Lately there has been much in the news about the “true identity” of Christ. *The Da Vinci Code*, like its predecessors *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, affirms that the Lord Jesus was a mere man, who did ordinary things such as starting a family. Since this novel has been such a lucrative commercial success, spawning a major motion picture, other volumes have followed, purporting to reveal the secrets of the “real Jesus” (*e.g. The Jesus Papers; The Jesus Dynasty*, etc.). The suggestions that these works make are certainly not new. They are merely popularizing ideas that infidel scholarship has propounded for the last two centuries (from the nineteenth century liberal German scholar David Strauss’ “biography” *The Life of Jesus* to “The Jesus Seminar” of the 1980’s & 1990’s to the more recent *The Pagan Christ* by the University of Toronto’s Tom Harpur). In fact, attacks on the person of the Lord Jesus are actually quite ancient. The apostles dealt with such falsehoods in their writings (2 Tim. 3:13; 1 John 2:18-19). Note Paul’s impassioned warning to the elders from Ephesus: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:28-30). In spite of the ever-multiplying attacks on Him, the biblical Christ will stand up to close historical scrutiny. The most compelling and realistic Jesus is the One that we encounter in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

**The Historical War Against the Claims of Christ**

The apostolic church was confronted by a number of cults including the Docetists, who believed that Christ only seemed to take on human nature or possess a body. Other heretical teachers like Cerinthus taught that Jesus was distinct from the Christ-spirit, who came upon Him at His baptism. Colossians teaches the central place of the Lord Jesus in spiritual things against those who would seek meaning and improvement outside of Him (Col. 1:12-23). Additionally, the Spirit used John to write the Gospel and his Epistles to counter these lies regarding the identity of the Christ (*e.g. 1 John 4:1-3*).

Among other ancient attacks on Christ, the Jewish *Talmud* accuses Jesus of being a sorcerer and asserts that He was executed as a blasphemer. Interestingly, it also claims that His followers wanted to steal His body and that it was re-interred by a gardener named Judah; thereby, confirming that this was the ancient story fabricated by the Jews to account for the empty tomb (*see Mat. 28:11-15*). Rather than contradict the Gospel accounts these unfriendly references actually fit in with what the New Testament claims about Him. There are other extra biblical mentions of Christ and Christians in the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius, as well as in the correspondence of Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan, the writings of the Greek satirist Lucian, and a letter by the Syrian Mara bar-Serapion. To put it mildly there is
much ancient literary and archaeological evidence to support the biblical account of Jesus and His disciples.²

Unlike spurious gospels like The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Mary, and the recently discovered Gospel of Judas, the traditional gospels bear the marks of genuine historiography. That is to say, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are filled with verifiable details like geographical places, people, and historical events (e.g. the census surrounding Jesus’ birth, Lk. 2:1-4). The other gospel claimants betray fanciful and Gnostic biases. Furthermore, they are of inferior literary caliber, and do not match the harmonious presentation of the biblical Christ in the Bible. This book alone presents a coherent portrait of Christ. What is more, He is entirely believable. Millennia after He first spoke them, His words still speak to the deepest needs of mankind. The alternative Jesus of the false gospels is insipid, capricious, vaguely new age-ish, and generally smacks of literary invention; this imposter is wispy and two dimensional. The real Christ was holy, yet humane; mighty, yet merciful; loving, but not licentious. His miracles always bolstered His teaching (unlike the preposterous miracles of the Gnostic writings – they aim more at sensationalism). In fact, the modern rejection of the traditional Jesus has more to do with contemporary opinions, than with bona fide scholarship.

**History or Propaganda?**

Present-day thinkers seek to strip the biblical Christ of all glory and power. They desire a tolerant Messiah, a feminist guru, or a feel-good self-help sage who will inflate people’s self-esteem. Even Albert Schweitzer – himself no friend to evangelical theology – favorably noted that the modern biographers of Christ tended to construct their portraits of Christ based on their own presuppositions, saying: “…each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus… hate as well as love can write a Life of Jesus, and the greatest of them are written with hate: that of Reimarus, the Wolfenbüttel Fragmentist, and that of David Friedrich Strauss. It was not so much hate of the Person of Jesus as of the supernatural nimbus with which it was so easy to surround Him, and with which He had in fact been surrounded. They were eager to picture Him as truly and purely human, to strip from Him the robes of splendour with which He had been apparelled, and clothe Him once more with the coarse garments in which He had walked in Galilee”.³ The scholars that he was reviewing, consciously set out to “de-mystify” Christ, because of their anti-supernatural prejudices. Hence, they rejected the traditional understanding of the gospels because they contained accounts of the supernatural.

The liberal attacks notwithstanding, if the canonical gospels invented the orthodox Jesus they pulled off an unheralded feat in the history of literature. To create a fictional character who resonates with human aspirations – One who permeates all of Western civilization – One who millions not only revere, but claim to have encountered personally, would require the genius of Homer, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy all rolled into one. For four gospels to speak of Christ from four different viewpoints, yet produce a balanced man who changes lives, is indeed miraculous.
Jesus was not invented, for His resurrection gives clear evidence as to His true identity. As Rom. 1:4 puts it: “[He was]…declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead”. The doctrine of the resurrection is unique in the annals of metaphysical writings. The gospel accounts of this authenticating sign are replete with historically verifiable information. There are diverse eyewitnesses including women, the twelve apostles, five hundred believers seeing Him simultaneously, and formerly skeptical individuals like James the half-brother of Jesus and Saul of Tarsus (1 Cor. 15:1-9). If this account were a fabrication, the forgers would hardly make women the first eyewitnesses (in the Jewish world, their testimony was considered dubious; it took the testimony of two women to equal that of one man in court). What is more, all of the alternative liberal theories concerning the empty tomb require more faith than believing what the Bible actually says. To think that Christ could survive the horrors of the cross without His professional executioners noticing, strains credulity. How could such a weakened figure roll away the stone? If the body was stolen, then surely the guards would have been executed, but they went on living (with extra money in their pockets). The idea that the women and Peter and John all went to the wrong tomb on multiple occasions is farfetched. Furthermore, no medical evidence explains the phenomenon of so many people seeing, touching, and communing with the risen Lord. The only believable explanation is that He actually rose again from the dead.

Millions of contemporary Christians know the historical Jesus experientially. They have discovered that He is true to His word: “…If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him” (John 14:23). Let the unbelievers assault Him; at His coming He will be vindicated (Phil. 2:9-11; 2 Thes. 1:7-8; Rev. 1:7).


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1 These quotations may be found in the tractates Sanhedrin 43a & Toledoth Jesu.
2 For more information on these extra biblical references to Christ, see Gary R. Habermas, The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ, Joplin, MO: College Press Publ. Co., 1996.