

Da Vinci DE-CODED

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Heard of *The Da Vinci Code*? Given its lengthy stint on the New York Times bestseller list, there's a fair chance you've read it. In either case, this popular book has people worked-up about questions that, before it was published, were of limited general interest – questions about the origins and development of the Bible.

The fact that people are now asking questions about matters to which they formerly gave less thought is a good thing. However, many who would otherwise be careful, evidence-based thinkers seem to have uncritically bought answers from what they must be reminded is a *novel* – a novel with an engaging story line that blurs facts and fancy. Were there eighty rival gospels considered for the New Testament? Was Jesus married? Is Christianity just one more myth?

The Da Vinci Code presents a story line that is seductively appealing. The novel opens with the mysterious murder of Jacques Saunière inside the famous Paris art museum, the Louvre, of which he was curator. The murder scene is accompanied by riddles or “codes” which leave the Paris police stumped. To help solve the mystery, Robert Langdon, an expert in religious symbology from Harvard, is summoned, along with French cryptographer Sophie Neveu – who also happens to be the estranged granddaughter of the late Saunière. Together, Langdon and Neveu trace the “code” through clues embedded in the artwork of Leonardo Da Vinci and find themselves caught up in a fast-paced pursuit of what turns out to be the Holy Grail.

According to the novel, the Grail is a source of hidden controversy between the Catholic Church and the “Priory of Sion” – a secret society started in the time of the Crusades to protect the Grail from the destructive interests of the Church. Saunière, we learn, was the last in a line of Priory Masters that at one time had included Da Vinci himself. Why is the Grail such a source of controversy? Because, contrary to popular lore, it was not the coveted cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, but a person: the bloodline of Mary Magdalene and Jesus. Jesus and Mary were allegedly sexual partners and produced offspring. After Jesus died, Magdalene is said to have fled to present-day southern France out of self-protection where her bloodline continued in secrecy. Now, with the death of the last Priory Master, the proof of that secret was at unprecedented risk. Eluding police and caught between the rivaling interests of the Priory and the Church, Langdon and Neveu decide to take up its cause.

In their pursuit, they collaborate with Leigh Teabing, a British historian residing in France. With his life-long interest in the Grail, Teabing presumably offers head-spinning insight into the origins of the Bible. He then navigates Langdon and Neveu through an improbable maze of twists and turns as a shadowy plot between those who want to preserve the Grail, and those who are desperate to destroy it, unfolds.

The ideas dramatized in *The Da Vinci Code* are not new. *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the well known film suggesting the marriage of Mary Magdalene and Jesus, is a case in point. But more to the point is a book by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, from which *The Da Vinci Code* is intentionally drawn. Interestingly, the fictional “Leigh Teabing” is an anagram of these real-life authors’ surnames. Published in 1982, their book drew little public interest. But with publication of *The Da Vinci Code*, the book that never caught on is now dramatized in a way that captivates readers’ imaginations.

Set yourself in the exotic home of Teabing’s rural French estate, and have your eyes “opened” along with Langdon and Neveu, as he delivers his insights on the Bible:

*Teabing cleared his throat and declared, “The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven.”
“I beg your pardon?”*

“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.

“Okay.”

“Jesus Christ was a historical figure of staggering influence, perhaps the most enigmatic and inspirational leader the world has ever seen. As the prophesied Messiah, Jesus toppled kings, inspired millions, and founded new philosophies. As a descendant of the lines of King Solomon and King David, Jesus possessed a rightful claim to the throne of the King of the Jews. Understandably, His life was recorded by thousands of followers across the land.” Teabing paused to sip his tea and then placed the cup back on the mantel. “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.” (*The Da Vinci Code*, p. 231) [all underlines added]

So what are these eighty gospels and where do they come from? The “gospels” being referred to here are known as “gnostic gospels.” Unlike the New Testament gospels, they were not considered “canonical,” that is, they did not “measure up” to the standards required for inclusion in the New Testament. “Canon,” an ancient Greek word for “measuring stick,” is simply a list of official books that were considered authentic. Going back to the earliest of these, the so-called Muratorian Canon of 170 A.D., these lists did not include the gnostic gospels.

The gnostic gospels were not written by contemporaries of the apostles. Incidentally, writing itself was not a common skill, and Teabing’s comments notwithstanding, the likelihood of thousands having recorded Jesus’ sayings is remote. The gnostic gospels were actually the product of a second-century religious movement known as “gnosticism.” From the Greek word *gnosis* – meaning *knowledge* – gnostics claimed privileged and exclusive spiritual knowledge. According to *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (Sixth Edition, 2001), they were “a wide assortment of sects, numerous by the 2d cent. A.D.” that “all promised salvation through an occult knowledge that they claimed was revealed to them alone.”

Elaine Pagels, a feminist theologian, explains how gnostic writings retold Bible stories to support feminist spirituality. For example, “the majority of the known gnostic texts depict Adam (not Eve) as representing the psyche, while Eve represents the higher principle, the spiritual self.”¹ Eve is often depicted in gnosticism as the principle of spiritual enlightenment.

Instead of Eve being taken from the side of Adam as described in Genesis, “...in one [gnostic] account she is actually the hermaphrodite from whom Adam is drawn.”² Another fanciful story has Eve and the serpent in sexual relations with each other:

[Eve] consorted with the celestial powers, especially Satan. It will come as no surprise that in a number of [gnostic] traditions Eve and the serpent had sexual relations, either before or after the creation of Adam. Johanan ben Zackai, a rabbi of the first century B.C. is quoted three times in his conviction that the serpent had copulated with Eve. The belief grew as well because “to know” is sometimes used in the Hebrew Bible as a euphemism for sexual intercourse; and for gnostics the important matter was the knowledge which passed between Eve and the serpent.³

According to authors Geisler and Nix, “...[gnostic] books manifested a wild religious fancy. They evidence an incurable curiosity to discover things not revealed in the canonical books (for example, about the childhood of Jesus) and display an unhealthy tendency to support doctrinal idiosyncrasies by means of pious frauds.”⁴ The story of second century Christianity is very much a struggle against “...the genius for story telling as displayed by the citizens of Asia Minor...”⁵ Origen, a second century theologian, called

¹ Pagels, Elaine. *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*. (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 66.

² Kroeger, Richard C. & Catherine C. *I Suffer Not A Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), p.122.

³ Kroeger, p. 124.

⁴ Geisler, Norman L. & Nix, William E. *From God to Us*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 114.

⁵ Kroeger, p. 129.

these “wives tales.”⁶ At a time when T.V. and computer games – let alone more primitive forms of entertainment – were lacking, it is not a far stretch to see where a story like the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene could have originated. Historian and novelist Umberto Ecco, in a recent interview, put this story on a level with fairytales the likes of “Pinocchio.”⁷

So were there really eighty rival gospels as Teabing asserts? The relevant gnostic writings number only around forty in their totality – half the number claimed by the novel. But further, only about half of these are “gospels.” Here is the list⁸:

1. *The Gospel of Thomas* (first century) is a Gnostic view of the alleged miracles of the childhood of Jesus.
2. *The Gospel of the Ebionites* (second century) is a Gnostic Christian perpetuation of Old Testament practices.
3. *The Gospel of Peter* (second century) is a Docetic and Gnostic forgery.
4. *Protevangelium of James* (second century) is a narration by Mary of King Herod’s massacre of the babies.
5. *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (second century) is an ascetic teaching against marriage, meat, and wine.
6. *Arabic Gospel of Childhood* (dating uncertain) records childhood miracles of Jesus in Egypt and the visit of Zoroastrian Magi.
7. *The Gospel of Nicodemus* (second century or fifth century) contains the Acts of Pilate and the Descent of Jesus.
8. *The Gospel of Joseph the Carpenter* (fourth century) is the writing of a Monophysite cult which glorified Joseph.
9. *The History of Joseph the Carpenter* (fifth century) is a Monophysite version of Joseph’s life.
10. *The Passing of Mary* (fourth century) relates the bodily assumption of Mary and shows advanced stages of Mary worship.
11. *The Gospel of Nativity of Mary* (sixth century) promotes Mary worship and forms the basis of the Golden Legend, a popular thirteenth-century book of lives of the saints.
12. *The Gospel of pseudo-Matthew* (fifth century) contains a narrative about the visit to Egypt by Jesus and some of His later boyhood miracles.
- 13-21. *The Gospel of the Twelve, of Barnabas, of Bartholomew, of the Hebrews, of Marcion, of Andrew, of Mathias, of Peter, of Philip.*

So the novel’s alleged eighty rival gospels have been narrowed down to forty existing gnostic texts, and down again to twenty-one possible gnostic gospels. But further, checking that Constantine became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in the fourth century, we see that probably only eight of these gospels were in existence at the time of his reign, the rest being written after it. So from eighty rival gospels, with some study, we have moved down to only eight.

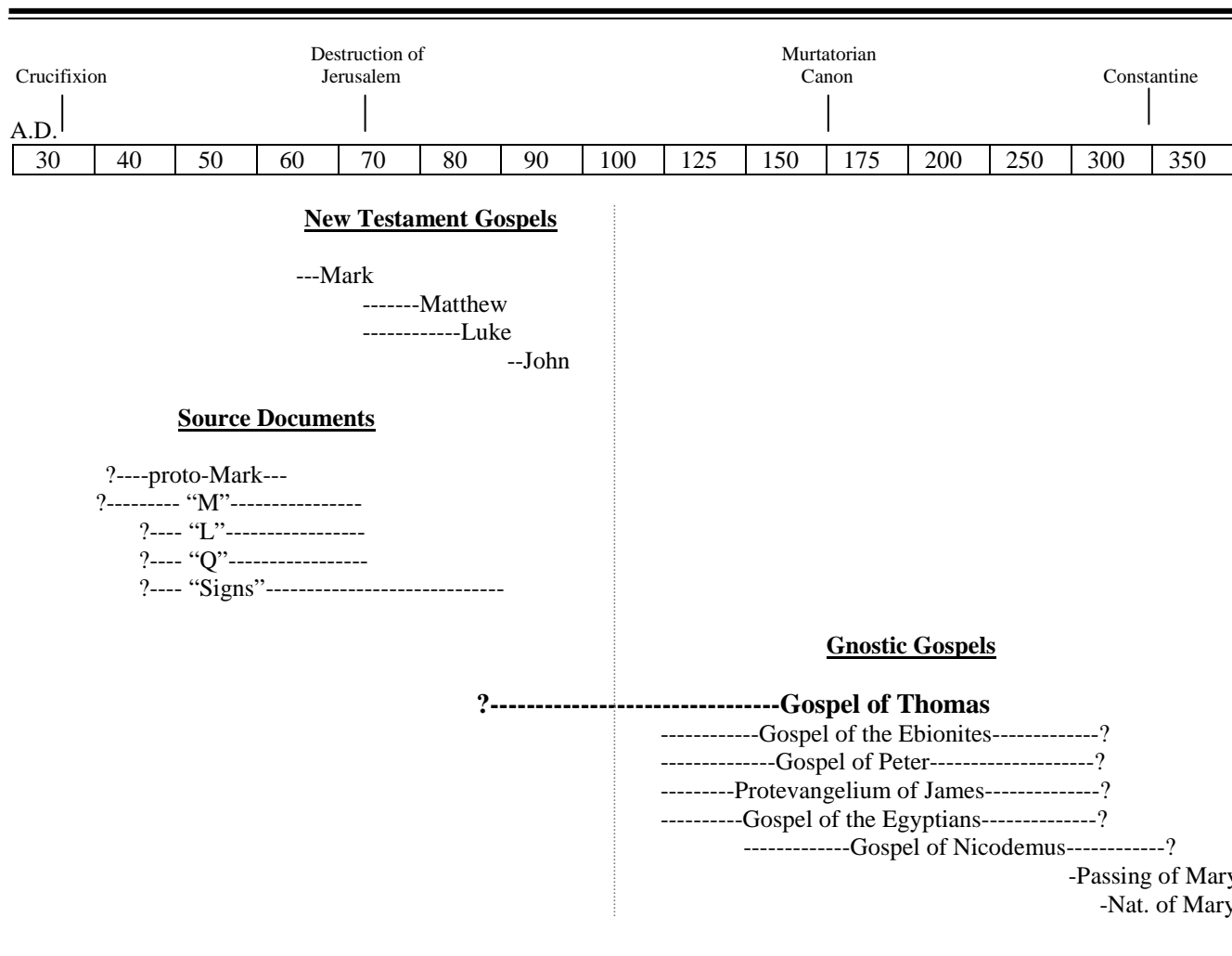
Now examine the chart below. The timeline at the top of the chart serves to separate the New Testament gospels and their sources from the gnostic gospels chronologically. Moving from left to right moves us forward in time from the death of Christ, to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., to the Murtatorian Canon mentioned above, and on to the reign of Constantine. Aligning the timeline with the New Testament and gnostic gospels listed, what should be clear is that the New Testament gospels (in fact, all the books of the New Testament) were completed during the second half of the first century. These had earlier sources rooted in the teaching of the apostles. With labels like “L,” “M,” and “Q,” scholars have tried to reconstruct some of these documents. Gnostic gospels and other gnostic writings, by contrast, date from the second century and beyond. There is a clear time distinction between the New Testament gospels and gnostic gospels – save possibly one.

⁶ Kroeger, p. 132.

⁷ Umberto Ecco is interviewed in: *Uncovering DaVinci’s Code: Mystery or Conspiracy?* Crystal Entertainment Videos, ©2004.

⁸ Geisler & Nix, p. 106.

The Gospel of Thomas is of uncertain date, but may have had its origin earlier than other gnostic gospels, possibly dating to the first century. It is a list of 114 sayings of Jesus, and some scholars think it may be an early source of information on him. Scholars detect clear gnostic influences in the gospel, suggesting either the possibility of a later, second century date for its writing, or gnostic corruption over time.⁹ Which it is cannot be said for certain. What is clear, however, is that we have moved effectively from eighty possible rivals to the four New Testament gospels down to one.



* * *

“Who chose which gospels to include?” Sophie asked.

“Aha!” Teabing burst in with enthusiasm. “The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.”

“I thought Constantine was a Christian,” Sophie said.

“Hardly,” Teabing scoffed... “He was a lifelong pagan who was baptized on his deathbed, too weak to protest. In Constantine’s day Rome’s official religion was sun worship – the cult of Sol Invictus, or the Invincible Sun – and Constantine was its head priest. Unfortunately for him, a growing religious turmoil was gripping Rome. Three centuries after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Christ’s followers had multiplied exponentially. Christians and pagans began warring,

⁹ Van Voorst, Robert E. *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), pp. 188-203.

and the conflict grew to such proportions that it threatened to rend Rome in two. Constantine decided something had to be done. In 325 A.D., he decided to unify Rome under a single religion. Christianity. (The Da Vinci Code, pp. 231-232)

Whether out of sincere personal interest or political expediency, Constantine did make Christianity the official state religion.¹⁰ But were the Christian scriptures already established, or actually put together by him for his political purposes?

When Constantine acted to favor Christianity exclusively, he requested a supply of fifty copies of the Bible – a number that, for the limited resources of the time, was something akin to mass production. God, of course, did not apprise church leaders of which books to include by title. The authenticity of a limited number of books – none of them gospels – had been debated up to that time. Constantine’s demand for Bibles may have required some final judgement on these books.¹¹

For example, the Muratorian Canon, mentioned above, initially omitted the letters of Peter and one of the letters of John. The reason: there were questions about their apostolic origin that had to be satisfied first.¹² When a book gained acceptance into the New Testament, it was on the conviction that it represented the testimony of an eyewitness to Jesus. The New *Testament*, in other words, represented the *testimony* of the apostles. According to the accepted scholarship, “If a book was derived from an apostle, it embodied his immediate experience of Christ. As such it would mirror the faith of the Church, which was of course apostolic.”¹³

With the numerical and geographical expansion of the early church – in a day without printing presses and easy transportation – it took some time for books and letters to circulate. Not all churches received all books at the same time. The eastern and western first century churches had a common group of books, but also had some they didn’t share. It took time for each of them to recognize the others’ differing books as authentic. When the books in question were accepted, it was based on the conviction that they represented the teaching of the apostles.

The most controversial of these, and the longest debated, was Peter’s second letter. It was stylistically different – its Greek was of poorer quality – than the first letter. There were suspicions, therefore, that someone other than Peter wrote it. In the end, it appeared that Peter’s first letter was of higher quality Greek because he dictated it to a scribe who wrote Greek well. Peter, whose first language was not Greek, probably wrote the second letter himself. In any case, “Until the fathers were convinced that it was not a forgery but that it really came from Peter the apostle as it claimed, it was not accorded a permanent place in the Christian canon.”¹⁴

So it was not at all easy for a book to make it into the New Testament. Preserving the primitive witness of the apostles was the overriding concern of the early church fathers. But one might ask: was their judgment right?

Scholarship that well predates *The Da Vinci Code* has asked this question. To satisfy its own methodology, modern biblical scholarship does not assume that the biblical books were actually written by the apostles just because the church fathers said so. Consequently, theories about the authenticity of New Testament books cover a range of opinions, from overt skepticism to unquestioning affirmation. Importantly, whatever the outcome of modern scholarship, there is no question that a book was accepted as authoritative because the early church fathers *believed* it contained eyewitness testimony. And there is good reason for us to believe they were right.

¹⁰ As the story goes, Constantine’s conversion was accompanied by a dream in which he saw a cross in the sky along with Latin words, *In hoc signo vinces*, meaning, *By this sign conquer*. He added a cross to the standards of his army and went on to successful conquest.

¹¹ Geisler & Nix, p. 102.

¹² Geisler & Nix, p. 110.

¹³ Turro, James C. & Brown, Raymond E. *Canonicity*. In *The Jerome Biblical Commentary, Vol. II*, edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer & Roland E. Murphy, pp. 515-534. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968), par. 517.15.

¹⁴ Geisler & Nix, p. 68.

From the beginning there was a consciousness of authentication. In the letters of Paul, for example, which were for the most part written before the gospels themselves, there is an effort to reassure the churches of the genuineness of his letters.

When Paul “wrote,” he actually used scribes – professional writers – to whom he dictated his letters. But he took the stylus into his own hand to personally write the greeting. In 2 Thessalonians 3:37, we read, “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write.” And in 1 Corinthians 16:21: “The greeting is in my own hand – Paul.” In Colossians 4:18: “I, Paul write this greeting with my own hand.” His penmanship apparently had distinction: “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.” (Galatians 6:11)

According to Geisler and Nix, a book was initially verified as authentic by signature or by apostolic envoy. An envoy would have been someone known to the church to which a book was being delivered. It was then read and circulated among a network of early churches. Any books not received by signature or envoy were refused.¹⁵ In this way, every New Testament book had been established as authentic by the end of the first century. They explain:

When a book was verified as authentic either by signature or by apostolic envoy, it was officially read to the church and then circulated among other churches. Collections of these apostolic writings began to take form in apostolic times. By the end of the first century all twenty-seven New Testament books were written and received by the churches. The canon was complete and all the books were recognized by believers somewhere.¹⁶

But what about the Gospel of Thomas? It is the only possible rival gospel of the alleged eighty mentioned in the novel. Does it have the same credentials to authenticity as the New Testament gospels?

One can assume that, since no gnostic gospel, including Thomas, appeared in any of the official canonical lists, it was not authenticated in the manner just described. However, scholars still believe that the Gospel of Thomas may contain some authentic sayings of Jesus. While there are sayings in it that are explicit in their gnostic slant, others seem to parallel the New Testament texts. With reference to the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas, Van Voorst comments:

...it is hard to make an overall judgment on their value. Their distance from Jesus, theologically and temporally, must also be taken into account. Obviously, sayings that reflect an explicit gnosticizing tendency must be discounted. What remains is of potential value in understanding the teaching of Jesus, its individual sayings and overall meaning.¹⁷

Whatever its ultimate scholarly value, the Gospel of Thomas would have posed little competitive threat to the New Testament gospels. It certainly would not have been suppressed by Constantine for its friendliness to feminist spirituality. Shockingly, the book’s last verse reads as follows:

Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, *because women are not worthy of the Life.*” Jesus said, “Look, I shall guide her so that *I will make her male, in order that she also may become a living spirit, being like you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.* (Gospel of Thomas, vs 114)

Contrast this with the following statement from the New Testament:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, *there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:28)

¹⁵ Geisler & Nix, p.47

¹⁶ Geisler & Nix, p. 107.

¹⁷ Van Voorst, p. 203

Objections to statements about women in the New Testament are generally directed against Paul. Taken in context, however, Paul's interests are not to be understood as discriminatory toward women.¹⁸ The words of Galatians 3:28 just quoted were, after all, written by the same man. Paul was also a supporter of leadership roles for women in the early church.¹⁹ In any case, there is no statement anywhere in the New Testament, let alone the canonical gospels, that is potentially offensive to women as verse 114 of the Gospel of Thomas. The idea that it would have been excluded from the New Testament due to its support of women makes no sense. So it seems, in the end, that of the eighty rival gnostic gospels mentioned in the novel, we end up with none.

That is not to say the gnostic writings are without value. They have historical significance for many scholars. They are not, however, in a position to rival the authenticity of the New Testament gospels. After reviewing several gnostic writings and the scholarship attached to them, Van Voorst draws the following conclusion:

For a significant number of scholars, second century literature holds the promise of rediscovering the true origins of Jesus and the early church. ... However, the most radical proposals are improbable, depending as they do on multiple hypotheses, controversial source criticism, and strained reconstructions. ... We are left for both the main lines and the details about Jesus' life and teaching with the New Testament. Our study of Jesus outside the New Testament point at the end of the day to Jesus inside the New Testament.²⁰

* * *

Sophie was surprised. "Why would a pagan emperor choose Christianity as the official religion?"

Teabing chuckled. "Constantine was a very good businessman. He could see that Christianity was on the rise, and he simply backed the winning horse. Historians still marvel at the brilliance with which Constantine converted the sun-worshipping pagans to Christianity. By fusing pagan symbols, dates, and rituals into the growing Christian tradition, he created a kind of hybrid religion that was acceptable to both parties."

"Transmogrification," Langdon said. "The vestiges of pagan religion in Christian symbology are undeniable. Egyptian sun disks became the halos of Catholic saints. Pictograms of Isis nursing her miraculously conceived son Horus became the blueprint for our modern images of the Virgin Mary nursing the Baby Jesus. And virtually all the elements of the Catholic ritual – the miter, the altar, the doxology, and communion, the act of "God-eating" – were taken directly from earlier pagan mystery religions."

"Don't get a symbologist started on Christian icons. Nothing in Christianity is original. The pre-Christian God Mithras – called the Son of God and the Light of the World – was born on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days. By the way, December 25 is also the birthday of Osiris, Adonis, and Dionysus. The newborn Krishna was presented with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Even Christianity's weekly holy day was stolen from the pagans."

"What do you mean?"

"Originally," Langdon said, "Christianity honored the Jewish Sabbath of Saturday, but Constantine shifted it to coincide with the pagan's veneration day of the sun." He paused, grinning. "To this day, most churchgoers attend services on Sunday morning with no idea that they are there on account of the pagan sun god's weekly tribute – Sun-day."

Sophie's head was spinning.... (The Da Vinci Code, pp. 232-233)

¹⁸ The Kroeger's book already cited is a case-study in point with reference to Paul's comments in 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

¹⁹ See Paul's mention of Phoebe, Prisca and Mary in Romans 16:1-7.

²⁰ Van Voorst, p. 217.

It is true. Pagan symbols have found their way into Christianity. And there is no reason to reject the idea that it was a deliberate way to help pagans bridge to the new official religion. Yes, there are inaccuracies in this dialogue. Second century theologian Justin Martyr, for example, writing some two hundred years before Constantine, makes a passing reference to the customary gathering of Christians on Sunday.²¹ It was not, then, a fourth-century innovation. Too, the fact that Christianity had grown to the extent it prompted Constantine to back it would not likely have given him the freedom to disregard church tradition by picking only the gospels he liked – at least not without dissent, which is exactly what he was trying to avoid.

Nevertheless, there is the inescapable fact that pagan symbols were turned into Christian ones to help the spread of Christianity. This idea, of course, would have Christianity as merely one among many similar myths. Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell after him, had argued this persuasively by drawing parallels between Christian and pagan rituals.²²

C. S. Lewis also saw the parallels between the New Testament and pagan mythology, but saw them very differently. Throughout history, he says, there have been folk stories – myths if you will – “about a god who dies and comes to life again and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men.” Centuries before Christ, for example, the Roman poet Virgil wrote of a paradisaal age that came with “a new child sent down from heaven.” Plato described a righteous man who “will be scourged, tortured, and imprisoned, his eyes will be put out, and after enduring every humiliation he will be crucified....” These and similar pagan myths sound suspiciously Christian.

“And what,” Lewis asks, “are we to say of those gods in various Pagan mythologies who are killed and rise again and who thereby renew or transform the life of their worshippers or of nature?” He presses the question further: “Can one believe there was just nothing in that persistent motif of blood, death, and resurrection, which runs like a black and scarlet cord through all the greater myths...?”²³

Transmogrification – as Langdon asserts? Perhaps not. There is one thing that cleanly separates pagan mythology from the life and ministry of Jesus. One thing that prevents the story of Jesus from being just one more salvation myth: *it really happened*. In his essay, *Myth Became Fact*, Lewis explains:

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the dying god, *without ceasing to be a myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens* – at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences.²⁴ [italics original]

What Lewis is saying, in essence, is that the pagan legends of a dying and rising god point to the future – to the historical reality of Jesus Christ. There *is* nothing original in Christianity. Paganism in many respects, not unlike sizeable portions of the Old Testament, turns out to be prophetic. The tales pagan mythology had spun anticipate the life of Christ. He is their fulfillment in history. So why should pagan symbols be a problem for Christians? Paganism and Christianity in a sense are, according to Lewis, compellingly linked in Christ.

That is unless, as *The Da Vinci Code* attempts to do, the historical credibility of the gospels can be exploded. Can the Christian Gospel not be just one more cleverly told myth? Isn't the New Testament, after all, merely words? How much history does it actually represent? Really now, who of us was there?

²¹ “And on the day called Sunday there is a gathering together to one place of all those who live in cities or in the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader has ceased the president presents admonition and invitation to the imitation of these good things.” In: McDowell, Josh. *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 23.

²² Jung, C.G. *Transformation Symbolism in the Mass*. In: *Psyche & Symbol: A Selection from the Writings of C. G. Jung*, edited by Violet S. deLaszlo. (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), pp. 148-224.

²³ Christensen, Michael J. *C. S. Lewis On Scripture*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), pp. 73-74.

²⁴ Lewis, C. S. *Myth Became Fact*. In *The Grand Miracle and Other Selected Essays*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), p. 41.

In addition to all that has been said here, add this: the basic facts of the life of Christ have been established independently of the New Testament. First century sources outside the gospels, written by non-believers, confirm the main events of Jesus' life. Among these were the writings of the Jewish rabbis and the historian Josephus. Van Voorst offers this succinct summary:

We learn from the Jewish sources that Jesus was the firstborn son of Mary (the rabbis). He had followers (Josephus) or gathered disciples (the rabbis); he taught them and worked miracles (Josephus, the rabbis). He was put on trial and died by formal execution (Josephus, the rabbis). Either the Jews alone carried out his trial and execution (the rabbis), or the Romans did in some cooperation with Jewish leaders (Josephus). Jesus' followers claimed that he rose from the dead, (the rabbis) and his movement continued (Josephus, the rabbis).²⁵

Perhaps a novel like *The Da Vinci Code* is so appealing because it puts together a seemingly plausible alternative to the traditional reading of the Christian Gospel. It gets an understanding that reassures us that our sensitivities to cultural diversity, our distaste for anyone's "truth" winning over anyone else's, is right. But the novel only succeeds to the extent that, through an engaging story line, it hides the substantial evidence supporting the authenticity of the New Testament gospels.

Having lived well into adulthood as a committed skeptic, Lewis' realization that the New Testament gospels were historically reliable was a turning point for him. He once listened to a hardened atheist lament that "the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good. ... *'It almost looks as if it really happened once.'*" Lewis reflects on the effect this realization:

To understand the shattering impact of it, you would need to know the man (who certainly never since shown any interest in Christianity). If he, the cynic of cynics, the toughest of the toughs, were not – as I would still have put it – "safe," where could I turn? Was there then no escape?²⁶

For Lewis, that myth became fact in Christ was not a point of division among people, but one of unity. Replacing our preference to see all religion as "true" because none of it is objectively real, Lewis had another thought:

The question was no longer to find the one simply true religion among a thousand religions simply false. It was rather, "Where has religion reached its true maturity? Where, if anywhere, have the hints of all Paganism been fulfilled? ... Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not "a religion," nor "a philosophy." It is the summing up and actuality of them all.²⁷

Lewis found something he had not bargained for. What he dismissed as nonsense for most of his life, in the end, caught him by surprise. It changed the direction of his life. He was, as he put it, "surprised by joy."

And you?

²⁵ Van Voorst, p. 131.

²⁶ Lewis, C. S. *Surprised By Joy*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1984), p. 224.

²⁷ Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, p.236.