



"Jesus' followers fabricated the stories and sayings of Jesus"

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In the book *The Da Vinci Code* the author Dan Brown poses a question and suggests an answer, in a discussion between the characters of Teabing and Sophie, that could, if it holds true, mean the total collapse and refutation of orthodox Christianity:

'At this gathering,' Teabing said, 'many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon ... the administration of the sacraments, and, of course, the divinity of Jesus.'

'I don't follow. His divinity?'

'My dear,' Teabing declared, 'until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless. A mortal.'

'Not the Son of God?'

'Right,' Teabing said. 'Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea.'

'Hold on. You're saying Jesus' divinity was the result of a *vote*?'

'A relatively close one at that,' Teabing added.

Dan Brown isn't the only one who takes this view. Thomas Sheehan, Loyola philosophy professor and author of *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God became Christianity*, also maintains that, 'Jesus did not think he was divine, nor did he assert any of the messianic claims that the New Testament attributes to him.'

So why does the Bible seem to tell a different story? Is the Biblical Jesus, who claims to be God, really an exaggerated and embellished victim of well meaning but corrupt early journalists? Did the church or disciples really change things? This is a good question. Most Christians tend to assume that this didn't happen. But is this a reasonable view to take? Does it make any sense? And what might a thoughtful person say in response?

Firstly, the Christian can offer good reasons for taking the Gospels to be historically reliable. This may provide a platform for speaking about the claims and deeds of Christ.

Secondly, the claim that the early Christian communities read back into Jesus' teachings their own concerns and controversies won't withstand scrutiny. For a few different reasons:

§ Many of the controversial issues in the Epistles aren't even mentioned in the Gospels (circumcision, speaking in tongues, eating meat offered to idols, etc.).

§ Matthew, Mark, and Luke offer a portrait of Jesus within one generation of his death. Note the case of Acts, which was likely written before Paul's death (A.D. 64), which means that Luke's gospel was written earlier than this and that Mark, which Luke follows, was written even earlier.

§ First-century Palestinian Jews were concerned about accurately preserving tradition, and this concern is reflected in the epistles – for example, themes from the Sermon on the Mount are reflected in James and the tradition of the last supper is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11.

§ The gospels do not reflect a fabrication. There is a simplicity to them, making fabrications unlikely. (Note the women as witnesses of Jesus' resurrection despite their lower societal status, or the 'embarrassing' points that would probably be deleted if the Gospel stories or sayings were fabricated – Jesus' baptism by John, his ignorance of the time of his own return, his not doing miracles in some places).

§ Why invent so many miracle stories, when most Jews expected a political deliverer as Messiah, not a wonder-worker?

Thirdly, the gospels – primarily Mark, Matthew, and Luke – offer a portrait of Jesus within one generation of his death, which tends to ensure the

accurate transmission of the Jesus-tradition.

Fourthly, the simple unsophisticated nature of the Gospels attests to their reliability rather than to their being fabrications.

In summary, to say that someone writes with evangelistic or apologetical purpose doesn't mean that what is written is unreliable. Passion or zeal – as with the Holocaust survivors – need not entail distortion of data. And you can point out places where the Gospels show themselves to be reliable historically and archeologically. This lends credibility to what cannot be directly verified – Jesus' claims and deeds.

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