

## **Tall Tales About Jesus**

### **By David Feddes**

Jesus is such a gripping figure, and Satan is such an active counterfeiter, that all sorts of stories exist about Jesus. A place in northern Japan claims to be the spot where Jesus is buried. Harold Netland, an expert on world religions and long-time resident of Japan, tells what the local legend says about Jesus:

After growing up in Galilee [in northern Israel], Jesus came to Japan before beginning his public ministry. He returned to Galilee at age thirty three and began preaching a heavenly kingdom: namely, Japan. When he encountered trouble with the Jewish leaders, Jesus left Galilee and returned to the town of Shingo, near beautiful Lake Towada. According to the legend, Jesus' brother, Isukiri, was crucified in Jesus' place on the cross. Jesus lived in northern Japan until his death at age 106. Local townsfolk point out the grave where he was supposedly buried.

Now, should we believe what those Japanese villagers say about Jesus instead of what the Bible says? Of course not. The gospel accounts in the Bible were all written in the first century. This is confirmed by analysis of ancient manuscripts. Not even the most skeptical analysts deny that all four New Testament gospels about the life of Jesus were written within the lifetime of people who knew Jesus. In contrast, the story in the Japanese village is just a local legend that somehow sprang up and cannot compare with the real, historical accounts of Jesus.

To know the real Jesus, you can't believe every tall tale someone tells about him, and you can't make up your own version of Jesus. You have to listen to the eyewitness accounts in the Bible from those who saw and heard him.

People of many different places and religions have their own ideas about Jesus. Few reject Jesus outright or believe nothing at all about him. Many Hindu shrines and homes include an image of Jesus. Some Hindus fit Jesus to Hindu thinking and make him an avatar or one among the millions of Hindu gods, not the only Son of the only God, as Jesus declared himself to be. Some Buddhists, such as the Dalai Lama, see Jesus as a fully enlightened being or as a high-level *bodhisattva* whose aim was to share Buddhist enlightenment with others, not as the Savior who died for our sins and rose again that we might also receive immortal resurrection bodies. The book of Mormon, written by an American eighteen hundred years after the New Testament, claims that Jesus came to peoples living in America. Mormonism also teaches that God the Father has a physical body, and that Jesus was produced by a physical union of God and Mary. The Ahmadiyya sect claims that Jesus died peacefully in Kashmir on the subcontinent of India. Muslim writings, produced six long centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection, insist that Jesus did not claim to be divine and didn't actually die on the cross but was instead taken directly to heaven. But Jesus' own disciples saw him die and wrote of it in the New Testament gospels; first-century Roman historians agree that Jesus died. Various religions have their stories about Jesus and their views of Jesus' identity and importance. But only the Bible includes what Jesus' contemporaries heard him say and saw him do.

### **The Gospel of Judas**

The Gospel of Judas claims to reveal the real Jesus and the real Judas. The real Judas, according to this ancient document, was not evil. Instead, Judas was the only one of the twelve apostles who really understood Jesus. Jesus secretly told Judas his real message. Jesus taught

Judas that the physical world is evil, that bodies are bad, and that people have an inner divine being. This divine self needs to escape the prison of the body to fulfill its divine destiny.

When Judas handed Jesus over to his enemies to be killed, it was not a wicked betrayal; the Gospel of Judas says that Jesus ordered Judas to do it. Jesus told Judas that he would surpass all the other disciples, because Judas would help Jesus to escape his body and become pure spirit. Jesus told Judas, “You will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” According to the gospel of Judas, Jesus did not die to get rid of the world’s sin; he died to get rid of his own body. Jesus did not rise from the dead in a glorified resurrection body, and he did not promise that his followers would be physically raised from the dead. Bodily resurrection would be tragedy, not triumph. Bodies are bad!

That contradicts what the Bible says. According to the New Testament gospels, Judas was not the best of all the apostles but the worst. He was a thief and a traitor. Judas was a member of Jesus’ ministry team, and one of his duties was to serve as treasurer. But Judas stole money that people had given for God’s work. Eventually Judas became so greedy that he decided to go for one big payday. He went to Jesus’ enemies and offered to betray Jesus to them for a payment of thirty silver coins. Satan, the chief of demons, entered Judas’s heart, and Judas did Satan’s work. He led a band of men armed with swords and clubs through the darkness of night to the place he knew Jesus would be. Judas gave Jesus a kiss, not out of love, but to help Jesus’ enemies pick Jesus out of the crowd and seize him. Afterward Satan had no further use for Judas. Judas was filled with horror and killed himself. That’s what the Bible says about Judas.

As for Jesus and his message, the Bible never says Jesus told people that they have a divine inner self that needs to be free of the body. It is not bad to have a body; the Bible says God created bodies. When Jesus died, it was not to get rid of his body but to get rid of our sin. Jesus did not just dwell in a spirit realm. He arose from the dead in a body that could be seen and touched. When Jesus returns, he will raise our bodies.

The gospels in the Bible say one thing; the gospel of Judas says another. What should we believe? When the Judas manuscript came to light, the news media gave it lots of publicity. You may have heard people say that the gospel of Judas is a legitimate alternative to the Bible. You may have heard that experts authenticate the gospel of Judas as very old.

Well, it is old. It goes back many centuries—but not as far back as the biblical gospels. The Bible’s accounts were written within a few decades of Jesus death and resurrection by people who knew Jesus personally. The Judas manuscript, on the other hand, is dated about 150 years after Judas betrayed Jesus. 150 years is a long time. The author did not know Jesus or Judas. The book was written by Gnostics who thought bodies were bad. Some Gnostics called themselves Cainites. They admired not only Judas but Cain, the biblical character who murdered his brother Abel. This cult twisted almost everything the Bible said into its opposite and turned many villains into heroes.

Now, let’s imagine a different example of writing a book 150 years after events, a book that contradicts the historical accounts of eyewitnesses. It’s been a little less than 150 years since President Abraham Lincoln was shot. Suppose somebody sat down today and wrote a book titled *History of Booth*. Suppose this book claimed to give the real, hidden story behind Abraham Lincoln’s death. *History of Booth* claimed that Lincoln secretly told John Wilkes Booth to shoot him, and the assassin Booth was actually an American hero. Now imagine that the person who wrote this book was part of a group called the Arnoldites. The Arnoldites are named after Benedict Arnold, the traitorous general who worked for America’s enemy. Would you take seriously a book that said the secret of being a true American is to follow in the footsteps of

Benedict Arnold, the traitor who double-crossed George Washington, and John Wilkes Booth, the assassin who murdered Abraham Lincoln? Who would pay any attention to such ridiculous lies dreamed up long after the actual events?

If such a *History of Booth* would be ridiculous, the Gospel of Judas is even more ridiculous. But some journalists and professors act as though it reveals things that place the biblical gospels in question. A similar dynamic occurred with the ridiculous Gnostic ideas described in *The Da Vinci Code*. Tell a big enough lie often enough to lots of people, and eventually some of them believe it.

### **The Da Vinci Code**

*The Da Vinci Code* is a mystery novel that has sold more than twenty million copies and made millions of dollars for author Dan Brown. Like any popular mystery, *The Da Vinci Code* offers many plot twists and secrets. The main mystery of the novel, the deepest secret it claims to reveal, is the secret of the real Jesus.

According to the novel, “almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is wrong.” When the mystery of Jesus is solved, it turns out that Jesus got married. He and his wife, Mary Magdalene, produced offspring. These offspring were taken to France and became part of a royal line.

According to the novelist, Jesus was not really God come to earth as a human. Rather, church leaders made up the deity of Christ a few hundred years after Jesus died. These leaders wanted to increase their own power, so they declared Christ to be God and poured their efforts into hiding the real truth.

The Council of Nicea, meeting in 325, declared Jesus to be the only begotten Son of God, the second person of the divine Trinity. “Until that moment in history,” says the author of *The Da Vinci Code*, “Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless.”

Dan Brown’s mystery story has entertained millions of readers, and a film version entertained millions of moviegoers. If you read the book or see the movie, keep in mind that what you’re getting is fiction, not fact. However, Dan Brown claims to offer more than fiction. The book claims, “All descriptions of ... documents ... in this novel are accurate.” *The Da Vinci Code* is more than an effort to entertain people and make money. It is an effort to promote a view of Jesus that differs from the Bible and the Christian church. It is a deliberate attack on what Christians for many centuries have believed about Jesus.

Dan Brown claims that Jesus’ earliest followers saw him as just a great man and only in later centuries did some people make up the idea that Jesus is God as well as man. But Brown has it backward. The Bible books were written by eyewitnesses within a few decades of Jesus’ time on earth; the writings Dan Brown refers to were produced long afterward by deviant groups that had no personal connection with Jesus. Jesus’ earliest friends and followers heard him claim to be God as well as man, and they made this clear in the writings of the Bible. Only later did others make up a different Jesus and write new stories denying Jesus’ deity and contradicting the original facts of the Bible.

*The Da Vinci Code* claims to be based on real documents from the past that speak about Jesus. Some of those documents still exist, but they were tall tales people came up with long after the time of Jesus. All sorts of stories and ideas have sprung up about Jesus in the centuries after he came. That doesn’t make them as trustworthy as the biblical writings produced by those who actually saw and heard the real Jesus.

## A Trustworthy Source

The Bible book of John was written by Jesus' closest friend, his dearest disciple. John was not a novelist eager to sell books and make money. John knew Jesus personally, loved him dearly, related to Jesus as God the Son, and wanted others to relate to Jesus as God the Son. John 20:31 explains the book's main purpose: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Contrary to Dan Brown's tall tales about Jesus in *The Da Vinci Code*, the earliest Christians, including Jesus' closest friend, knew Jesus as the Son of God. When the Council of Nicea declared three centuries later that Jesus is God, it was not making up a new doctrine. It was restating what John and Jesus' other friends, the authors of the New Testament, had been saying all along. The Council was reaffirming the deity of Jesus and the truth of the Trinity to counteract false ideas cooked up by a renegade religious leader named Arius.

It was not just the council of Nicea 300 years later which spoke of Jesus as God. All four gospels show Jesus saying what only God could say, doing what only God could do. In John's gospel, it was an eyewitness to Jesus' resurrection who called Jesus "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

If you don't want to accept Jesus as God, you can always find a way out. You can reject the New Testament, and you can focus on stories and ideas written long afterward. You can even dream up things on your own and write a novel, such as *The Da Vinci Code*. You can say whatever you want to say about Jesus—but that doesn't change the truth.

The truth about Jesus is that he was and is God and man. He came into this world to show us God's love, to die as a sacrifice to pay for our sins, and to defeat death through his resurrection and return to glory. The biblical truth about Mary Magdalene (the woman alleged in *The Da Vinci Code* to be Jesus wife) is that Jesus saved Mary Magdalene from demons that possessed her. Mary loved Jesus as her Savior and friend, not as her husband. Mary Magdalene was the first to see Jesus alive after his resurrection, but she never had children with him. If you've got your own agenda, you can make up any fiction you like. But Jesus doesn't change with every heresy, and truth doesn't change with every popular novel.

The New Testament writers are authors we can trust. John emphasized the difference between the phonies who never knew Jesus and his own firsthand connection with Christ. John wrote, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (1 John 1:1). Another New Testament writer, Jesus' dear friend Peter, made the same point: "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16).

The New Testament eyewitnesses were trustworthy people who spoke from firsthand experience. On top of that, they had God's inspiration and guidance to make them totally trustworthy in everything they wrote about Jesus. If the choice comes down to the *Gospel of Judas* or the Bible, believe the Bible. If the choice comes down to *The Da Vinci Code* or the Bible, believe the Bible. If the choice comes down to another religion's view of Jesus or the Bible's firsthand account of him, believe the Bible. Don't believe tall tales. Believe those who saw Jesus with their own eyes, heard him with their own ears, and wrote as he directed them.