

Summary of Primary sources for Christian History (plus later events)

- ~600 BC and earlier: **Old Testament Prophets** protest worship of other gods, including going to pagan temples and coupling with their prostitutes. This was not the practice of the Jewish Temple.
- ~33AD: Jesus and first apostles
- 50-70 AD: **Letters** (I Thessalonians, Philippians, I & II Corinthians, Romans...)
- 51: Roman historian **Suetonius**: “because of Chrestus”
- 64: Roman historian **Tacitus**: Nero blames the Christians
- 60-70: Gospels according to **Mark, Matthew, Luke**
- 90-100: Gospel according to **John**
- 107: Letter from **Ignatius of Antioch & Clement** confirm early Christian theology
- 111: Roman governor **Pliny** reports on Christians singing hymns to Christ “as to a god.”
- 100-155: **Polycarp** (who died in 155) records a list of books considered authoritative in the church (these are the core of the New Testament books).
- ~150 and later: **Gnostics** produce other writings and “gospels,” describing Jesus as pure spirit, without a human body, and without a birth or death; they describe two gods (the god of the Old Testament is a bad god) or perhaps many divine beings. One is saved by growth in the secret knowledge (“gnosis”). Gnosticism is against the material world and against the physical body (including sex and childbirth). These writings include the “gospel of Mary,” “the gospel of Judas,” “the gospel of Thomas” and so on.
- ~180: **Irenaeus** writes “Against Heretics” against the Gnostics, saying that if one wants to know the Christian faith, don’t look for these new “secret knowledge” ideas, rather talk to Christians around the empire and read what they hold authoritative. Seek the teaching that is “of the whole” (his word was “catholic”).

Events from Constantine’s time and long after his death

- 313: Constantine wins the battle of the Milvian bridge and legalizes Christianity (“the Edict of Milan”)
- 325: **The Council of Nicaea**: solves controversy between a new line of thinking that thought Jesus was a divine creature before all other non-divine creatures (the Arian view), and those traditionalists who thought that Jesus was fully divine (the orthodox view). No one argued that Jesus was only human. The orthodox won by a large margin.
- After 325: Constantine began to favor the Arians, and the orthodox bishops had a hard time of it for several decades.
- ~350: The apex of Arianism in the empire (stronger in the West than in the East). Pagan Emperor Julian lashes out in persecution against the Christians.
- 381: As Arianism declines, the council of Constantinople affirms the orthodox position.
- 393 & 397: Councils specify the New Testament as the current 27 books. Most of these books appeared in Polycarp’s list from the mid 100s (including the four Gospel accounts and Paul’s letters); 20 books were authoritative by 200. The other seven (several of the smaller letters and Revelation) were widely in use at least since the 100s, but were not universally “official” in their status until this time.

**Notes from “The Da Vinci Code and History,”
looking at the historical events and characters referred to in the book and the movie.**

Dan Brown’s “The Da Vinci Code” caused quite a stir for its smug reference to ‘the biggest and most dangerous secret that would rock the world,’ which the book claimed is also part of the “historical record” open and obvious for everyone to see. ☺ I note this just to set the context for this inquiry (see the contradiction—if it’s a secret, then its not open and obvious, and if its open and obvious, then its not a secret). That is to say, there’s a reason why the Da Vinci Code is found in the *fiction* section of your local library. I found the book to be an interesting mystery plot stretched thin by self-observations of how suspenseful it is (“she couldn’t wait to hear more....”). If you’ve seen the movie “National Treasure” with Nicholas Cage, you’ll get the gist of the plot—wild theories of the Knights Templar, the Masons, secret societies and the Holy Grail. The Da Vinci Code spices it up by a basic premise of undermining Christian historical claims while painting the mean old Roman Catholic Church as the demonic ogre. The theological thrust of the book was surprising: a steady advocacy of pagan goddess worship (to balance all the world’s masculine stuff). The real surprise was the extraordinary effort to paint Christianity, in its origins and in truth, to be totally on board with this goddess worship. There was a passing claim that Judaism integrated sexual goddess worship as well. This is sort of like saying that the American revolutionaries were really all about helping king George, or that the Nazis were really non-violent pro-democracy protesters. Male or female, other deities mean other religions when it comes to Judaism or Christianity.

What made these claims so compelling for so many people were the “of course you know...” references to historical events and people, especially from early Christian history. So who were these people and what really happened and how did it impact Christian theology and practice?

Primary Sources:

To start with, historians rely as much as possible on *primary sources*. Rather than a commentary written long after the fact, a primary source is the first hand account of the person or event, or as close to it as possible. To verify the document, one then compares the information with other documents of the day—from other writers or cultures. Documents can be dated by language and events. For instance, any document describing “World War I” would have to be written after the 1930s, since that war was called simply “The Great War” until Hitler’s campaign brought WWII. The primary sources for Jewish History are the Old Testament scriptures themselves (and the Apocrypha)—there are no other ancient Hebrew writings.

Here one finds no rule that rabbis or sons must be married or have heirs, though there is a strong emphasis on providing husbands for women, and the care of widows and orphans without husbands or fathers. Here, one also finds the primary distinction of the Jewish religion: their absolutism toward God’s oneness and otherness from creation and any other god. Surrounding peoples worshipped fertility goddesses and had sex with temple prostitutes, but the Hebrew people were excoriated by the prophets if they took part in such sinful apostasy. The Temple in Jerusalem would never have invited such practice—indeed Jews later gave their lives rather than let pagans even enter the Temple in Roman times. The idea of the “divine feminine” was abhorrent for the same reason that the “divine masculine” was abhorrent—one didn’t even speak God’s name, much less represent God by any part of creation or human trait. Some Jewish writings offer feminine qualities as descriptors of God (“as a hen gathers her chicks”), and Jewish wisdom writing sometimes describes wisdom with the metaphor of a woman. Here, you can find a balance to traditional masculine language of God, but goddess worship you will not

find. Also, to find affirmation of human sexuality, read through the Old Testament book the Song of Songs. However, celibacy is not condemned—look at the apostle Paul who practiced and encouraged it.

As for blurring the lines between God and creation, this is what got Jesus into trouble with the Jews—he claimed to be divine, and was therefore tried for blasphemy. The Da Vinci Code claims that Jesus was just a regular guy that Emperor Constantine called divine for political purposes in AD 325. However, primary sources make a claim for divinity long before Constantine’s great-great-great grandparents were even gleams in their ancestor’s eyes.

Primary Sources for the New Testament and the early church:

The Primary sources we use for the history of Jesus begin with several **letters written by Christian leaders** to various churches. The earliest of these (with a fairly cautious and skeptical dating) dates from ~50 AD. These letters describe the worship of Jesus, call Jesus Lord and Son of God, and insist on his resurrection from the dead. You can read these letters—in fact you hear from them in church, for these letters form the bulk of the New Testament. Some letters from **Paul** date as early as the 50s, and others from later decades. Primary sources from this time include Roman historian **Suetonius** wrote about expulsion of Jews from Rome in AD 51 “because of Chrestus,” that is, because of disputes between traditional Jews and Jewish Christians. Another Roman historian **Tacitus** described how Nero persecuted the Christians, blaming them for the fire that engulfed Rome in AD 64.

We can also date the final forms of the gospel accounts; evidence indicates that they probably relied on earlier written or oral accounts, but the more cautious estimate (inclining to a later date) can only be based on dating the final form of the account. The gospels according to **Mark, Matthew and Luke** are dated between AD 60 and 70. The final form of the gospel according to **John** is usually dated later, perhaps 90-100. Here, we clearly see the claim of Jesus’ divinity, and the basic Christian theology that continues today.

By the way, here are the only references to **Mary Magdalene** until decades later. Mary is mentioned 12 times in the New Testament—in all four gospel accounts in three basic events: the burial of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, and as one who takes the message back to the apostles (for this, she is aptly known in the church as the “apostle to the apostles”). The only other thing we know about Mary Magdalene is that Jesus delivered her from 7 demons. That’s it. Some later tradition in the church linked her with other Mary figures in the gospels, or other women, including the prostitute who bathed Jesus’ feet with her hair, or the woman who poured perfume on Jesus’ head. I suppose that these links are possible, but there is no evidence for it in the primary sources. As for marrying Jesus and having kids, this is an argument from silence. It sure would be an odd fact for all of these writers to overlook. They don’t overlook the fact that one of the leaders of the early church (certainly not the only one, and certainly not the master of others) was Jesus’ brother James, nor is any significance given to his blood relation to Jesus. The Da Vinci Code relies on sketchy verses from Gnostic documents that the author then interprets wildly. But those documents come much later in our historical review, so they’ll have to wait.

There are many other writings not included in the New Testament. The Da Vinci Code mentions the **Dead Sea Scrolls**, found in the 20th century, as the earliest Christian documents, and a treasure of controversy for the Catholics. This claim is fascinating, since, in addition to the Catholic Church supplying a great deal of the scholarship working on the translation project, the scrolls themselves are purely Jewish—from a sect that we call the Essenes. Jesus or other Christian figures appear nowhere in their literature.

Other Christian and pagan texts, however, do offer some early pictures of Christian life. The first letter of **Clement** was written around AD 96, a teaching manual known as the **Didiche**

may have origins ~AD 100, though some would date the document as late as 130. In AD 107, **Ignatius of Antioch**, a ~70 year old bishop, wrote several letters on his way to be martyred in Rome. These documents clearly describe Jesus in divine terms, and specifically as the son of God (Ignatius writes of “the Passion of my God” when referring to Jesus’ suffering), and reflect a faith consistent with later Christianity. These writings also demonstrate that their authors and their readers were familiar with many of the letters and writings that appear in the New Testament, for they quote these documents as an appeal to authority.

In AD 111, a Roman governor named **Pliny** investigated the illegal religion of Christianity (which by then had been persecuted for their stubbornness in not worshipping the gods and goddesses of other religions, including most problematically, the worship of the emperor). Pliny scoffed at Christian religion and practice, though he thought them unworthy of the costs of full-scale annihilation. Pliny reported that Christians gather on Sunday and sing hymns to Christ “as to a god.” Interestingly enough to those who accuse early Christianity of sexism, Pliny’s investigatory methods including torturing two female Christian ministers. St. Paul also mentions women who were important patrons and leaders in the church. **Polycarp**, a bishop whose colleagues call a disciple of the apostle John, also wrote early in the second century, **including a list of writings authoritative to the Christian community**, including much of what is now the New Testament. The outlines of the Bible showed up long before Constantine.

The Da Vinci Code claims that there were many gospels considered for the New Testament, but these other gospels don’t appear until after the writings listed above. Main New Testament letters and gospel accounts were widely authoritative at the turn of the first century and certainly by Polycarp’s time. The Da Vinci Code claims that Jesus wasn’t called divine until Constantine’s time (AD 325), but the primary sources above tell us otherwise. The Da Vinci Code claims all sorts of special knowledge of Jesus’ “authentic,” “merely human” life. So what were these “other gospels” and what did they say about Jesus? These are the **Gnostic** texts that appeared ~AD 150 and later.

The Gnostics

Polycarp’s writings address some of the early teachings of what are known as the “Gnostics.” “**The gospel of Peter,**” “**The gospel of Thomas,**” “**the gospel of Mary,**” “**the gospel of Judas,**” and others all belong to a strain of thinking opposed by the early church as in conflict with the teaching about Jesus handed down by the apostles and their disciples. So did these Gnostic writings (written ~150 and later) really claim that Jesus was merely human and married to Mary Magdalene? Actually, the Gnostics taught that Jesus was too divine to even have a real body! The Gnostics were against the body and the physical world, against sexuality, and certainly against the God of the Old Testament. They described a universe filled with various divine creatures (“demiurges”) filling various levels of spirituality that only the enlightened could reach. The spirit world is everything, and only the truly enlightened will achieve the special knowledge (the Greek word is *gnosis*) that will lead to salvation. Secret knowledge fits Dan Brown’s description, but the secret knowledge they describe fully contradicts the Da Vinci Code even more than traditional Christianity.

So the rest of the church fought against these claims by actually emphasizing how *human* Jesus really is. Yes, Jesus is divine, but Jesus was indeed “born of the Virgin Mary” (the messy idea of childbirth was too demeaning for the Gnostic Jesus), “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died” (bodily suffering and death was even more anathema to the Gnostics) and, just to emphasize the point, Jesus “was buried” before he “rose again.” Recognize these clauses? These

are from the earliest of creeds that we still show in the “Apostles’ Creed,” developed to strike clear contrast with the Gnostic ideas of Jesus as pure spirit.

Polycarp, Justin Martyr (writing around AD 160) and **Irenaeus** (writing around 180) wrote letters challenging these teachings and their “gospels.” Irenaeus emphasizes that there is nothing secret about the Christian faith—what the Christian fathers taught is available for all to read. The true teaching about Jesus is from the apostles, whose writings have been widely used and taught for decades, unlike these new “gospels” so recent to appear. Irenaeus appeals to the teaching that is common around the empire, and to texts that are used in common around the empire. Thus, he describes a faith, not of secret and unusual teachings, but one that is “of the whole.” The word that Irenaeus uses for “of the whole” is the word “catholic,” and this controversy is what brings the criteria of “catholic” and “apostolic” to great importance in determining authoritative status for church documents.

As the Da Vinci Code rightly points out, copies of these Gnostic writings were found near **Nag Hammadi** in Egypt in the twentieth century. Without the background of context, one can easily see how these texts could be inflated to be “alternative gospels.” These texts were long known to the church, however, and the hype about them is just hype. The Da Vinci Code’s assessment of these texts is considerably fictional—it helps his plot but with no basis in fact.

Long before Constantine

So, long before Constantine, the church held a collection of New Testament texts as authoritative, Jesus was worshipped as a divine man, and the only alternatives were out-of-place writings that appeared long after the authoritative texts, and which claimed that Jesus wasn’t really human at all. Long before Constantine, what the Da Vinci Code describes as a “war between Christians and Pagans” was being lost by the Christians, largely because they weren’t fighting—they were occasionally slaughtered by the pagan authorities. Primary sources and just general knowledge of history make laughable the claims such as ‘Constantine shifted the Sabbath day to Sunday’ or Constantine founded “the Roman Catholic Church” Where? In his new city Constantinople of course, far from Rome? The Western Church wasn’t called the “Roman Catholic Church” for centuries—just ask the Eastern Orthodox who hold Constantinople as their primary historical center. The western church wasn’t even seen as that distinct from the East until closer to the time East and West split in AD 1054. Then there is the idea that the concept of “heresy” started with Constantine centuries after Irenaeus wrote “Against Heresies,” or that Constantine ‘financed & commissioned a new Bible,’ as if the collection of authoritative texts cited since the early second century were a novelty.

Constantine

But I digress... The book did get a few things right about Constantine: he was an emperor and he did legalize Christianity, even though he remained the chief pagan priest of the empire, and was baptized on his deathbed (though not forcibly). The story goes that Constantine saw a vision of one of the Christian symbols before an important battle, and heard the message “under this sign, conquer.” He won the battle (“of the Milvian Bridge”) in AD 313, which gave him the whole empire, and he later issued the “Edict of Milan” legalizing Christianity. Constantine didn’t mix Christianity and pagan religion (the Christians wouldn’t tolerate it), but Christians did build church buildings on top of pagan worship sites and took over pagan holiday dates for Christian holidays. Of course, they weren’t blending the meaning, they were *substituting* Christian theology and practice for that of the pagans.

Legalizing Christianity made travel and correspondence among Christian leaders much safer than before. This, in turn, made the politics of the current controversy rather public and

apparent. Constantine called the bishops to a council—the council of Nicaea in AD 325. They didn't commission a new Bible or decide that Jesus was now divine instead of human. In fact, the debate was **how one should properly describe Jesus' divinity**. That's right—both sides agreed that Jesus is divine, but they differed on how to describe his divinity. The party known as the Arians (following a priest named Arius) claimed that Jesus is a divine creature, higher than the angels, and certainly not merely human—but not fully *one* with God. The party known later as the orthodox claimed that this contradicted the traditional understanding of Jesus as “one with the Father.” The council decided in favor of the orthodox party, and despite what the Da Vinci code says, the vote wasn't close (and regardless, both sides said he is divine).

So did the council called by Constantine (not run by him) decide the matter forever and suppress the pagans? Hardly. The arguments were subtle, and Constantine later favored the Arians. Orthodox bishops had a very hard time for a while, as Arianism grew in prominence in the successive decades. Was that it for the pagans? Hardly. Pagan emperor Julian viciously persecuted the Christians in mid-century. Toward the end of the fourth century, Arianism began to decrease, and by 381, a new council of bishops (long after Constantine and Julian) reaffirmed the Nicene position. Councils in 393 and 397 codified the text of the New Testament. The gospels and most of the letters were the same four as had been cited as authoritative as early as ~AD 100-150 (20 of the final 27 books were widely accepted as authoritative for the whole church by 200). These councils of 393 and 397 affirmed as authoritative seven additional books which had been used since the 100s, but not quite as widely as the other 20 (Hebrews, Revelation, James, Jude, 2nd Peter and 2nd and 3rd letters of John. Constantine (long dead by 393) neither had the first word or the last word on what was the Bible.

Miscellany: Q, patriarchy, Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail

A few other details of mention: “Q” is a theoretical document based on some guesswork about source material for the final form of the gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke, after comparing them with each other and with the gospel according to Mark. No one has ever found a document that is anywhere close to being this theoretical “Q” document, and scholars still argue whether or not Q ever existed. Certainly, one can make no claims about who theoretically wrote this theoretical document (the Da Vinci Code claims Jesus wrote it).

As for “patriarchal Christianity” replacing “matriarchal paganism,” Rome was far more patriarchal than Christianity. Granted, they worshipped goddesses as well as gods, but the social, political and family life was ruled by men, and the “Pater Familias” (“father of the family”) ruled as king in the extended household—sort of like Marlon Brando in “The Godfather” movies. Jesus' fraternization with prostitutes and foreign women and the place of various women in the gospel accounts, Acts, and even Paul's letters (thought fairly paternalistic by some) stand in sharp contrast to both the Jewish and Greco-Roman culture of patriarchy. This is the basis for many Liberation, feminist and womanist Christian theologies.

What about Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail? These are the main legends on which the plot of the Da Vinci Code is based. This is legendary stuff indeed, largely formed out of the silence of the historical record. Nature abhors a vacuum, and conspiracy theorists abhor it even more. Enjoy the book, and enjoy the stories, but when it comes to theology, stick with what we have. The earliest primary sources may not answer every question, but they are the most reliable record we have. All the rest is just for fun.