

Discerning Fact from Fiction in *The Da Vinci Code*:

Part 3

The Historical Reliability of the Gospels

I have been presenting a series of articles answering the allegations presented by *The Da Vinci Code*. In my first article I stated several reasons why the assumption that the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Texts contain any secret gospels is false. In the second article, I examined the notion that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and demonstrated that this was highly improbable. In this article I will examine Brown's claim that the gospels do not represent an accurate historical account of Jesus life. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown presents these comments:

"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" (p. 231).

"The twist is this, ... 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. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history.... 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" (p. 234).

Brown alleges that the gospels are not divinely inspired, they were written centuries after Christ's death and were embellished by the early church. Are the gospels an accurate historical work? I will present the evidence to support their historical accuracy.

Confirming the historical reliability of the gospels requires that we present evidence that the writers were eyewitnesses, their writings were factual not fictional, they displayed integrity in what they wrote, and that we have an accurate copy of their works.

The Date of the New Testament Writings

Critics claim that the late date of the gospels allowed for myths to proliferate. Were the gospels written by eye witnesses as the gospels themselves claim or were they written much later? Jesus' ministry was from 27-30 AD. Noted New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce gives strong evidence that the New Testament was completed by 100 AD and that most of the New Testament works were completed 20-40 years before that date.¹ The gospels are dated traditionally as follows: Mark is believed to be the first gospel written in 60 AD, Matthew and Luke follow and were written between 60-70 AD. John is the final gospel written in 90-100 AD. There is internal and external evidence to support these dates.

Internal Evidence for the Gospels

The internal evidence presents a strong case for a first century date for several reasons. Each of the gospels prophesy the fall of the Jerusalem Temple which occurs in 70 AD. However, the gospels do not record the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy. The most plausible reason for this is that it had not occurred during the writing of the gospels.

In the book of Acts, the Temple continues to play a central role in Israel. This indicates that Acts was completed before the fall of the Temple as well. Further proof stems from the fact that Luke completes

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 14.

the book of Acts before Paul's death in 64 AD. The book ends with Paul living under house arrest. It is noteworthy that Luke does not record the death of its two chief characters, Peter and Paul. We can conclude that the reason for this is Luke finished Acts before their deaths in 64 AD. Another significant point to note is that the Gospel of Luke precedes Acts (Acts 1:1) giving further support for the first century date of Luke. The vast majority of scholars agree that Mark precedes the gospel of Luke. The timing of the other writings would indicate that Mark may have been written even earlier, perhaps even as early as 50 AD.

Finally, Paul's epistles were written from 48-60 AD. Paul's outline of the life of Jesus matches with the gospels. First Corinthians is one of the least disputed books regarding its dating and Paul's authorship. In chapter 15, Paul summarizes the gospel and reinforces the premise that this is the same gospel preached by the apostles. The creed in verses 3-8 dates back to the very beginning of Christianity. It was a creed Paul probably learned from the Apostles who used it to summarize the gospel message when they taught. Even more compelling is that Paul quotes from Luke's gospel in First Timothy 5:18 showing us that Luke's gospel was indeed completed in Paul's lifetime.

External Evidence for the Gospels

The external evidence is convincing as well. New Testament scholars have an enormous amount of ancient manuscript evidence; over 5000 documents. An important document is the Chester Beatty Papyri, dated 200 AD, which contains most of the New Testament writings, including most of John.² Another is the Rylands Papyri that was found in Egypt and contains a fragment of John dated 125 AD.³ From this fragment we can conclude that the gospel was completed well before 125 AD because not only did the gospel have to be written, it had to be hand copied and make its way down from Greece to Egypt. Since Matthew, Mark, and Luke precede John, we can affirm the first century date. A final piece of evidence comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls Cave 7. Spanish paleographer Jose Callahan discovered a fragment of the Gospel of Mark and dated it to have been written in 50 AD. He also discovered fragments of Acts and other epistles and dated them to have been written slightly after 50 AD.⁴

Another line of evidence are the church fathers. Clement of Rome sent a letter to the Corinthian church in 90 AD and quotes from the gospels and other portions of the New Testament. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, writes a letter before his martyrdom in Rome in 115 AD quoting the Gospels and other New Testament letters. Polycarp wrote to the Philippians in 120 AD and quotes from the gospels and New Testament letters. Justin Martyr (150 AD) quotes John 3. In all, the church fathers quote all but eleven verses of the New Testament so that even if we did not have a copy of the New Testament, we could reconstruct it from these writings. Several church fathers from the first century are familiar with New Testament works, especially the gospels, and quote them as inspired scripture.

Early dating is important for several reasons. The closer in date to the event, the more accurate the record. Early dating indicates that eye-witnesses were alive and able to attest to the accuracy of the newly circulating gospels. Apostles often appeal to the witness of the hostile crowd pointing out their knowledge of the facts as well. (Acts 2:22, Acts 26:26) The time period between the events and their written record is too short for myths to proliferate. Historians agree that it takes the passing of two generations for myths to develop. Finally, with the brief time period from Jesus ministry to the writing of the first Gospel Mark, there seems even less of a possibility that a Q document exists. Q is a hypothetical document from which many scholars believe Matthew and Luke derive the material for their gospels.

Archaeology and the Gospels

Next we must answer the question, "Does evidence support the claim that the Apostles recorded a historical, not a fictional document?" Archaeology confirms the historicity of the Bible including the Gospels. Archaeologist Randall Price states that when it comes to the Bible, there are over 100,000

² John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1999), p. 357..

³ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

⁴ Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2002), 530.

discoveries related to Biblical references.⁵

Luke is found to be a very accurate historian. He names 32 countries, 54 cities, and 9 islands without error. Modern mariners have confirmed the accuracy of the details surrounding Paul's final journey from Palestine to Italy.⁶ Luke used titles of government officials, proconsul, tetrach, etc..., and while some are unique, they are found to be accurate. For example, in Luke's announcement of Jesus' public ministry (Luke 3:1), he mentions "Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene." Scholars questioned Luke's credibility since the only Lysanius known for centuries was a ruler of Chalcis who ruled from 40-36 B.C. However, an inscription dated to the time of Tiberius, who ruled from 14-37 A.D., was found recording a temple dedication which names Lysanius as the "tetrarch of Abila" near Damascus. In Acts 28:7, Luke gives Plubius, the chief man on the island of Malta, the title, "first man of the island." Scholars questioned this unusual title and deemed it unhistorical. Inscriptions have recently been discovered on the island that indeed gives Plubius the title of "first man."⁷ Historian Sir William Ramsey writes, "Luke is a historian of first rank... In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."⁸

Luke's tested accuracy gives us confidence in his works. F.F. Bruce writes, "A man whose accuracy can be demonstrated in matters where we are able to test it is likely to be accurate even where the means for testing him are not available. Accuracy is a habit of mind, and we know from happy experience that some people are habitually accurate just as others can be depended upon to be inaccurate. Luke's record entitles him to be regarded as a writer of habitual accuracy."⁹

Archaeology confirms the Gospel of John as well. In John 5:1-15 Jesus heals a man at the Pool of Bethesda. John describes the pool as having five porticoes. The existence of the pool was disputed until recently, when the Pool of Bethesda was discovered in northeast quarter of the Old Town Jerusalem. Forty feet underground archaeologists discovered a pool with five porticoes; the description of the surrounding area matches John's layout.¹⁰ John 9:7 mentions another long disputed site, the Pool of Siloam. However, this pool was also discovered in 1880, upholding the accuracy of John.¹¹

Pontius Pilate is mentioned in all the gospels. Evidence that he was the governor at Jesus' trial and the description of his character as described in the gospels has been affirmed. In 1961, Italian archaeologist Antonio Frova uncovered a fragment of a plaque that was used as a section of steps leading to the Caesarea Theater. The inscription, written in Latin, contained the phrase, "Pontius Pilatus, Prefect of Judea has dedicated to the people of Caesarea a temple in honor of Tiberius." This temple is dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius who reigned from 14-37 AD. The new finding fits chronologically with the New Testament which records that Pilot ruled as procurator from 26-36 AD.¹²

Non-Christian Corroboration

Non-Christian sources also confirm the events of the gospels. There are Roman and Jewish historical records that confirm the essence of Christ's life as recorded in the gospels. Tacitus, a Roman historian of the first century, confirms the New Testament designation of Pilate. He writes, "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus. . . ."

Other Roman sources confirm the gospel accounts as well. Thallus wrote a historical work of Greece from the Trojan War to his day in 52 AD. Although his work is lost, Julius Africanus in 221 AD quotes Thallus. In the third book of his histories he states that darkness covered the earth during the

⁵ Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out*, (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), 25.

⁶ FF Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 88.

⁷ Lee Strobel, 97-98.

⁸ William Ramsey, *Luke the Physician*, p. 177-179, quoted in FF Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 31.

⁹ FF. Bruce., p. 31.

¹⁰ Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 108.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹² Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 67.

crucifixion of Jesus. He explains the darkness with a solar eclipse.¹³ From Julius Africanus' work, it can be concluded that the passion story was known in Rome by 50 AD, and that the enemies of Christianity tried to give naturalistic explanations to the occurrence of darkness.

There is also the testimony of Jewish historical works. The Talmud (Completed 300 AD) confirms a historical Jesus, but labels him a heretic and attributes his miracles to sorcery and magic. The Talmud rarely mentions false teachers so, the fact that it mentions Jesus at all indicates that He was a significant figure. The Talmud also affirms his death by Roman crucifixion and confirms the healing ministry of five Apostles.

Another source is Josephus who identifies characters mentioned in the gospels including the Herods, Emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero. He also mentions the High Priestly families of Caiaphas, Ananias, and Annas. He also corroborates events in the gospels. In *The Antiquities* 18, he mentions that Gamaliel names Judas the Galilean as leading an uprising (Acts 5:37), the famine in the days of Claudius is mentioned (Acts 11:28), the sudden death of Agrippa (Acts 12), the death of John the Baptist, and the death of James, the Brother of Jesus.¹⁴ Archaeology and the historical records from Christian and non-Christian sources prove that the gospels are historical works, not fictional writings.

The Manuscript Evidence

The next objection we must answer is, "Are the New Testament documents accurately preserved?" Here we look at the manuscript evidence. The number of manuscripts that exist and the time gap from the original writings determines manuscript accuracy. Generally speaking, the more ancient documents there are and the closer in date to the original writings, the more accurate your text is to the original.

When looking at the number of manuscripts, we find that there are over 5000 Greek manuscripts dating from as early as the first century. Additionally, there are quotes from the church fathers, some as early as the first century, and early translations such as the Latin Vulgate. Putting all the documents together gives us over 24,000 ancient documents. As stated previously, the earliest manuscript is the Rylands Papyri dating about 120 AD. The Bodmer Papyri contains entire New Testament books dated to 200 AD. The church fathers also quote sections of the New Testament. Clement of Rome quotes Matthew, John, and First Corinthians in a letter dated to have been written in 95 AD. Polycarp writing in 110-150 AD quotes all the gospels. The Shepherd of Hermas quotes Matthew and Mark as early as 120-150 AD.¹⁵

The time gap between the original writings and the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament is twenty-five years. With the small gap in time and the numerous manuscripts available, we can be assured that we have a copy that is accurate to the originals. Furthermore, texts can be compared for accuracy and any changes or incorrect edits can be corroborated with the other manuscripts. New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger writes that we have a copy 99.5% accurate to the original text.¹⁶

Comparing it to works of its time, the New Testament far exceeds all others. For example, for the writings of Plato, there are seven ancient manuscripts the earliest dating 1300 years after the date of the original text. There are ten copies of the Gallic Wars, the earliest dating 1,000 years after the original writings. The *Iliad* by Homer contains 643 copies.¹⁷ From this we see the New Testament manuscript evidence far exceeds the other works of its time. Either we accept the accuracy of the New Testament or we must reject what we know of the Greek and Roman Empire as fiction.

Finally, were the authors writers of integrity? First, the time gap from the occurrence of events to the time of writing is too short for legends to develop. On top of that, they were written during the lifetimes of eyewitnesses who could corroborate or contradict the facts. Third, the gospels do not have the style of legends. They include many detailed facts that could have been corroborated by eye-witnesses and they often appeal to eyewitnesses for confirmation. Luke 3:1-3 includes a detailed account regarding the time of John the Baptist's ministry. John 19 includes details of Jesus' burial place. The apostles also leave in stories that show them to be hard of heart, insensitive, cowardly, and slow to learn. These facts would be edited out in a legendary document. The apostles also leave in difficult teachings of Jesus that an editor

¹³ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing, 1998), p. 84.

¹⁴ FF Bruce, p. 105.

¹⁵ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology Volume 1* (Minneapolis, MN.: Bethany House Publishers, 2002), 464.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 463.

¹⁷ Norman Geisler, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 408.

would love to leave out. Sayings like, “pray for your enemies,” and the warnings of persecution. There are also details that cause difficulty between the gospels because there are four different perspectives. The differing perspectives reveal that the writers did not try to harmonize their works with one another. Finally, the apostles had nothing to gain from their message but a life of suffering and death. None of the authors renounced their faith even in the face of death. All these facts confirm the men who wrote were men of integrity writing from conviction of what they knew to be true.

From the historical evidence, we can reject the critics charge that the gospels are legendary accounts of Jesus’ life. There is an abundance of internal and external evidence that support an early date of the gospel writings. There are numerous archaeological and historical records corroborating the events of Jesus’ life. Finally, the manuscript evidence assures us that we have a copy accurate to the originals. Since all of the evidence upholds the historical accuracy of the gospels, Brown’s assertion that the gospels were not written by eye witnesses and that they have not been accurately preserved is fiction not fact.

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