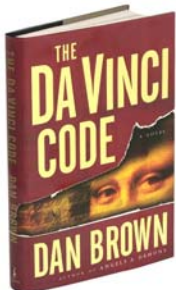


The Da Vinci Code and The Bible

Lesson 2

Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?

Steve Patton



The Da Vinci Code remains the decade's best selling book. In January, Doubleday Publishers announced another 5 million copies of the paperback version were being printed. Already 25 million copies have been sold worldwide. Its attack on long held beliefs about early Christianity are having a tremendous influence on the thinking of many people.

In our first lesson we examined the primary source documents upon which Brown bases his theories. Their unreliability as sources is plain to any honest observer. However we must be fair and challenge the documents upon which Christianity is based - the New Testament. Are Brown's accusations against them valid? Or can we trust The New Testament as being reliable accounts of Jesus and His teachings? If they are reliable then Dan Brown's theories about early Christianity are worthless.

The Da Vinci Code's Challenge to the New Testament.

It is fundamental to the theories presented in The Da Vinci Code that the New Testament be shown as a 4th century creation of the Roman church. That opens the way to argue there are other "gospels" which more accurately reflect the beliefs and teachings of the first century church.

Brown's Theory About the Formation of the Bible.

The theory is expressed in the book by the fictional character Leigh Teabing, who is pictured as a world renowned authority on the ancient documents in question. In an extended conversation with Sophie Neveu and the main character Robert Langdon, Teabing argues for the unreliability of the New Testament record:

"The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it... History has never had a definitive version of the book." (pg. 231)

"More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were

chosen for inclusion - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them." (pg. 234)

"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." (pg. 234)

"Fortunately for historians, some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive." (pg. 234)

"What I mean is that almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false." (pg. 235)

Teabing espouses there is an alternate account of Jesus that was expunged by the church in the 4th century. The remaining documents were doctored by Constantine and powerful bishops in the 4th century to redefine Christ and His teaching. He claims these are the books included in the canon set by the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. The reasons Brown gives for this will be discussed in lesson 3.

What about the New Testament documents? Are they genuine and reliable accounts of Jesus and his early disciples? We must examine the evidence to see if the charges are true.

How did the New Testament come into being? What evidence do we have that the New Testament books were accepted by early Christians?

The New Testament Canon

The word "canon" literally means "rule." The Biblical Canon refers to the recognized list of authentic books that make up the Bible. The Da Vinci Code suggests this list was created in the fourth century at the Council of Nicea. This late date is necessary so that claims there were earlier gospels and teachings can be given plausibility. But there are major problems with saying the New Testament books as we know them were not accepted by the early disciples of Jesus. How can we determine what the early disciples believed and taught?

Listening to the Opposition

In the 2nd century a man named Marcion (AD 96-160) from Pontus (modern Turkey) began to preach



“another gospel.” He holds the distinction of being regarded as the first great heretic of the early church. Expelled by his home church for adultery (where his own father served as a bishop) he began to develop his own form of “Christianity.” He got rid of marriage

and rejected the Old Testament as out of date. He went to Rome in 144 AD and started an alternative Christian community. There he was expelled from the church for doctrinal heresy as he denied the essentials of Christianity and created his own Bible.

Marcion’s Bible consisted of the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul’s letters, all “cleansed” of Old Testament influences. *The books Marcion rejected he nonetheless acknowledged as being accepted by the church as a whole and as being written by the original apostles and prophets.* He just thought he was right and they were wrong. The response to him was not a gentle one. Polycarp (AD 69-155) who knew the apostle John personally, upon meeting Marcion, called him “the first-born of Satan” (*Against Heresies; Irenaeus*). Marcion’s name remains infamous in church history to this day.

But understand the implications of the whole Marcion controversy. Because of Marcion the issue of what writings were inspired and authentic was raised 150 years before the Council of Nicea. It indicates clearly that there was already a general agreement on what books were accepted by Christians as being from God. Marcion’s influence caused churches to recognize a need to agree on a canon of scripture so that Marcion and others like him would not be able to challenge the divinely inspired books. Most scholars recognize that the canon of scripture was pretty clearly set by the end of the 2nd century AD. Thus Dan Brown’s fourth century date for the setting of the canon of scripture is out of the question.

Marcion did something he never intended to do - leave clear evidence of what was accepted as New Testament scripture by Christians within a generation of those who God used to write it. And Marcion is not the only one to refer to the books accepted by the early church. The Gnostic Gospel of Truth (ca. 140-150) cites a body of authoritative books that is “quasi-identical with the co-called later canon of the church.” (W. C. van Unnik, *The Jung Codex*; London 1955; pg. 125) That further confirms there was a recognized

body of scripture that existed before any gnostic gospels appeared.

So how was the canon of the NT decided upon? Who voted books in or out?

Actually there was no voting process involved. But Brown’s character Leigh Teabing is right in saying that “The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds.” It did not arrive already bound up in a black moroccan leather cover with the words “Holy Bible” printed on the outside. Nonetheless it is not difficult to understand how the Bible came into being and that we can trust that the 27 books in the New Testament were the books accepted by early Christians as being from God.

The Situation in the Early Years of the Church

The New Testament claims that the Apostles and prophets were speaking the Word of God with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Letters were written by Spirit guided men like Paul, Peter, James, etc. The four gospels were written the same way by men who either accompanied Jesus personally (Matthew & John) or by men who knew the eyewitnesses and recorded their words (Luke & Mark).

The early church knew who was inspired and who wasn’t. They readily accepted the inspired writings from those recognized as apostles and prophets. However it took time for documents to reach out to all the world and circulate. Some arrived earlier to a particular region than others. There might have been some cultural biases that would have slowed acceptance of a particular letter or book. But in time the acceptance of the 27 books was pretty much universal. We know this from the writings of the apostolic fathers and from some lists that have survived from the 2nd and 3rd centuries - long before the council of Nicea.

For example, the document called **The Muratorian Fragment** is a Latin copy of a much earlier Greek document usually dated to the latter half of the second century. It is a canon list that includes all the New Testament books except Hebrews, James and 1st &



2nd Peter. It includes references to all the New Testament books. Another example is the Greek manuscript known as P45. It is dated about AD 200 and contains

all four gospels together. The Magdalen College Greek Fragments of Matthew's Gospel is an early book that contains only the four biblical gospels. One scholar argues this collection comes from the first half of the second century. Another scholar, basing his arguments on ancient writing forms, dates it as early as the first century. There is a lot of recent solid scholarship that pushes the four Gospels much further back than some had wanted to believe.

Despite what Dan Brown's character Leigh Teabing says, The church did not produce the Bible - the Bible produced the church. The books we have today are what the early church accepted as scripture. Incidentally, Teabing states that the vote on the canon of scripture at the Council of Nicea was a relatively close one (pg. 233). The vote was actually 316-2, just one of many historical inaccuracies in the book.

How about the other writings that many claim were rejected?

We have already discussed that some in first lesson. The Gnostic gospels are clearly from a later period when gnosticism began to arise in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Claims that the Gospel of Thomas was an early gospel from the first century has no historical or documentary evidence to back the claim. *In fact, if the gospel of Thomas was in existence in the first century and known to early Christians, why didn't the heretic Marcion refer to it since it espouses some of the same doctrines he espoused?* Marcion's silence about the Gospel of Thomas and any of the other Nag Hammadi "gospels" is again a powerful indictment of Dan Brown's claims.

How Early are the New Testament Writings?

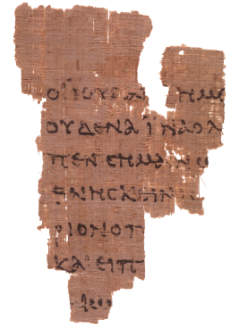
Most scholars date them in the first century. Some even argue that all of the New Testament books were written by 70 A.D. It is only a small group of scholars who would date the New Testament writings in their present form to the late 3rd or 4th century. They are the same scholars who, like Dan Brown, want to make the "Gnostic Christians" the original disciples - something they cannot do if the New Testament documents in their present form were in existence in the first century during the lifetimes of the apostles and early Christians.

Is there evidence of the existence of the New Testament documents in their present form from the late first or second century?

In a word - Yes.

The John Rylands Fragment. This small fragment of St. John's Gospel, less than nine centimeters high and containing on the one side part of verses 31-33, on the other of verses 37-38 of chapter 8 is one of the collection of Greek papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, England.

It was originally discovered in Egypt. The importance of this fragment is quite out of proportion to its size, since it may with some confidence be dated in the first half of the second century A.D., and thus ranks as the earliest known fragment of the New Testament in any language. It provides us with invaluable evidence of the spread of Christianity in areas distant from the land of its origin.



However, complete texts of the New Testament do not exist from the earliest dates. This is most likely due to the type of materials on which it was written. More durable leather (vellum) codexes and scrolls do not appear until the 300's AD. Before then papyrus was the most common form of writing material and it was not durable. Most papyrus manuscripts of any kind that survived are from the dry, arid climates of north Africa although the Dead Sea scrolls are an example of the survival of extensive papyrus scrolls in Palestine. The Dead Sea Scrolls predate Jesus and include, among other writings, the entire Old Testament. But we do have another important source of scripture from this period.

The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers. The term Apostolic Fathers is a phrase historians apply to some early Christians whose writings have survived to the present day. They were men who lived in the period of the late 1st century to the 3rd century A.D. Some of the more famous ones include Irenaeus, Polycarp (a personal friend of the apostle John), and Clement of Alexandria. These extensive writings not only refer to all 27 books but quote from them extensively. In fact it has been said if every copy of the New Testament was destroyed, it could be re-created from the quotations found in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. I have a five volume set of these writings in my library as well as a topical dictionary of their writings. These writings are almost universally accepted as authentic.

It is interesting that Brown makes no mention of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers in his novel. But

then, he would have no basis for the main thesis of his book - that the New Testament was rewritten or embellished by later church leaders. Since we essentially have the New Testament embedded in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, their testimony leaves no room to suggest the writings were changed at a later date. What is recorded in their writings is the text of the same New Testament we have today.

It is also important to understand that these books were regarded as "scripture" by the early church. That was not a designation added later. The writings of the apostolic fathers refer to most of these books as scripture, i.e., from God. Remember also that:

- Peter called Paul's writings scripture (2nd Peter 3:16).
- Paul quotes from Luke's gospel and refers to it as scripture (1st Timothy 5:18).
- Paul used the Greek word *kanon* to refer to the fundamental teachings of the apostles that were to be believed and obeyed (Galatians 6:16).

All of this evidence points to one clear conclusion - the New Testament books we have today were known in the first century church and regarded as scripture.

Conclusion

The history of the Bible is clear and open. That history shows the Bible has survived despite great struggles, intense persecutions and attacks upon its truth and its reliability. Those who have a problem with it usually have more than just a problem with its accuracy. They usually have a problem with its teaching. Since they don't want to accept its teaching they find ways to discredit it as inaccurate and unreliable. Dan Brown's attempt to discredit the Bible involves a rewriting of history - one in which power hungry bishops with political aims strategically take over the church and recreate a Bible in the image of their personal theological choices. But the facts will not allow such a twisting of history. The Bible has stood the test of time and Dan Brown's attack will be forgotten while the Bible will continue to endure. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away but My Word shall by no means pass away." (Luke 21:33)



Next Lesson:

We will examine the "doctrines" of Dan Brown's new religion to understand his motives for trying to discredit the Biblical record. We will especially examine his ideas on spirituality and sexuality and the paganistic influences in his writings.