

**The Council of Nicea:
Promoting Jesus from Man to God?**

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INTRODUCTION

The DaVinci Code (Brown, 2003), a novel by Dan Brown, wraps a fictional adventure story around what the author claims is a factual, yet relatively unknown history of Jesus and the Holy Grail. Holy Blood, Holy Grail (Baigent, et al. 1982), a non-fictional book published in the early 1980s, provides the bulk of Brown's factual material (and is even mentioned by one of Brown's characters). Brown describes an ecumenical conference in the fourth century known as the Council of Nicea, and makes the case that it was a pivotal event for Christianity. The DaVinci Code's popularization of this interpretation of Christian history demands a closer look at the real events and their effect on Christian doctrine and its power structure.

Two characters from The DaVinci Code who are fictional experts in Church history and symbology provide a great deal of background relating to the first few centuries of the Christian Church. They claim that until the Council of Nicea in 325, the followers of Jesus viewed him as a mortal prophet, that the Council was convened to resolve growing turmoil between Christians and Pagans, and that Constantine instructed the bishops to declare Jesus was a divine being. All of this was done, they said, to silence Pagan protestations and solidify the orthodoxy. They also claim that Constantine created a new bible, one which omitted any gospels which even hinted at Jesus' humanity, and included those which professed his divinity.

ACCORDING TO HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL

The larger hypothesis being argued in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Baigent, et al. 1982) proposes that Jesus was a man, Mary Magdalene was his wife, and that the secret of the Holy Grail protects the evidence of their continued bloodline. To partially support such a hypothesis, the authors spent some time discussing the political and theological environment which existed in the fourth century Church. Namely, that many believed that Jesus had not died on the cross, and that Constantine, needing to mold Christianity to better serve his political aims, used the council of Nicea to obliterate Jesus' humanity and define him as a divine being.

Holy Blood, Holy Grail claims that early writers saw Jesus one of two ways: God, or human prophet. Multiple ancient texts claimed that the crucifixion was a fraud, that Jesus did not die. More than one of the writings discovered among the Nag Hammadi Scrolls (a.k.a. Gnostic Gospels) claimed this, with one of them quoting Jesus telling the story himself. The Quo'ran also tells of how the Romans thought they had killed Jesus, but crucified Simon instead (Baigent et. al, 1982).

Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln present their own version of the "Arian Crisis" which led to the Council of Nicea. In the late third century, Irenaeus published the *Five Books Against Heresies*. These works cataloged all deviations from his version of the orthodoxy, and condemned the authors as heretics. The best-known such heretic was Arius, a bishop from Alexandria whose dispute with the orthodoxy centered on the premise that there was a single, omnipotent, and

supreme God, and the Jesus was simply a man, a mortal prophet. The conflict between the Orthodoxy and the growing number of bishops and priests who agreed with Arius led to the calling of the great Council of Nicea (Baigent et. Al, 1982).

According to Holy Blood, Holy Grail, Constantine convened the Council of Nicea to get the bishops to decide that Jesus was divine. The bishops did so, condemning Arius and any who would not sign the Creed. Constantine supported the results because it was politically advantageous to him—the teachings of a divine Christ could not be disputed, and it defined the Catholic Church as the only path to salvation. Constantine ordered the destruction of all heretical documents, and commissioned new copies of the Bible, allowing the orthodoxy to choose gospels and other writings which supported the divinity of Christ (Baigent et. al 1982).

CHRISTIANITY IN THE EARLY FOURTH CENTURY

It is well established that differences over Church doctrine were growing into a broad conflict among the bishops across the Roman Empire. This conflict regarding the nature of Christ was not "mortal versus divine," as Baigent would have us believe. It was a debate between those who believed Jesus had been created by God and sent to Earth, and those who believed Jesus was God (Hanson, 1988 p. 7). The debate was not a defense of established orthodoxy from heretics, but a search by all parties to define an orthodoxy. Many people were on each side of the debate, and each turned to tradition to support their

claims. Not surprisingly, each side claimed the other was unorthodox (Hanson, 1988).

Arius was the most well-known advocate of a viewpoint professing the uniqueness of God, describing a Holy Father who is “sole true, sole wise, sole good” (Hanson, 1988, p.8). Arius did not say Jesus was a man, however. He claimed that God created him, that Christ was as an unchangeable, unalterable, perfect creature of God. Arius stated that the Son of God did not exist before God created him, whereas God is unbegotten and unoriginated (i.e., he has always existed) (Hanson, p. 7). Here are excerpts from the statement of faith presented by Arius and his supporters to the Council of Nicea:

Our faith, which we have from our forefathers and which we have also learned from you, holy father, is this: we acknowledge one God, the only unbegotten, the only eternal, the only one without cause or beginning, the only true, the only one possessed of immortality, the only wise, the only good, the only sovereign, judge of all things, immutable and unchanging...

The begetter of his only Son before endless ages; through whom he made both the ages and all that is; begetting him not in appearance but in truth, giving him subsistence by his own will; begetting him as immutable and unchanging, the perfect creation of God...

...we say that he [the Son] was created by the will of God before all times and all ages, receiving from the Father his life and his existence,

the Father making the Son's glories exist alongside himself. [Williams, 2001, p. 270]

No consensus had been reached among the Church's teachers on this issue. "Each school claimed to represent the true tradition and to know the clearest interpretation of the Scriptures" (Hanson, 1988, p.145). Nevertheless, a significant group of powerful bishops were determined to excommunicate and depose any bishops who showed leanings toward the views presented by Arius (Hanson, 1988).

Constantine, Emperor of the Roman Empire, directed the bishop Ossius to call the first-ever ecumenical (i.e., "worldwide") council of bishops and urged them to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict between those who supported the idea of the holy trinity, and those who held fast to the idea of a single, supreme God (Elliot, 1996, Lim, 1995).

THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

The great Council of Nicea met from May to the end of July in 325 CE. It was the first attempt to summon a general council at which the churches from every part of the Roman Empire should be represented. Constantine sponsored the event, with the government providing all transportation, food and lodging for the bishops and their entourages. No records were kept which identified all of the attendees, and varying accounts from that time place the number of attending bishops somewhere between 250 and 320 (Hanson 1988).

A majority of the bishops who attended the council were only peripherally aware (if at all) of the conflict raging between the Arians and the partisans of Alexander of Alexandria. Most lacked a strong interest in what they may have viewed as a disagreement over esoteric aspects of Christian doctrine (Lim, p.183).

Debate consumed several weeks. Once the Creed in its final form was written and presented to the bishops, Ossius (the chairman of the proceedings) signed the Creed. It was then taken around to the bishops to be signed, but seventeen refused. Eustathius and his allies tried at this point to get the so-called Arians expelled from the church, only to discover that even though nearly all of the bishops in attendance were willing to endorse the Creed, there was little support for this action. When Constantine assured the dissenting bishops that they could avoid being deposed (as well as avoid any other punishment) merely by signing the Creed, all but two agreed (Elliott, p. 209).

Two bishops remained steadfast in their refusal to sign the Creed of Nicea: Secundus of Ptolemais, and Theonas of Marmarique (Hanson p. 162). Both were deposed by the council and exiled by Constantine, along with Arius (Williams, p.70).

A complete translation of the Creed of Nicea follows, standing in sharp contrast to Arius' statement of faith excerpted earlier:

We believe in one God, the Father, the ruler of all, the maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten as the only Son out of the Father, that is, out of the substance of

the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, *homoousios* (Greek: "of one substance" or "of one being") with the Father, the one through whom all things came to be, things in heaven and things in earth; who, for the sake of us human beings and our salvation, descended and became flesh, became human, suffered, and rose on the third day, ascended into the heavens and is coming to judge living and dead; and in the Holy Spirit.

As for those who say, 'there was when he was not', or 'he did not exist before he was begotten', or 'he came into being out of non-existence', or who fantasize that the Son of God is from some other *hypostasis* ("substance" or "foundation") or *ousia* ("being"), or that he is created or mutable or changeable, such people the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes. [Williams, 2001, p. 278]

The only documents produced by the council were the Creed, and twenty canons on a variety of minor issues (Elliott, p. 195). Constantine also instructed the Bishops to agree on a consistent method for determining the date of Easter, so that all Christians everywhere in the world would observe Easter on the same day (Elliott, p. 211).

The Creed's concepts of the Son (Jesus) being of the substance of God and being consubstantial are a first. These ideas had not appeared in any creed or profession of faith prior to 325 (Hanson, p.166). The Creed defined the Holy Trinity as it exists today in Catholicism.

AFTER THE COUNCIL

Even though virtually all in attendance were signatories to the Creed, many were dissatisfied and later provided their own, often conflicting version of the council proceedings to further their own interests (Lim, 1995).

Constantine worked hard after the Council to campaign for its acceptance. He wrote letters to the churches in Alexandria and Nicomedia, recommending the Creed as a tool for unity, and pointing to the nearly unanimous endorsement by the bishops as a sound basis for this interpretation (Elliott, 1996). Constantine also sent letters to all churches regarding the need to fix the date of Easter (Hanson, 1988).

Two other bishops were exiled (Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Theognis) when Constantine learned of their continued association with Alexandrian followers of Arian thought. They confessed to the emperor of only signing the Creed out of prudence, and were rewarded with deposition and banishment (Williams, 2001, Hanson, 1988).

Some time after the council, Constantine issued an edict declaring that all the works of Arius were to be burnt, and anyone not surrendering their copies would be executed (Williams, 2001).

For years after the first Council of Nicea the conflict continued, but in a more muted fashion. Arianism was far from dead, and between 341 and 360, several anti-Nicene creeds were produced. The Creed of Nicea, the cornerstone

of Church orthodoxy, was not fully and permanently installed until its reaffirmation at the Council of Constantinople in 381 (Lim, 1995).

Unrelated to the Council of Nicea (contrary to the long-standing myth perpetuated by *The DaVinci Code*), Constantine did request 50 copies of sacred scripture for use in the new churches in Constantinople (Socrates, 1886). The exact contents of the fifty copies of scripture is not known (none are known to have survived), but some suspect they may have contained the same 27 books found in the New Testament (Bruce, 1988).

CONCLUSIONS

The Council of Nicea was indeed an important event in the history of Christianity, and boasts a number of unique contributions. It was the first ever empire-wide gathering of church leaders, it defined a core doctrine of the Church which lives on today (the Holy Trinity), and it was a first step toward unifying the Church.

It seems apparent from the information gathered from academic works that the Council of Nicea did not change Jesus from a mortal man to a divine being. While some early writings claimed that Jesus was simply human, this concept was never an issue at the Council of Nicea. Even those who were excommunicated and expelled from the Empire as a result of the Council believed Jesus to be a being of heaven, and would no doubt consider the concept of Jesus' mortality to be heresy.

Without the Council of Nicea acting as an agent in the conspiracy to hide Jesus' humanity, much of the foundation for Holy Blood, Holy Grail's theories falls away.

Regarding the additional contention that Constantine ordered all heretical writings destroyed, and a new bible written to only include books which supported Christ's divinity, no evidence was found that this was his motive. Constantine certainly did order fifty new copies of the Scriptures, but his purpose was to provide Scriptures to the newly built churches in Constantinople, which had none.

The authors of Holy Blood, Holy Grail have put together a very exciting, interesting theory which fits their interpretations of the known history, but even they admit they lack evidence for many of their hypotheses. Even so, their representations of the known history are not just controversial, they are in some cases simply incorrect. One needs only to read the words of Arius himself to conclude that Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln either did not do their homework, or bent the truth sufficiently to make their story work.

It would be absolutely astounding if Jesus had avoided the crucifixion and his descendants still lived today, protected by a secret society. This kind of conspiracy theory seems to capture the imagination of people everywhere. The appearance of Dan Brown's the DaVinci Code twenty years after Holy Blood, Holy Grail has reached millions of readers who never heard of the previous work, but are now intrigued enough to demand answers, such that entire shelves at bookstores are dedicated to books explaining, supporting, or refuting The

DaVinci Code. Holy Blood, Holy Grail may well be a fantasy woven from ancient history, but it has succeeded in getting millions of people to read, ask questions, and read some more.

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