gospels’ are hardly narrative accounts at all but consist of certain Gnostic ‘sayings’ which are put into the mouths of Jesus and others. They are more interested in imparting esoteric knowledge to a spiritual élite than they are with the New Testament’s concern of explaining the way of deliverance from sin. *The Nag Hammadi* document which has aroused most scholarly attention is *The Gospel of Thomas*. As F.F. Bruce comments, ‘the historical and geographical setting — Palestine under the Romans and the Herods around AD 30 — has been almost entirely forgotten’ (*Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1974), p. 155). Gnosticism appears to have sat very loose indeed to history. This being so, Teabing’s comment, to the effect that the ‘Gnostic Gospels’ bring us near to the historical Jesus, really is very, very wide of the mark. Popular and accessible treatments of Gnosticism will be found in Bruce, *op. cit.*; R.T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1986), and in D. Groothuis, *Revealing The New Age Jesus* (IVP, Leicester, 1990). More scholarly treatments will be found in Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidence*, Tyndale Press, London, 1973; N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (SPCK, London, 1993), and in J.D.G. Dunn, *ibid.* The last two of these interact with *The Gospel of Thomas* and some of the exaggerated claims that are made for it.

- 15 *Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 114: see Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- 16 Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, being vol. 1 in *The Pelican History of the Church* (Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 127-128.
- 17 Dunbar, *op. cit.*, pp. 325-327.
- 18 The background and history of the Council of Nicea is dealt with in numerous works. A good introduction will be found in Chadwick, *op. cit.*, and in M.A. Smith, *The Church Under Siege* (IVP, Leicester, 1976). More detailed treatments will be found in the following: J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (A. & C. Black 1968); J. N. D. Kelly *Early Christian Creeds* (Longman, 1972); G. Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ* (IVP, Leicester, 1984). For the documents see: H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (OUP, London, 1963 (2nd edition)); M. Wiles & M. Santer (Eds.), *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (CUP, 1975).
- 19 Chadwick, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- 22 *Matthew's Gospel* 19:12.
- 23 S. Clark, *Putting Asunder: Divorce and Remarriage in Biblical and Pastoral Perspective* (Bryntirion Press, 1999), p. 95. See also M. Hilton & G. Marshall, *The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism* (SCM Press Ltd, London, 1988 (o/p)), p. 135.
- 24 D. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary*

- Context* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2002), p. 169.
- 25 *John's Gospel* 8:41.
- 26 Instone-Brewer *op. cit.*, p. 169.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p.169.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 29 *Luke's Gospel* 2:24; *cf.* Leviticus 12:8.
- 30 See note 9, above.
- 31 Craig Blomberg, *Denver Journal*, ed. R. Hess, vol. 7, 2004 (Denver Seminary, published on their web site /dj/index.php/dj/index.php).
- 32 *Luke's Gospel* 10:38-42; *John's Gospel* 4:1-42; 11:17-37.
- 33 *Matthew's Gospel* 28:9-10; *John's Gospel* 20:16-18.
- 34 Josephus *Antiquities* 4.219; m. Sheba 4:1, quoted in J.D.G. Dunn, *ibid.*, p. 833 note 28; Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: A Jewish Perspective* (English Translation, SPCK, 1984), p. 95.
- 35 *Galatians* 3:26-29.
- 36 *1 Corinthians* 11:3-5; *cf.* Acts 2:17-18; 21:9.
- 37 *1 Corinthians* 7: 3-4.
- 38 *Proverbs* 5:15-20.
- 39 On the interpretation of *The Song of Solomon*, see G. Lloyd Carr *Commentary on the Song of Solomon* (IVP, Leicester, 1984).
- 40 See the Appendix to this chapter for further examples in *The Da Vinci Code* of misleading statements, half truths, and downright falsehoods.

## **Chapter 5**

# **The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth**

### **Getting it all into focus**

We are beginning to near the end of the journey which we started with Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. We have seen why the book is such a best-seller. We have also seen that it is a work of *fiction*. I have produced enough evidence of basic inaccuracies to demonstrate that its reconstruction of the message of Jesus and of Christian origins is, quite simply, false: it is a house of cards built on a foundation of sand.

In an earlier chapter we considered the heart of the Christian message according to the New Testament: what it says about Jesus and why this is still supremely relevant to us today. This, however, raises what will, for many people, be the most important questions of all. Is the New Testament historically reliable? Are the New Testament documents trustworthy and is their message *true*? The fact that the four Gospels portray a Jesus who performed many miracles, the climactic miracle being His resurrection from the dead, will be sufficient to lead many to conclude that we cannot here be in the realm of fact. The thinking of many people can be briefly summarised in the following way. Whatever kernel of truth may be preserved by the four Gospels, no twenty-first-century person can seriously be expected to believe a book that speaks of conception by a virgin and resurrection from the dead. Such things just do not happen. Therefore, at the very least, the four Gospels must be presenting an embellished account of the life of Jesus. The New Testament world is a world of legends, a bit like the world of King Arthur: there may well have been some shadowy kind of king called Arthur, but most of what has been written about him is pure legend. So it must be with Jesus. Dan Brown has, admittedly, got it all muddled up; but then the New Testament is really no better. We cannot know that much about Jesus of Nazareth and so let's get on with working to pay the mortgage and to have enough left over to make the most of the life that we've got. Maybe you are thinking like this yourself.

It is now time to address the question of the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament documents. I shall seek to demonstrate that they are as far from legend and myth as it is possible to be. We shall see that, contrary to what Dan Brown has written and contrary to ‘the legend view’ of the New Testament, from a very early stage — indeed as far back as we can go — Jesus was regarded as the Son of God by His followers. Furthermore we shall see that there is good historical evidence from *outside* the New Testament to confirm all this. Finally, we shall look at the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I shall adduce the evidence for this being a historical event and shall seek to show how it is the resurrection which makes sense of the historical material. It is the resurrection alone which can account for what happened in the first century AD: all other explanations of what happened to Jesus fail to come to grips with certain historical realities. Of course, it will be necessary to answer the charge that this is to retreat into a pre-scientific understanding of the world, and this I shall endeavour to do. But enough of mapping out the route we shall take on this last leg. It is time to get on with the journey.

### **The book that speaks for itself**

The New Testament consists of twenty-seven documents. There are four complementary accounts of the life of Jesus, which are called ‘Gospels’. There is a narrative account of the life of the early church and of the spread of the Christian message from Jerusalem to Rome, which was the capital of the Roman Empire. Apart from one other book, the rest of the New Testament consists of letters, some quite short, others quite long, which were written to different churches and to individuals. Although the four Gospels cover the earliest period of the New Testament, they were probably not the first documents to be *written*. There are good reasons for believing that some of the letters were written before the Gospels. The interesting point to note is that these earliest documents of the New Testament refer to Jesus as the Son of God, to His death and resurrection, and to His coming again. What is especially noteworthy is the fact that, in saying these things, it is clear that the writers can assume that they are saying what was universally accepted amongst the early Christians. Three examples will amply prove this point. (Since there is a certain amount of technical detail in the discussion of these examples, I have moved discussion of them to Appendix 1 to this chapter. Readers who wish to consider for themselves the evidence in support of my claim that at an

early stage the New Testament writers referred to Jesus as the Son of God and to His death and resurrection from the dead, should turn at this stage to Appendix 1.)

## **The evidence for the Bible**

### **Call Pliny the Younger**

If you studied Latin at school, the chances are that you have already heard of a character called Pliny the Younger. It is, however, more likely that Latin has been a closed book to you and, this being the case, I shall first say a bit about Pliny before looking at what he has to say about Christianity. Pliny the Younger was an interesting character, who came from an interesting family. His uncle, known as Pliny the Elder, was evidently a man who combined adventure with an insatiable thirst for knowledge. It was this thirst for knowledge which led to his untimely end: his interest in volcanoes led him to being in the wrong place at the wrong time — Vesuvius in AD 79. The rest, as they say, is history. His nephew (known as Pliny the Younger, to distinguish him from the illustrious uncle), was governor of Bithynia, in the north of Asia Minor, for some time between AD 106 and 114. In the words of Professor Bruce, ‘Pliny shows himself... as the complete civil servant of caricature, incapable of taking any decision on his own initiative’.<sup>1</sup> The benefit to us of Pliny’s bureaucratic mind is that he conducted a considerable correspondence with the Emperor Trajan about all kinds of matters connected with public administration. And one of these matters concerned what Pliny should do about Christians.

Pliny wrote to the emperor for advice on a number of matters concerning the treatment of Christians.<sup>2</sup> During the course of this letter we learn some fascinating things about the early followers of Jesus. Pliny tells Trajan that, as a result of his interrogations, he had discovered the following:

*They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before sunrise and reciting an antiphonal hymn to Christ as God, and binding themselves with an oath — not to commit any crime, but to abstain from all acts of theft, robbery and adultery, from breaches of faith, from repudiating a trust when called upon to honour it.*

The words which are clearly of huge significance are ‘an antiphonal hymn to Christ as God’. Pliny had clearly carried out fairly detailed enquiries as to the practices of Christians and it is evident from the whole of the letter that he is describing not simply the practices of Christians when he wrote, but practices that went back some time. This means that very early in the second century AD we have good, independent evidence that it had been the practice of Christians to meet together to sing praise to Christ as God. Evidence like this completely torpedoes the claim that Jesus was not regarded as the Son of God until the fourth century. Lest it be thought that what is being referred to by Pliny is simply some kind of homage to Christ, similar to the homage paid to other human dignitaries, we have only to read the whole of the letter to discover that this quite simply cannot be the case. Pliny tells Trajan that he had received an anonymous document with the names of certain people on it. These he examined to ascertain if they were Christians. He continues in the following words:

*Some of these denied that they were Christians or had ever been so; at my dictation they invoked the gods and did reverence with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose along with the statues of the gods; they also cursed Christ; and as I am informed that people who are really Christians cannot possibly be made to do any of those things, I considered that the people who did them should be discharged.*

As this quotation indicates, the Roman world could accommodate a variety of gods, including the emperor himself. Christians, like Jews, would have none of this. Their God was not one of many, but was the only God and He was to be identified with Christ.

### **Tacitus the untaciturn**

But who was this Christ? We shall let another Roman writer answer this question. The Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus was born in or about AD 56. He was a friend and teacher of Pliny the Younger. He wrote two major historical works, the *Histories* and the *Annals*. Both of these works deal with the story of the Roman emperors, the *Annals* being intended to cover the period AD 14 to 68, though Book XVI actually breaks off in AD 66. It is in

Book XV that we find mention of Christ. Tacitus is dealing with the fire which had broken out in Rome during the time of Nero. He writes as follows:

*But neither human resources, nor imperial munificence, nor appeasement of the gods, eliminated sinister suspicions that the fire had been instigated. To suppress this rumour, Nero fabricated scapegoats — and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilatus. But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital.<sup>3</sup>*

This is a fascinating passage. One can hardly say that Tacitus was partial to Christians! Quite the opposite. I shall explain why Tacitus had such a low view of Christians, but before doing so, I shall identify a number of interesting features in this passage. First, Tacitus notes that ‘Christians’ was a name by which certain people were popularly known. This is entirely consistent with what we find in the New Testament. The word Christian appears only three times in the New Testament, the first occurrence being Acts 11:26, where we read, ‘The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch’. From the Book of Acts it would appear that ‘Christians’ referred to themselves mostly either as ‘disciples’ or ‘brothers’. The statement in Acts 11:26 seems to indicate that it was those who were not disciples who gave the name ‘Christian’ to the followers of Christ. In other words, it was a kind of ‘nickname’. The second important point to note is that Tacitus acknowledges that the founder or originator of the movement was Christ and that he had been executed at a certain period (during the time when Tiberius was emperor and when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea), and at a particular place (the area of Judea, of which Pilate was governor). This is also thoroughly consistent with the New Testament account of the death of Jesus. Although the New Testament Gospels tell us that Jesus was a Galilean,<sup>4</sup> they all agree that He was executed in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate.<sup>5</sup> Paul also refers to Jesus having been before Pilate.<sup>6</sup>

The third thing to observe is that Tacitus notes that the execution of Jesus led to a temporary setback. This too accords with what we find in the New

Testament. It is quite clear from all four Gospels that Jesus had acquired a considerable popular following.<sup>7</sup> It is just as clear that the Jewish leaders set the crowd against Jesus at His trial before Pilate,<sup>8</sup> and that the disciples were frightened and shattered men after Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>9</sup> It seems that after the resurrection, for a forty-day period the disciples withdrew somewhat from public life and also spent some of their time in Galilee.<sup>10</sup> During this period Jesus appeared to them on numerous occasions, but this was not something which they yet communicated to the outside world. At the end of this forty-day period, Jesus left this earthly dimension, having first instructed them to wait for a number of more days in Jerusalem until they were especially empowered for the mission which Jesus had entrusted to them.<sup>11</sup> Ten days after Jesus was taken from them, on the Jewish Day of Pentecost, when dispersed Jews from all over the Empire had gathered in Jerusalem, the disciples began the task of making known the message Jesus had given them. According to the account in the New Testament, this was the beginning of the great expansion of the Christian message and the Book of Acts traces its spread from Jerusalem (which was in Judea) to Rome. In other words, Tacitus's account is entirely consistent with the New Testament account.

Two questions might be asked concerning what Tacitus wrote. First, why did he have such a low view of Christians? Secondly, if Jesus truly is the Son of God, why is this the only reference to Him in the *Annals*? With respect to the first question it is worth pointing out that Tacitus's 'angle' on Christians is exactly in line with what the Book of Acts and some of the New Testament letters have to say of the way in which Christians were viewed by the society of that time. The Book of Acts relates accounts of Christians being slandered and then, on the basis of such slander, being mistreated.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in one of his letters Peter writes to Christians as follows:

*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.*<sup>13</sup>

This kind of thing happened to the 'Puritans' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England, as well as to the eighteenth-century Methodists. Furthermore, it seems clear from part of Pliny's letter to Trajan that some thought that Christians engaged in cannibalism. This mistaken belief probably resulted from the words of 'the Lord's Supper', 'Take and eat;

this is my body' and 'Drink from it... This is my blood'.<sup>14</sup> The refusal to honour the Roman gods would also have got the Christians a bad name.

Why did Tacitus give so little space to Jesus? The answer is perfectly straightforward. Tacitus's focus was on the emperors and the various intrigues associated with them. This being so, it is no more surprising that Tacitus should say little about a Jewish teacher in a rather unimportant part of the Empire than that the biographers of Queen Victoria or Winston Churchill should say next to nothing about the religious revivals which were experienced in Wales in 1859 and 1904.

### **Evidence from a Jewish renegade**

One writer who was versed in things Jewish was the Jewish historian Josephus. He was born Joseph ben Matthias around AD 37 into a Jewish aristocratic family and died in 100. Although he became a priest when he was about twenty-seven and served as a commander of a Jewish force in Galilee when the Jewish revolt began in AD 66, he won favour with the Roman general Vespasian after he had been captured by him in AD 67, after the Romans had crushed the revolt. Vespasian spared Joseph ben Matthias from execution after he prophesied that Vespasian would one day become emperor. Vespasian kept him a prisoner for two years, but when the prophecy came true, Joseph was released. Thereafter he went to live in Rome, adopting the Roman name of Flavius Josephus, having seemed to betray his Jewish heritage by claiming that Vespasian was promised in the Old Testament as a great deliverer! Amongst other things, Josephus wrote a history of the Jewish people, *Antiquities*. In the words of Professor Bruce, this work was written 'in defence of the prestige of the Jews with which his own prestige was intimately bound up',<sup>15</sup> 'though he would not write anything calculated to offend his Roman patrons, especially during the reign of Vespasian's second son Domitian (AD 81–96) — a man cursed with an insanely suspicious nature and also with an irrational anti-Jewish prejudice'.<sup>16</sup>

*Antiquities* has an account of one of the Herods having John the Baptist put to death.<sup>17</sup> Both Matthew's Gospel and Mark's Gospel refer to the execution of John by one of the Herods, while Luke's Gospel and John's Gospel refer to the Herod having imprisoned John.<sup>18</sup> (Josephus fastens attention on one of the reasons for the Herod's action, while Matthew and Mark refer to a further

reason.) *Antiquities* also refers to the execution of James, the brother of Jesus. Matthew and Mark refer to a James who was one of the brothers of Jesus,<sup>19</sup> while Paul, in an early letter to a group of churches, refers to this James as ‘the Lord’s brother’ (that word ‘Lord’ again!) at Jerusalem.<sup>20</sup> So here again is independent testimony from outside the New Testament, by someone who was emphatically not a Christian, which nevertheless corroborates what we find in the New Testament. Josephus mentions the death of the Roman governor Festus and the fact that while his successor was in transit, the Jewish high priest assembled the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council) and had James put to death. This is how Josephus expresses it:

*He convened a judicial session of the Sanhedrin and brought before it the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ — James by name — and some others, whom he charged with breaking the law and handed over to be stoned to death.*<sup>21</sup>

This passage is very interesting for a number of reasons. First, it recognises that Jesus was regarded by some (Josephus not being one of them) as the Messiah. Secondly, Josephus was well informed about this particular period of Jewish history. He is regarded as a very important source of information about many aspects of this period in the history of the Jewish people. The fact that he himself did not regard Jesus as the Messiah makes the passage all the more significant.

## **How much is legend?**

Enough has been said, I trust, to demonstrate that the belief that Jesus was the Messiah goes right back to the very early church. Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger all testify to this and their testimony corroborates what the New Testament says. Of course, this raises the question as to whether Jesus Himself claimed to be the Messiah and, even if He did so claim, whether He was in fact who He claimed to be. In other words, might it be the case that, at a very early stage, followers of Jesus built up a legendary account of Him, so that there is a gap between what Jesus Himself taught and what His disciples claimed that He said? In the words of an earlier generation of sceptics, is there a difference between the religion *of* Jesus (that is, what He Himself taught) and the religion *about* Jesus (that is, what His disciples made of Him)? A

number of important things need to be said by way of reply to these questions.

First, we need to realise that there were plenty of religious teachers, as well as so-called ‘miracle men’, in the ancient world. Yet movements did not gather around them to spread throughout the ancient world, notwithstanding persecution and going on to influence millions, not only throughout the ancient world but also throughout history. Hanina ben Dosa, for example, was ‘apparently a younger contemporary of Jesus, and also a Galilean, a man of poverty, piety, and supernatural powers rather than a teacher and debater... [He] was credited with power over the queen of the demons’.<sup>22</sup> There were other such characters, both within the Jewish religion or on the fringes of it, as well as in the ‘pagan’ world. The question which must be answered, however, is this: why is it that it was Jesus, rather than any of these figures, about whom His followers claimed such great things and won over to their cause many who had hitherto not been His disciples, and even those who had once been hostile? When the claim is made that Jesus’ followers simply made up things about Him, I am inclined to respond in the words of one of Mark Twain’s characters, ‘Your saying so, don’t make it so.’ Simply to say that this is what happened is a bald assertion without any supporting evidence. And the assertion fails to answer the question as to why it was about Jesus that these things were said. Might it just be that the reason is precisely because He did claim to be who the Gospel writers said He claimed to be, and that He did rise from the dead? I shall argue in due course that this is in fact the true answer.

It might be objected that other religions have started from very humble beginnings and spread very quickly. Take Islam, for example. Within a very brief period of time from the arrival of an obscure Arab called Muhammad in Medina in AD 622, Islam spread at an astonishing rate. ‘Islam progressed as far in one century as Christianity in seven.’<sup>23</sup> So perhaps Jesus was not so unique after all? A number of things must be said in reply. First, Muhammad never claimed to be anything other than the prophet of Allah. It is a fundamental tenet of Islam that God has no Son and that Muhammad, though the greatest of the prophets, is no more than a prophet. Secondly, Islam advanced in those seventy years at the point of the sword. However disgraceful and disfiguring has been the record of some who have claimed ‘to fight in Christ’s cause’, it is

abundantly clear from the New Testament that Jesus taught that His disciples were not to take up arms to spread His message. The early Christians most certainly followed their Master's teaching at this point. In an empire which had conquered the then known world with armies whose discipline and military precision have become legendary, the marginalised followers of a humble teacher, from an obscure part of an unimportant outpost in that empire, lived transformed lives, loved their enemies, cared for the weak and helpless, rejoiced in forgiveness of sins, and attributed all to the Master they served: for though He had been brutally crucified, He had, they claimed, risen from the dead, was Lord over all, and the giver of eternal life. Without military prowess or political power, their numbers multiplied and this message spread into every stratum of society and touched different people groups throughout the empire. Some explanation has to be sought for this astonishing phenomenon. The one which fits like a hand in a glove and has maximum explanatory power is that Jesus was exactly who the New Testament writers say that He was and that He did those very things which the New Testament says that He did.

### **The real Jesus of history is the Christ of faith**

It will be necessary at this stage to say just a few things about the four Gospels. Ever since the European 'Enlightenment' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there have been numerous 'quests' to find 'the historical Jesus': that is to say, many have sought to drive a wedge between what 'the church' (and I do not simply mean the Roman Catholic Church) has believed about 'Christ' and what was the 'real', historical truth about Jesus. According to this approach, the New Testament account of Jesus is one which is biased by those who had come to view Him as the Christ. The task of those who 'quest' for 'the real Jesus' is to sort out the historical wheat from the chaff of faith within the New Testament documents. Or, to change the metaphor, to remove from the New Testament portrait of Jesus those things which have been added by faith and thus restore the picture to its original form. The attempt, however, must be deemed a monumental failure. To begin with, as is being increasingly recognised in our postmodern world, those who claim to be free from the bias of faith have their own presuppositions and agendas, albeit that they have often gone unnoticed and unquestioned. Indeed, it is this fact which has made them to be so insidious. One fairly widespread

presupposition has been that of the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume: miracles cannot happen, they do not happen, and therefore they have not happened. One may think this presupposition to be true; it is a presupposition nonetheless. I shall deal with the miraculous a little later in this chapter.

The Enlightenment project to search for ‘the historical Jesus’ is a failure because those involved in it cannot agree amongst themselves. A ‘quest’ reaches something of a dead end, only for someone to come on the scene with a new ‘map’ which will lead to the true Jesus, only for that quest to end in hopeless disagreement. It is as if a hospital has the latest state of the art instruments for diagnosing a whole range of conditions. The trouble is, however, that all of the doctors who use the instruments come to differing conclusions as to what is wrong with the patients. As the health budget rockets to buy more and more of these machines, so the disagreements intensify, and all the while the patients are dying like flies. Obviously there is need for someone like the child in the fable to cry out, ‘The emperor has no clothes.’ Either the machines are not all that they are cracked out to be or there is something wrong in the way in which the doctors are using them. So it is with these ‘quests for the historical Jesus’.

There are immensely learned tomes by immensely learned men which come to wildly different conclusions from equally learned tomes by other equally learned men. Meanwhile the world seems to go from bad to worse. Might it just be that there is something wrong with some of the historical ‘tools’ which are being employed? Or might it be that the commitment to disbelief of certain things blinds men to what is patently obvious? I am not for one moment suggesting that we adopt a ‘closed mind’, obscurantist approach to things. I am certainly not denying that some historical tools have proved extraordinarily helpful in understanding Jesus in His historical context. What I am saying, however, is this: if Jesus were who the New Testament sets Him forth to be, then to approach the New Testament account with a presupposition that things just could not be as the New Testament says they were, will inevitably mean that one will misread the evidence and inevitably go hopelessly astray. As C.S. Lewis once commented in another context, the first thing that is necessary for judging any piece of work is to know what it *is* and then what it is *for*. If one adopts the rather foolish notion that because the

men who wrote about Jesus had faith in Him as the Messiah they could not therefore be trusted to tell the truth about Him, one will, strictly speaking, be incapable of properly assessing their writings: all the time the presupposition, ‘This cannot be true’, will keep popping up and distorting the true picture of Jesus. To return, for a moment, to the analogy of the doctors and their sophisticated machines, many academics who write about Jesus are like those doctors. The Dan Browns of this world and those whose books are briefly cited in *The Da Vinci Code* belong with those on the outer fringes of ‘alternative medicine’.<sup>24</sup> (I am not rubbishing all ‘alternative’ medicine. But even the most ardent supporter of alternative medicine has to admit that some of it really is rather whacky.)

There is another reason why the attempt to unravel the historical truth about Jesus from the claims of faith is bound to fail. It is this: the more one gets into the New Testament, the more one realises that the claims of Jesus are part of the very warp and woof of its message. If one continues to unpick anything which refers to His Messiahship, His miracles, and His being the Son of God, one discovers that eventually nothing is left at all. For example, there was a time when it was very popular to say that the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount was the real, the authentic Jesus. Here was nothing of the miraculous, nothing about Jesus being God. What we have is a wonderfully simple message of the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man. Live by this and one could forget all that unnecessary stuff about Jesus being God and dying for the sins of the world. A closer look at the Sermon, however, and a careful reading of what it says demonstrate just how wide of the mark this thinking really was. A few examples must suffice.

A careful reading of Matthew 5 verses 11 and 12 will reveal something of what might be called ‘the substructure’ of Jesus’ thinking. It is clear that He is emphasising not only the importance of His teaching but, also, of His person — who He is. He is clearly implying that the difference between Himself and His disciples is the same as the difference between Jehovah and the prophets. Here is an implied claim to be none other than God. Here is an implied claim that His disciples are similar to the prophets because of their relationship to Jesus. Again, in chapter 5 verse 17 Jesus insists that the whole of the Old Testament is meaningless apart from Him, that it finds its climactic fulfilment in Him. In chapter 7 verse 11, quite incidentally and almost as an

aside, Jesus refers to the innate evil which characterises even those who have become His disciples. In verse 22 of that chapter He makes it clear that He will be the one who will judge men and women ‘on that day’.

### **Jesus is the ‘Son of Man’**

Had the Gospel writers been out to embellish the truth, then our New Testament would be very different from what it is. It will be impossible within the constraints of a book such as this to address the question as to how and why the Gospels were written. A few brief comments must suffice. First, the portrait of Jesus presented in the Gospels can be compared to that of a flower: it *develops*. The Jesus who is presented, especially in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is a Jesus who is something of an enigma to His disciples. The more they get to know Him, the more awed they are by Him. Here is a real man indeed, but what manner of man is He?<sup>25</sup> When Peter finally confesses Him to be the Messiah, Jesus completely baffles him by explaining that He, as Messiah, must be put to death and then rise again. That, quite simply, did not fit with Peter’s expectation of Messiahship nor with that of most of Peter’s contemporaries.<sup>26</sup> Frequently Jesus refers to Himself as ‘Son of Man’, a title which, with the exception of two, or possibly three, other references, is *never* used of Him elsewhere in the New Testament.

If the Gospel writers were simply projecting their faith onto a remarkable Galilean teacher and wonder-worker, why on earth should they preserve this enigmatic title in their Gospels when it did not seem to figure in the faith of the early church? Answer: because Jesus really did use this title as a designation of Himself. But that fact leads us on to the way in which the truth about Jesus dawned on the disciples. I shall explain.

The phrase ‘Son of Man’ could carry a range of meanings. To the Hebrew mindset ‘the son of’ someone was someone who shared the characteristics of the father. Thus ‘a son of evil’ would be an evil person. Therefore, ‘son of man’ is a reference to a man. It is frequently used in this way in the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel. It is quite clear that Jesus used this phrase as a roundabout way of saying ‘I’.<sup>27</sup> The phrase, therefore, was hardly controversial. However, it is also used in the Old Testament Book of Daniel with clear Messianic overtones<sup>28</sup>. The phrase was used by Jesus, therefore, in an ambiguous way. It allowed Him to speak of Himself to the crowds without

running the risk that they would seek to make Him a kind of political king and without endangering Himself before the Roman authorities. (The reference in John's Gospel chapter 6 and verse 15, that the crowds intended to use force to make Jesus king, resulted from an astounding miracle that He had performed, a miracle which, in the eyes of the crowd, likened Him to the first great leader of their nation, Moses. The fact that Jesus withdrew from these crowds because of their plan to make Him king supports the view that He used the phrase 'Son of man' in order to minimise this risk.) At the right moment, the moment of His choosing, He disclosed to His enemies quite clearly that all the while the title had the same Messianic overtones which it has in the Book of Daniel.

In other words, here is historical realism, rather than anachronism. An anachronism is when someone reads into the past things which belong to the future. A good example would be that of a coin discovered by an archaeologist which bears the date 20 BC. It would obviously be a fake because the dating system of BC and AD did not exist at the point in time which we know as BC. It would be anachronistic. This is not what we find in the Gospels.

### **Jesus is also the Son of God**

Since discussion of the title 'Son of God' involves a certain amount of technical detail and discussion of certain issues which are current in the scholarly world of New Testament studies, I discuss the origins and significance of this title in Appendix 2 to this chapter.

Much of what Jesus said of Himself as the Son of God was lost on the disciples until *after* the resurrection. Then things began to fall into place. Then, with Jesus further outlining to them how all that had happened had been promised in the Old Testament, they grasped what had hitherto been eluding them. The death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus were now seen to be central. This is what was being constantly preached by the apostles. Letters were written by apostles to help the infant churches which had been established by the itinerant preachers. There were those, however, as there always have been, and still are, who wished to 'hijack' and distort the message about Jesus.<sup>29</sup> The Gospels were to prove to be a bulwark against these distortions of the truth about Jesus.<sup>30</sup> The evidence which we have gathered from Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger indicates the congruity of

what we read in the New Testament with what these writers say was believed by the earliest followers of Jesus. From the beginning the four Gospels and the letters of the apostles were authoritative.<sup>31</sup> ‘The church’ did not confer authority upon these documents; rather they ‘recognised’ that authority. Just as Isaac Newton did not invent gravity but recognised its existence, so it was with the New Testament documents. The authority of the New Testament books rested on the fact that these were the documents which bore witness to the real Jesus and His message: they served both to propagate and to preserve that message.

### **The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection**

That message, we have seen, has Jesus at its centre: who He was, what He said and did, His death and His resurrection. This brings us to the last part of our journey in seeking to get at the truth about Jesus: the evidence that He did, in fact, rise from the dead. It is of crucial importance to realise that belief in the resurrection of Jesus does not rest upon wishful thinking, nor does it result from a propensity which some might have to believe sentimental stories or to indulge a particular interest in ‘the paranormal’. No: there are good and solid reasons for believing that Jesus rose from the dead. There is solid evidence which supports the claim that having been crucified and buried under the permission of Pontius Pilate, Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. It is to this evidence that we must now turn, but only after first explaining what exactly is meant by ‘resurrection’.

First, resurrection must not be confused with someone coming back to life after a ‘near death’ experience. From time to time there have been reports of people whose hearts have stopped or who have felt that they could see themselves on an operating table at the very point when it looked to the surgical team that death was inevitable and imminent, only for such people to ‘win through’ or ‘come back’ and live to tell the tale. In the case of Jesus we shall see that there are overwhelming reasons for believing that had a twenty-first-century doctor have been around, he would have had no difficulty at all in pronouncing Jesus dead and signing his death certificate.

Secondly, resurrection is not the same as resuscitation. People who are resuscitated live longer than they otherwise would have, but they still die at some later date. By resurrection the Bible means not that Jesus came back to

His old life but that He arose in the power of a new and endless life, and thereby was able to enter into a new quality and dimension of existence. Having clarified what is meant by resurrection, I shall now set out the evidence for it and consider objections that are raised against that evidence.

### **Hallmarks of authenticity**

The documentary evidence for the resurrection is to be found in the four Gospels and in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.<sup>32</sup> Analysis of that evidence gives good and sufficient reason for believing it to be reliable and truthful in the story which it tells. The first striking thing to notice is that all four Gospels record that it was women who first discovered that the tomb where Jesus had been buried was empty, and that it was to women that the message that Jesus had risen from the dead was first made.<sup>33</sup> The importance of this detail derives from the fact that in ancient Middle Eastern societies women were not regarded as reliable witnesses and their testimony was not given the same weight as that of men.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, there are indications within the Gospel accounts that if the male disciples did not exactly dismiss the women's testimony entirely out of hand, they certainly took it with more than a pinch of salt and can hardly be said to have wholeheartedly believed it.<sup>35</sup> The obvious question to ask, therefore, is, *Why* did all the Gospel writers include these details of the women unless they were recording what actually happened? There would be absolutely no point at all in mentioning the women, unless this is what did happen. The exact opposite would be the case. Indeed, the early Christian tradition did not include these details when presenting to an unbelieving world the basic Christian message.<sup>36</sup> This makes the fuller account of what happened on that first day of the week all the more remarkable. If the Gospel writers had been fabricating a story, the testimony of the women would have been the very last thing which they would have mentioned.

### **What are we to make of the empty tomb?**

The second feature which all four Gospels record is the fact that the tomb of Jesus was empty. This fact raises the question as to what had happened to the body of Jesus. While the Gospels maintain that Jesus had risen from the dead, other theories have been proposed to account for the empty tomb. There are

three such theories; we shall subject each of them to critical analysis and evaluation.

The first theory builds upon the supposition that Jesus did not really die on the cross. Therefore it was not a lifeless corpse that had been placed into the tomb. In the tomb, somehow or other, Jesus revived and somehow or other got out of the tomb and then later appeared alive to His disciples. There are numerous variations on this theory, some of which suggest that Joseph of Arimathea helped Jesus to come round in the tomb and helped him to get out. This theory just simply fails to fit the facts. The theory fails to fit the facts of what happened in any crucifixion and what happened specifically in the case of Jesus. We are told that before He was crucified, Jesus underwent a severe flogging. This flogging was called the *verberatio*. This was a terrible form of punishment which was always associated with other punishments, including crucifixion. Under this form of punishment, ‘the victim was stripped and tied to a post, and then beaten by several torturers... until they were exhausted, or their commanding officer called them off. For victims who, like Jesus, were neither Roman citizens nor soldiers, the favoured instrument was a whip whose leather thongs were fitted with pieces of bone or lead or other metal. The beatings were so savage that the victims sometimes died. Eyewitness records report that such brutal scourgings could leave victims with their bones and entrails exposed.’<sup>37</sup>

Crucifixion is possibly the most barbaric form of execution ever devised by men. The victim would have his hands nailed to a crossbar (the nails would go through the wrists) and the feet would also be secured by a nail. There would be a small ‘peg’ called a *sedile* upon which part of the victim’s rump would rest. There would be considerable blood loss, and death would normally be slow and agonising and would often result from tetanus.<sup>38</sup> Due to the fact that the day after Jesus was crucified was a special Sabbath day in the Jewish calendar, the bodies were not, as would normally have been the case, left on the crosses. This being so, the two men with Jesus had their legs broken.<sup>39</sup> This would have hastened death: death would have resulted from asphyxia, since the victim would be unable to push with his legs to keep his chest cavity open. In the case of Jesus they found Him already dead. As a kind of *coup de grâce* one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear ‘bringing a sudden flow of blood and water’.<sup>40</sup> Professor Carson surveys the views of

various medical authorities on the meaning and significance of this flow of blood and water.<sup>41</sup> What is unmistakable is the fact that John, recording this years before the advances in medical knowledge, is giving testimony to something which indisputably meant that Jesus was dead, as dead as could be. This fact alone is sufficient to scotch the theory that Jesus was still alive when He was put into the tomb and later revived. The theory would also mean that the soldiers involved in the execution were singularly inept at their job. Furthermore it fails to account for the nature of the resurrection appearances.

A second explanation for the empty tomb is that the women went to the wrong tomb. This theory must be dismissed for a number of reasons. First, the Gospel writers emphasise that the women saw where Jesus was buried: they made a mental note of it.<sup>42</sup> It would mean that all of them got it wrong. It would also mean that the disciples, who were told by the women that the tomb was empty, either did not raise with the women the possibility that they had gone to the wrong tomb or, having raised it and checked out the details, similarly made a mistake. Thirdly, it raises the problem that somebody else's tomb was empty, since the fact is recorded that the sealing stone had been removed and that grave clothes lay undisturbed in the tomb.<sup>43</sup> In the fourth place this theory fails to account for the appearances of the risen Jesus to His disciples. And finally it fails to explain why the Jewish authorities, who wished to stamp out the early Christian teaching, did not arrange for the true grave to be opened and the body to be produced. Here is a theory which is left with far more things to explain than the empty tomb. It is unsustainable as an explanation.

The third way of accounting for the empty tomb is to say that the body of Jesus was stolen. There are four versions of this theory. Version one says that the Roman authorities stole the body. Version two says that the Jewish authorities stole the body. Version three has unknown people as the grave robbers, while the fourth version maintains that it was Jesus' disciples who stole His body. Each version needs to be examined.

At a general level, the question must be asked as to *why* the Jewish or Roman authorities would have wanted to have removed the body. If Pontius Pilate had wished, for some reason, to have had the body, why on earth did he give Joseph of Arimathea permission in the first place to have the body for burial? Secondly, if the Jewish authorities had stolen the body, why did they not

produce it when the first Christians took Jerusalem by storm with their message that Jesus had risen from the dead? Thirdly, there is no evidence to say that it was ever suggested that the body of Jesus had been stolen by the Jewish authorities, the Roman authorities, or by some unknown people. In the fourth place, versions one to three of this theory cannot account for the resurrection appearances or for the great change which came over the disciples. But what of version four, that the disciples stole the body of Jesus? Matthew's Gospel tells us that the soldiers who guarded the tomb were bribed to say this and that, at the time when Matthew wrote his Gospel, this story was still circulating amongst the Jews. What are we to make of this?

First, we shall examine the theory in its bare form and then examine the way that Matthew says that it was being reported. To begin with, it would mean that men who continually inculcated the importance of telling the truth were, in fact, perpetrating one of the greatest frauds of all time. There have, of course, always been hypocrites in the world and it may be argued that Jesus' disciples were such. The difficulty with this explanation is that many of the disciples suffered greatly, and some were put to death, for preaching the Christian message. Part of that message was that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead, and the disciples claimed not that they simply believed this but that they had seen the risen Jesus. Is it really credible that not one of them would have broken ranks on this, even when faced with imminent death? One cannot resist this objection to the theory by saying that there have been, and are, many people who are willing to die for their beliefs or for a cause: for the apostles did not suffer for a cause which they had taken up or for a belief which they held simply as a belief, but for a belief and whole way of life that was based *not* on faith but on fact, on something which they had seen. It also means that all the alleged appearances of the risen Jesus were nothing other than fabrications. The theory fails to account for the psychological fact that the apostles were possessed of great courage and spread the message. It fails to explain how men, who clearly believed that they held to the monotheistic faith of their Jewish heritage (that is, that there is only one God), could maintain such a faith together with a belief that Jesus was Lord, unless, of course, He really had demonstrated Himself to be Lord by rising from the dead. And, perhaps most significantly of all, this theory is torpedoed by the rather awkward fact that Paul, who was not one of the original apostles but who had had it in for the church and their message, changed sides as a result

of the risen Jesus appearing also to him. How on earth can that be fitted into this bizarre theory?

That Matthew should say that this explanation was circulating amongst the Jews of his day is quite significant. First, Matthew's Gospel is literally saturated with details which demonstrate that he was thoroughly versed in matters Jewish and that he was writing for people who were likewise fully conversant with Jewish affairs. It would have been unthinkable, therefore, for him to expect his Gospel to be taken seriously if, having said that this account was circulating at the time when he wrote his Gospel, this, in fact, were not the case. We have good reason, therefore, for believing Matthew when he says that this 'explanation' of the empty tomb had circulated amongst the Jews from the earliest time and was still current when he wrote his Gospel. But how would such a story get going in the first place? Its intrinsic improbability tells against it. Matthew, however, tells us that the story goes right back to the soldiers who guarded the tomb. This makes good historical sense of the origin of the account. But this being so, there is every reason to believe Matthew when he says that the soldiers were guarding the tomb, for how else could they be the originators of this story? And this means that Matthew's account of the Jewish leaders bribing the soldiers also makes perfect sense: for otherwise, we have to believe that a group of untrained military men were able to overpower the trained Roman soldiers, open the tomb, conceal Jesus' body somewhere else, preach openly that Jesus had been raised from the dead, was Lord of all, and get away with it without the Romans arresting them for having overpowered the soldiers! Such a theory beggars belief. The idea that the disciples stole Jesus' body simply will not stand.

All attempts to explain away the empty tomb also fail to come to terms with the fact that the Gospels not only say that the tomb was empty, but also emphasise the message that was given to the women at the empty tomb that Jesus had risen.

### **The appearances of the risen Jesus**

The second piece of evidence which the Gospels, Acts and 1 Corinthians record is that the risen Jesus appeared to His disciples over a forty-day period. It is important to stress what a lawyer would call the *cumulative* nature of the evidence: that is to say, that it is not simply the pieces of evidence taken on

their own which must be considered, but their combined effect when placed together. One of the weaknesses in some of the theories which discount the resurrection is that, in seeking to explain one strand of evidence, they completely fail to deal with other strands. But as with a good scientific theory, so with evidence: the explanation which can account for all the evidence, the explanation which has greatest explanatory power, is preferable to a theory which can only account for one piece of evidence by ignoring other pieces. We have already considered the fact that appearances to women would hardly have been mentioned unless the Gospel writers were ‘telling it as it really happened’. And what established their belief in what the women said was not only the fact of the empty tomb but the appearances of the risen Jesus to them. A number of theories have been proposed to account for these appearances and to discount the resurrection. The first says that it was a case of mistaken identity: it was not Jesus who appeared to them but somebody else who, in certain respects, bore similarities to Him. Proponents of this theory often seek to find support from a number of verses in the Gospels which indicate that the disciples did not immediately recognise Jesus.<sup>44</sup> But this is a classic example of what a lawyer would refer to as someone being selective with the evidence. To appeal to verses in the Gospels which suggest that initially the disciples did not recognise Jesus, while, at the same time, ignoring the way in which those accounts proceed to tell of their great joy in realising that it was Jesus and that He had risen from the dead, is to be guilty of playing extraordinarily fast and loose with the evidence. In lawyers’ language, it is a kind of ‘special pleading’.

Similarly, this theory fails to get to grips with the fact that Jesus showed the disciples the wounds from the nails in His hands and feet, and the spear wound in His side.<sup>45</sup> If this were not Jesus, then it was someone else who had undergone the same suffering. This is a theory which gives rise to problems rather than being an explanation of things. Furthermore, it does not account for the fact that the resurrected body of Jesus was evidently possessed of properties which, hitherto, it did not possess: He could appear to people in a locked room and then disappear. Again, this theory takes no account at all of the fact that Paul claimed to have seen the risen Lord, nor does it explain how the risen Jesus was finally taken from the disciples.

Another ‘explanation’ of the appearances of the risen Lord is that the disciples experienced hallucinations of some kind. This theory will hardly bear scrutiny. The idea that different people, at different times and in different places — early morning, daytime, evening; on the road, at the seashore, inside a room, on a mountain; ones, twos, eleven, ten, eleven, even five hundred at one time — were all suffering from the same hallucinations, over a period of nearly six weeks, and which spontaneously stopped for them all at the same time; that they were thereby transformed and able to persuade a largely hostile society that Jesus had in fact been raised from the dead; and that some time later, quite independently of them, Paul should have had a similar hallucination: this is not the way that hallucinations are experienced. And, furthermore — and this is why it is important to stress the cumulative nature of the evidence — it says nothing about the empty tomb.

### **That incredible Christian**

The third strand of evidence comes from Paul himself. Here was a man who was a zealous member of a Jewish religious group called ‘Pharisees’ and who was utterly committed to this strand of the Judaism of his day. The threat to the temple which, he saw, was posed by the Christian movement; his complete self-confidence in his own achievements; his hostility to the idea that the message of Jesus opened up the faith of his fathers to non-Jews of every description; and his commitment to the Old Testament teaching that whoever was hanged on a tree was under God’s curse: all of these things made him implacably opposed to the Christian message that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah. And yet, this same man became the greatest Christian missionary of all time, the human spearhead who took the Christian message to the Gentile nations and championed the faith which said that such Gentiles did not need to be ‘judaised’ to enter the community of God’s people, nor did they need to be judaised to stay as members of that community. What produced this staggering *volte-face*? In a word, Jesus. Intent on crushing the church, Paul’s life was revolutionised when the risen Lord intervened in it outside the Syrian city of Damascus. Paul is quite clear that he saw the risen Jesus. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, one of the most famous passages in the Bible on the resurrection, Paul makes it clear that the risen Lord appeared to him in the same way that He had appeared to the other disciples: that is to say, bodily. The remainder of the chapter makes it quite

clear that Paul is speaking, not of some mystical experience, but of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He also explains that he was the last thus to see the risen Lord. Elsewhere Paul speaks of receiving visions: he is able to distinguish visions from the appearance of the risen Lord Jesus to him.<sup>46</sup> The man who was such a convinced and thoroughgoing monotheist; who was such a nationalistically minded Jew; who was zealous for the law of Moses and the traditions of his fathers: this is the man who poured his life out in service to Jesus Christ. This is the man who teaches in many places that Jesus is God.<sup>47</sup> This is the man who came to see that Jesus was cursed by God but it was in order to redeem or rescue us from that curse.<sup>48</sup> And all the while he is at pains to stress that the message he preached, though he received it directly by revelation from Jesus, is exactly the same message that the other apostles preached and was handed down by them as a sacred deposit.<sup>49</sup>

### **The compelling evidence**

In his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*, C.S. Lewis says that one of the things which shook him into reconsideration of the Christian faith was the remark of one of the ‘hardest boiled of all the atheists’ that he had ever met, that ‘the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good. “Rum thing,” he went on. “All that stuff... about the Dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it really happened once”.<sup>50</sup> Frank Morrison, a journalist who set out to discredit the resurrection, ended up writing a very different book, *Who Moved the Stone?*, in which he concluded that Jesus really did rise from the dead. Other books have sifted and examined the evidence and come to the same conclusion.

### **Science and faith**

But some continue to doubt. Surely in a scientific age there must be another explanation, some will say. A number of things need to be said by way of reply. First some general comments about the nature of science. Science is all about observing the world and its phenomena, proposing explanations of these phenomena, and then testing the explanations. The idea that a scientific description of the world is all that is needed is an example of the fallacy known as *reductionism*: that is to say, once you *reduce* everything to the scientific level, you have hit the bedrock of reality. The fallacy can easily be illustrated in the following way. Imagine that a chemist analyses the chemicals

involved in the *Mona Lisa* painting. He has given a true description of that great work. A physicist may describe the painting in terms of the absorption of different light frequencies by different pigments within the painting. That too would be a true description. A forensic scientist might tell us some very important things about the fibres upon which the painting was done. None of these descriptions makes the others to be untrue and it certainly would be an odd person who would think that the chemical description of the painting would mean that one could discount the involvement of Leonardo in painting the picture. So it is with a scientific description of the world and a religious description. The idea that science corrodes faith is really quite fallacious, and is belied by the fact that some of the world's most eminent scientists are Christian believers.

## **Science and miracles**

What I have just said may be granted and yet exception be taken to a belief in the miraculous. And the resurrection is most certainly miraculous: people do not rise from the dead! The best way to deal with this objection is to quote from a letter published in *The Times* newspaper on 13 July 1984. The letter was signed by fifteen distinguished scientists: all were university professors in some science subject, and six were Fellows of the Royal Society, a society which only admits as fellows those who have distinguished themselves by contributions to science. The letter reads as follows:

*In view of the recent discussions about the views of Bishops on miracles we wish to make the following comments. It is not logically valid to use science as an argument against miracles. To believe that miracles cannot happen is as much an act of faith as to believe that they can happen. We gladly accept the Virgin Birth, the Gospel miracles, and the Resurrection of Christ as historical events. We know that we are representative of many other scientists who are also Christians standing in the historical tradition of the churches.*

*Miracles are unprecedented events. Whatever the current fashions in philosophy or the revelations of opinion polls may suggest it is important to affirm that science (based as it is upon the observation of precedents) can have nothing to say on the subject. Its 'laws' are*

*only generalisations of our experience. Faith rests on other grounds.<sup>51</sup>*

## **Evidence that demands a verdict**

We are now at the end of our journey. It may not have been as entertaining a journey as is provided in *The Da Vinci Code*. But it surely has a better ending: for *The Da Vinci Code* ends with the rationally minded Robert Langdon falling to his knees in reverence, thinking that he is near the bones of a woman who died two thousand years ago. Our journey has brought us to the feet of one who, two thousand years ago, rose triumphantly from the dead. He is the most important person of all. It is not what Dan Brown thinks of Him that matters but what He thinks of *The Da Vinci Code*'s author. It is not whether Dan Brown has a great rating with *The New York Times* that matters but what kind of credit he has before Jesus Christ. Dan Brown? The same is true for you and me. At the end of the day — at the end of *the* day, the little day of our lives — the only thing that will matter to us is, What does Jesus Christ think of me? The answer to that question will turn on what you think of Him and do with Him now. He is the true God, the living Lord of history, and the only Saviour for people like you and me. Confess to Him that you have not lived as you should, that you are sorry for where you have gone wrong. Trust Him to deliver you from guilt, to pardon you, and to make you new. Yield your life up to Him as *your* Lord and Saviour and all will be well. The most important question you will ever answer is that which Jesus posed one day to his disciples: *Who do you say that I am?* And having answered that question, you will be faced with the question which Pontius Pilate put to the crowd: *What shall I do with Jesus?* The answers to these two questions are something you cannot afford to get wrong.

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## **Appendix 1**

Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians is possibly the earliest New Testament letter to have been written. It may confidently be dated to about AD 51.<sup>52</sup> This is roughly twenty years after the death of Jesus. The opening 'greeting' of the letter refers to Jesus as 'the Lord Jesus Christ'. Three things are significant about this. First, in the ancient world this part of a letter was fairly formal and

followed certain conventions. In other words, this would not be the part of a letter in which ‘to grind one’s axe’ or to make controversial statements. Secondly, the description or ‘title’ of Jesus is all-important. ‘Christ’ is the Greek word for ‘Messiah’. ‘Lord’ is also a very important word. While it is true that the Greek word which it translates, *kurios*, could sometimes have the sense of our ‘sir’, it is also the word which is used to translate one of the names of God in the Old Testament. This is the name which schoolchildren learn as ‘Yahweh’ and which is also known as ‘Jehovah’. For a number of reasons it must bear this latter meaning in the greeting which Paul makes. In other words, he refers to Jesus as the Messiah and as Jehovah. It is nothing less than calling Jesus God. The third significant thing about the greeting is the fact that Paul wishes grace and peace to his readers ‘from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’. For any Jew (which Paul was) to place someone on the same level as God would have been regarded as blasphemy and idolatry, unless that person was God. What all this means is that Paul regards Jesus as God and yet, in some way, distinct from ‘God our Father’. Already we see part of the outline of what is known as the doctrine of the Trinity.

In chapter 1 verse 10 Paul refers to Jesus as God’s Son and says that God raised Him from the dead. Furthermore, he says that it is Jesus who delivers us from the coming wrath (a reference to the way in which Jesus’ death — implied in the fact that He had been raised from the dead — removes our guilt before God) and that Jesus is coming again.

Another very early document is Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. This can reasonably be dated to around AD 55–57.<sup>53</sup> This was written, therefore, about twenty-five years after the death of Jesus. The letter has a similar greeting to that of 1 Thessalonians,<sup>54</sup> is full of references to the death of Jesus by crucifixion for our sins,<sup>55</sup> and to His resurrection.<sup>56</sup> While Paul is quite clear that Jesus was a real man,<sup>57</sup> he is just as emphatic that He is more than a man: thus he calls Him ‘the Lord of glory’.<sup>58</sup> This is one of the most ‘elevated’ titles given to Jesus in the entire New Testament: it unmistakably identifies Him with the LORD God of the Old Testament. Later in the letter,<sup>59</sup> Paul adapts what is known in Judaism as ‘the Shema’ in such a way as to identify Jesus with God.<sup>60</sup> Another point to observe in this letter is the fact that in chapter 12 verses 4–6 there is a clear reference to what would come to be known as the doctrine of the Trinity. All this only twenty-five years after the

death of Jesus. Furthermore, in chapter 15 verses 3-8 Paul refers to the facts of the gospel or ‘good news’ as something which had been handed down,<sup>61</sup> thereby intimating that this was something already well-known. He goes on to speak of the appearances of the risen Lord and mentions one appearance to more than five hundred brothers (a reference to Christian disciples) at the same time, most of whom were still living, though some had ‘fallen asleep’ (a reference to death).<sup>62</sup>

I shall refer to just one other letter: the letter to the Hebrews. While this letter must be dated before AD 95,<sup>63</sup> there are good reasons for believing that it was written prior to the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>64</sup> The letter is fascinating because it clearly refers to Jesus as God and as creator of the entire universe,<sup>65</sup> and, just as clearly, emphasises that He was a real man, in every sense of the word, yet without sin.<sup>66</sup> The letter clearly indicates that Christianity is the natural and inevitable fruit from the stem of the Jewish religion of the Old Testament. It is full of references to the sacrificial nature of Jesus’ death and also refers to His resurrection from the dead, and His coming again.<sup>67</sup>

Enough has been said to lay to rest for good and all the idea that the later church invented the belief that Jesus was the Son of God and invented the belief that He rose from the dead. The simple fact is that very early Christian documents teach this. But it is not only Christian documents which say as much: there are pagan documents, from long before Constantine, which clearly confirm that early Christians worshipped Jesus and believed Him to be God. These documents are dealt with in the body of this chapter.

## **Appendix 2**

What, however, of the title ‘Son of God’? It is important for us to realise that the roots of this phrase go right back to the Old Testament, to a time well over a thousand years before Jesus was born. The phrase is applied to the nation of Israel, for they were to live under God’s rule and be a light to the surrounding nations.<sup>68</sup> As the nation failed to fulfil its promise and mission, hopes fastened on kingship within the nation. The first king, King Saul, was rejected by God and was replaced by David. God refers to David’s dynasty in terms of ‘sonship’ of God.<sup>69</sup> In this context the phrase most emphatically does not refer to David’s dynasty being ‘divine’. It is this usage of the phrase ‘son of God’ which we find in Psalm 2, which is a ‘coronation psalm’, referring to

the king as being God's son. The tragedy was that the dynasty of David did not live up to what was hoped for it: it is a tale of failure and corruption. In this context the prophets, especially the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, looked forward to the day when the Messiah would come, *the* son of David. What is so important about Isaiah's prophecies is that, while referring to the Messiah as the son of David, he also regards Him as divine: he describes Him as 'the mighty God', as 'Immanuel' or 'God with us'. As Isaiah proceeds with his prophecy, written hundreds of years before Jesus, he rings the changes on the fact that the king was to represent the nation. Accordingly, a part of the prophecy deals with one who is called 'the servant of the LORD'. At times it seems that this servant is the nation of Israel, while at other times it can only be an individual. The reason for this is that the individual, as the king, is the representative of others. Towards the end of chapter 52 and throughout chapter 53 the servant suffers terribly, not only at the hands of men but also at the hands of God. He is bearing the sins of others and bears the punishment they deserve. Yet it becomes clear that this sufferer who will die will go on after death and something great will be accomplished.

These different strands come together in Jesus' thinking in a way in which they had not amongst His contemporaries. They regarded the phrase 'Son of God' as a reference to the Messiah, and they understood Messiahship politically. Part of the reason for this may have been that the Emperor Octavius had taken the title 'Son of God'. It was, therefore, charged with political meaning. Jesus accepts the title as referring to Him as Messiah, but He clearly understands Messiahship against the background of books like Isaiah. Therefore, as David's descendant, He is a real man. But He is more than a man: He is the mighty God and David's Lord. He is also the one who must suffer, as Isaiah prophesied. In other words, the phrase Son of God refers to Jesus' Godhood *not* because the early church decided this, nor because this is what the phrase always means; rather, its Old Testament roots applied it to the Davidic king, but the Davidic king *par excellence* would be the Messiah. He, however, would be God and man. Therefore, the phrase Son of God applied to the Messiah *does* refer to His Godhood. It is because of this that Jesus can refer to the fact that He had always been God's Son.

## Notes

- 1 Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- 2 Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96. The translation I have quoted is found in Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-27. Trajan's reply is found on p. 27.
- 3 I am quoting from the Penguin Classics edition of 1977, the translation being that of Michael Grant. The quotation is found on page 365.
- 4 Matthew 4:12-13; Luke 23:5-6.
- 5 Luke 23:11; Matt. 27:26; John 19:16-22.
- 6 1 Timothy 6:13.
- 7 Matthew 13:2; Luke 12:1; 23:27.
- 8 Matthew 27:20.
- 9 Luke 24:18-21; John 20:19.
- 10 John 21:1-14; Acts chapters 1 and 2.
- 11 Acts 1:3.
- 12 Acts 16:16-21.
- 13 1 Peter 2:12.
- 14 Matthew 26:26, 28.
- 15 Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
- 17 Josephus, *Antiquities* xviii. 2. For English translation see Whiston (trans.), *The Complete Works of Josephus* (Kregel, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1960, 1978, 1981), p. 382, and Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.
- 18 Matthew 11:2; 14:1-12.
- 19 Matthew 13:55.
- 20 Galatians 1:19.
- 21 Josephus, *Antiquities* xx. 200. For English translation see Whiston, *op. cit.*, p. 423, and Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
- 22 R.T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1986), pp.52-53.
- 23 Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Pimlico, 1996; printed with corrections, 1997), p. 253.
- 24 The dust jacket to the hardback edition of L. Picknett & C. Prince, *The Templar Revelation* (Bantam Press, 1997). For example, on page 253 of *The Da Vinci Code*, reference is made to *The Templar Revelation* as one of the many books which have

been written by ‘scores of historians’. The details which are given of the authors on the dust jacket of this book are very different from those which one normally finds in a work of serious scholarship by a historian.

- 25 Matthew 8:27.
- 26 Matthew 16:13-23. Of the two definite references outside of the Gospels to Jesus being ‘the Son of Man’, one is in the Book of Revelation and is clearly alluding to the occurrence of the phrase in the Book of Daniel. The other definite reference is in Acts 7:56, where the martyr Stephen says before he dies that he can see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. This reference is highly significant, given that Luke, the author of Acts, does not use this phrase anywhere else in this book. This suggests that the early church was aware that Jesus had used this self-designation and had come to grasp its full messianic significance. The reference to the Son of Man being at the right hand of God is an allusion both to the use of this term in the Book of Daniel and to its use by Jesus before the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, at His trial. The other reference is in the Letter to the Hebrews, where it is a quotation from Psalm 8. Its use in Hebrews 2 indicates that it is in union and fellowship with Jesus that men and women will be brought to the position which God originally intended for us.
- 27 Matthew 16:13; cf. Mark 9:27.
- 28 Daniel 7:13-14.
- 29 2 Corinthians 11:4.
- 30 Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31: the human authors of these two Gospels had somewhat different aims in writing. It is clear from John 21:22-24 that a ‘saying’ which was wrongly attributed to Jesus was circulating as such in the early church, and that *one* of the reasons for John recording the conversation in John 21:20-23 was to correct this error. In other words, one of the purposes for the writing of the four Gospels was to give an accurate and authentic account of what Jesus said and did.
- 31 1 Tim. 5:18. Paul quotes as ‘Scripture’ a verse from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, and then goes on to quote a saying of Jesus which is found in Luke 10:7. In 2 Peter 3:16 Peter refers to Paul’s letters as Scripture: this is clear from the way in which he refers to ‘the other Scriptures’. See also the quote from Polycarp in Dunbar, *op. cit.*, p. 326. There is an extensive literature on the *historical* background and recognition of the New Testament *canon*, as well as on the *theological* need and nature of such a canon. The following is a selection of works which are fairly accessible and not unduly technical: F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Chapter House, 1988); H.N. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company); Dunbar, *op. cit.*; B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1948).

- 32 Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20 & 21; 1 Cor. 15:3-8.
- 33 Matt. 28:1-10; John 20:1-18.
- 34 See Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.219; the reference in the *Mishnah* that the law concerning ‘an oath of testimony’ applied only to men and not to women: *m. Shebu.* 4.1. ; ‘the ineligibility of women as witnesses was a benchmark of what was to be counted as ineligible (*m. Rosh Hash.* 1.8).’ This quotation and these references come from J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, being volume 1 of *Christianity in the Making* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK 2003), p. 833 note 28. See also the same point made by the Orthodox Jewish writer Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (English trans.) (SPCK, 1984), pp. 95-96, quoted in P. Beasley-Murray, *The Message of the Resurrection* (IVP, Leicester, 2000), pp. 250-251.
- 35 Luke 24:11, 22-23.
- 36 1 Cor. 15:3-8.
- 37 D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (IVP, Leicester 1991), p. 597.
- 38 On crucifixion see M. Hengel, *Crucifixion* (SCM 1977).
- 39 John 19:31-33. On the practice of breaking the legs, known as *crurifragium*, see Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 622 and note 2.
- 40 John 20:34.
- 41 Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 623 and note 2.
- 42 Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55.
- 43 Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2-3, 12; John 20:1, 5-7.
- 44 Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:16, 31.
- 45 Luke 24:39; John 20:20, 27.
- 46 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.
- 47 Romans 9:5; 1 Cor. 2:8; Philipp. 2:6, 10-11; Col. 1:15; 2:9.
- 48 Gal. 3:10-14.
- 49 Acts 9:15-16; Gal. 1:11-12; cf. 1 Cor. 15:3.
- 50 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (Fontana Books, 1959), pp. 178-179.
- 51 The text of the letter is reproduced in D. Alexander, *Rebuilding The Matrix* (Lion Publishing plc, Oxford, 2001), p. 427. The letter gave rise to an editorial in the prestigious scientific journal *Nature* and to correspondence arising from this.
- 52 D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (IVP, Leicester, 1970), pp. 566-567.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 441; G.D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987), pp. 4-5.
- 54 1 Corinthians 1:3.
- 55 1 Cor. 1:18, 23-25; 2:2; 15:3.

56 1 Cor. 15:4-8, 12-22.

57 1 Cor. 15:21.

58 1 Cor. 2:8

59 1 Cor. 8:6.

60 1 Cor. 8:6. See also the treatment of this verse in N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1991).

61 The Greek verb which Paul uses and which is translated ‘I passed on to you’ ‘is a technical term in Judaism for the oral transmission of religious instruction’ (Fee, *op. cit.*, p. 499 note 29), and carries the idea of passing on what had become established teaching or authentic tradition.

62 1 Cor. 15:6.

63 See Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 716.

64 *Ibid.*, pp. 716-717.

65 Hebrews 1:8-10.

66 Heb. 2: 5-18; 5:1-7.

67 Heb. 9:14, 23-28; 10:1-14, 19; Heb. 13:20-21.

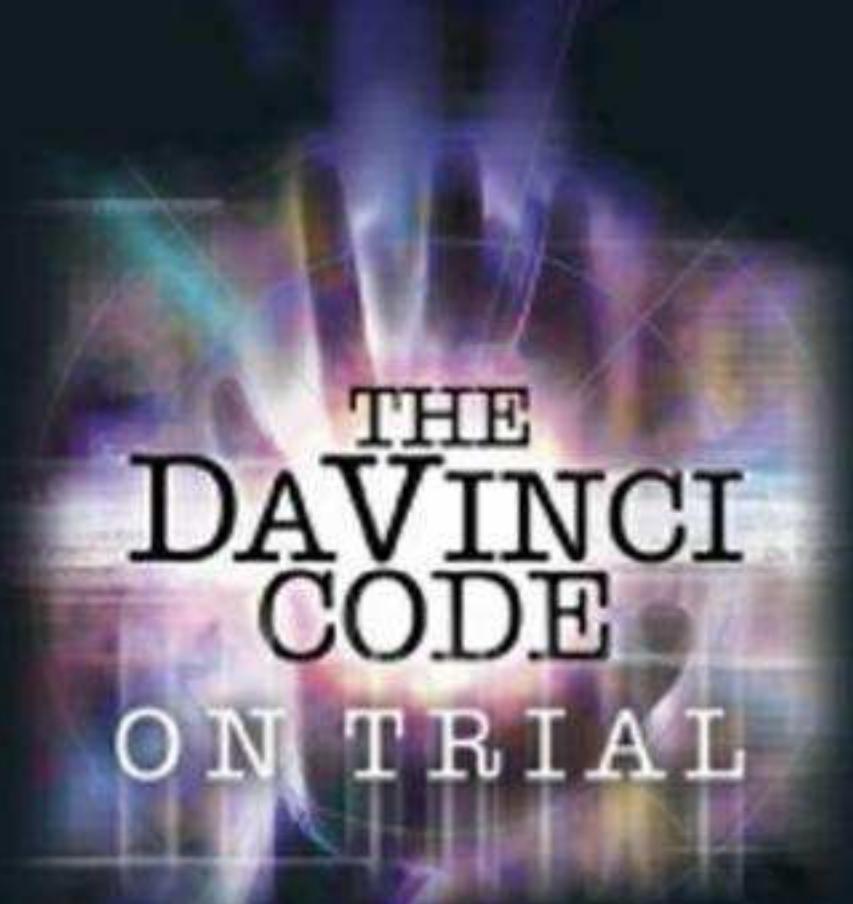
68 Exodus 4:22, 23; Hosea 11:1.

69 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7.

## **For further reading**

In writing this book I have made use of most of the works which are referred to in the notes. While writing it I became aware of the fact that a number of books have been written in response to *The Da Vinci Code*. Thus far I have not read any of them. Between completing the first draft of this book and finally completing it for publication, I visited Waterstone's bookshop in Trafalgar Square and was greatly encouraged to see alongside the special Christmas edition of *The Da Vinci Code* and books such as *The Templar Revelation* a copy of Darrell Bock's *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*. Darrel Bock is a superb New Testament scholar, renowned for his magisterial commentary on Luke's Gospel and for his immense erudition with respect to the background to Luke's Gospel, as well as for his telling criticisms of views represented in what is called *The Jesus Seminar*. Having leafed through the book at Waterstone's, it is clear to me that he has written a systematic refutation of all the things in *The Da Vinci Code* which are not true. For example, amongst other things he sets out to show that The Priory of Sion is not at all what *The Da Vinci Code* (and certain other books) make it out to be. I am sure that Bock's book will repay careful study.

For those who wish to know more about the heart of the Christian message, I would thoroughly recommend Vaughan Roberts *Turning Points* (Authentic Lifestyle, 2003). It is a jargon-free, user-friendly, but serious introduction to the main message of the Christian good news.



# THE DA VINCI CODE ON TRIAL

## FILTERING FACT FROM FICTION

Stephen Clark read Law at Oxford University and practised as a solicitor before becoming a Christian minister.

In this book the author sifts the evidence for the claims found in Dan Brown's best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*, that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, that the early church covered up the real message of Jesus and that the Bible's account of Jesus is false. After giving a bird's-eye view of the novel and explaining why so many find Dan Brown's 'case' to be convincing, Stephen Clark shows why the truth about Jesus is the most important thing we can ever consider. Having set out the Bible's account of Jesus and its relevance to our lives, he then goes on to demonstrate that *The Da Vinci Code* contains basic inaccuracies and errors and points out why the evidence can in no way support Dan Brown's 'case'. In a final chapter he considers the evidence for believing that the New Testament is historically trustworthy and reliable and that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead. In doing so he presents a compelling case for believing what the Bible says about Jesus. By the end of the book it becomes clear that what matters is not only what we make of Jesus, but what the real Jesus makes of us.

This is an easy-to-read book, which does not avoid difficult questions. 'Technical' matters are discussed in a number of appendices. This ensures that while the book reads easily, those who wish to dig deeper will find the answers to their questions.

Stephen Clark is minister of Freeschool Court Evangelical Church, Bridgend, and a member of the Theological Team of Affinity (formerly The British Evangelical Council). He is married with three children and became a grandfather on the day that he completed this book.



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