

**H**OW are we to understand the unprecedented popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*? Dan Brown's novel and the box office smash hit film based upon it assert that there has been a massive conspiracy covering up the true story of the origins of Christianity.

Is there any truth to this claim? And what does all this have to do with Judaism?

In this eye-opening booklet, Rabbi Michael Skobac unravels fact from fiction in *The Da Vinci Code* and shows that indeed, there is a story that has been obscured – but one much more interesting than the one proposed by Dan Brown.

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KEEPING JEWS JEWISH



# THE DA VINCI CODE:

**A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE**



**Rabbi Michael Skobac**

This first edition of  
**The Da Vinci Code:  
A Jewish Perspective**

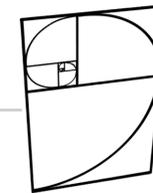
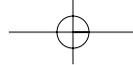
is dedicated by  
**Gerald and Marcia Papoff**

in honour of  
their children and grandchildren.

**THE  
DA VINCI  
CODE:  
A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE**

**Rabbi Michael Skobac**

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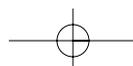
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## THE DA VINCI CODE

Since its publication in 2003, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has taken the world by storm. What is most puzzling is why this murder mystery/scavenger hunt with no real character development and a plot that's little more than one long chase scene has become an international cultural phenomenon.

Part of the appeal of this novel is certainly its claim to be revealing an actual conspiracy that has concealed the true story of Jesus and the origins of Christianity – and that this knowledge, if ever revealed, has the potential to undermine the Church as we know it today. In our cynical age where many people don't trust traditional authority and organized religion, this book has become immensely popular among Christians who wonder, "What haven't they told us? And why not?"

Presented as a fictional story based upon historical fact, *The Da Vinci Code* makes the following controversial claims:

- Jesus of Nazareth was married to Mary Magdalene and fathered a daughter named Sarah who became the progenitor of the Merovingian line of French kings – and this bloodline still exists today.
- The legendary Holy Grail is not a chalice, but a metaphor for Mary Magdalene.
- The historical Christian church has suppressed this knowledge and has attempted to stamp out feminine spirituality.
- The Christian Bible was foisted upon the world by the emperor Constantine in the 4th century to further his own selfish agenda, and displaced the true accounts of Christianity that are now preserved in Gnostic texts.
- Jesus' secret bloodline has been protected by an ancient organization called the Priory of Sion. The members of this clandestine society have hidden and continue to hide clues of these secrets in works of literature and art.

It should come as no surprise that traditional Christian groups, both Catholic and Protestant, have been outraged by these and other assertions made by Dan Brown. The cover story in the June 2006 issue of *Christianity Today* was entitled, "Da Vinci Fever: How to Fight the Infection".

Dozens of books and websites have emerged to scrutinize *The Da Vinci Code* (DVC) with CSI-like intensity in order to debunk its credibility. Some have focused on factual minutiae, such as Dan Brown's claim that the Pyramid monument at the entrance of the Louvre museum in Paris was constructed with exactly 666 panes of glass (DVC page 21), when it actually contains 698 panes.<sup>1</sup> Others have catalogued historical errors, such as the contention that during 300 years of witch hunts, the Church burned five million women at the stake (DVC page 125). A survey of scholarly sources, however, reveals that the number was between 30,000 to at most 100,000.<sup>2</sup>



## THE CODE'S SHAKY FOUNDATION

The most critical weakness with Brown's edifice emerges even before his novel begins. On the page before the prologue, we find the following statement, "FACT: The Priory of Sion – a European secret society founded in 1099 – is a real organization. In 1975 Paris' Bibliothèque Nationale discovered parchments known as *Les Dossiers Secrets*, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo and Leonardo da Vinci."

The only problem with this fact is that it is completely false! It is based upon a hoax that was exposed decades ago. With most novels and works of fiction, this would not be a problem. However, *The Da Vinci Code* is presented as historical fiction – a novel based

<sup>1</sup> Dan Burstein, *Secrets of the Code* (New York, NY, CDS Books, 2006), p.584.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Abanes, *The Truth Behind The Da Vinci Code* (Eugene, OR, Harvest House Publishers, 2004), p.36.

upon a foundation of truth. Dan Brown claims to have meticulously researched the theories upon which his story is based.<sup>3</sup>

According to *The Da Vinci Code*, the Priory of Sion was founded by Godfrei de Bouillon, a crusading French king, to preserve the secret of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene recorded in documents hidden beneath the Temple in Jerusalem. Dan Brown asserts that this secret cult of goddess worshippers is preserving Gnostic wisdom, protecting the royal descendants of Jesus and Mary to this day and waiting for the appropriate time to go public with the truth.

It is true that Priory of Sion documents did turn up in the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1975. The question is – how did they get there? Significantly, the institution has no record of who deposited them. An organization called the Priory of Sion was registered with the French government in 1956 by someone named Pierre Plantard. He borrowed the name of a Catholic monastic order that was founded in Jerusalem around the year 1100 and lasted until 1617 when it was incorporated into the Jesuits.<sup>4</sup>

Plantard was an ultra-conservative anti-Semite who became obsessed with the reunification of Europe under the dual leadership of the Roman Catholic Church and a divinely ordained monarchy. This fanatic saw himself as an occult master and descendant of the Merovingian royal dynasty. With two accomplices, he fabricated documents about this fantasy bloodline and planted them in various locations around France. Investigators determined that these documents were produced on the same printing press that Plantard used to produce his right-wing newsletters and pamphlets. In the 1970's, his co-conspirators began to admit helping him create the genealogical documents, and in 1993, Plantard himself confessed that he had made up the entire story.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Hank Hanegraaff & Paul L. Maier, *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?* (Carol Stream, IL, Tyndale Publishers, 2004), p.71.

<sup>4</sup> Abanes, pp.48-49.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Griffith-Jones, *The Da Vinci Code and the Secrets of the Temple* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), pp.15-18; Nancy De Flon and John Vidmar, *101 Questions & Answers on The Da Vinci Code and the Catholic Tradition* (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 2006), pp.93-95; Abanes, pp.48-57; Burstein, pp.472-477, 528-537, and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priory\\_of\\_Sion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priory_of_Sion).



## DOWNHILL FROM THERE

It's not Dan Brown's naive embrace of the discredited delusions of a French fascist that has set Christians on edge. Rather, it's the overall point of view of his novel as articulated by one of its major characters, "Almost everything our fathers taught us about Jesus is false."

A bold central bold claim of *The Da Vinci Code* is that the marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, "is a matter of historical record" (DVC page 244). While Jesus' marriage is certainly a possibility, there are no historical sources for this claim whatsoever. One argument advanced by Brown is that it would have been inconceivable for a Jewish man not to have been married in Israel 2000 years ago. While most men certainly did marry, this wasn't necessarily the case. In point of fact, the famous Talmudic sage Ben Azzai remained single,<sup>6</sup> and the historian Josephus points out that most of the Essene sect didn't marry.<sup>7</sup>

Other so-called evidence advanced by the DVC (page 246) comes from the apocryphal Gospel of Philip where Mary is described as Jesus' companion. The book's character, Leigh Teabing, claims that the document's Aramaic word for companion carries the implication of spouse. In point of fact, the Gospel of Philip is not written in Aramaic. It is a Coptic text that borrows the Greek word for companion that simply means companion with no spousal connotation.<sup>8</sup>

Continuing with its factual distortions, *The Da Vinci Code* claims that the ancient Dead Sea Scrolls contained the earliest Christian records (DVC page 245). Actually, these important documents, discovered in 1947, were produced by a pre-Christian Jewish sectarian sect and have nothing at all to do with either Jesus or Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Yevamot 63b.

<sup>7</sup> The Jewish War, Book II, Chapter 8:2.

<sup>8</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.143-144; Abanes, p.39.

<sup>9</sup> Robert M. Price, *The Da Vinci Fraud* (Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 2005), p.169; Abanes p.28; Ehrman, pp.25-35.



## THE CONSTANTINE CONNECTION

A major thrust of *The Da Vinci Code* is to cast the Roman emperor Constantine as the real force behind the displacement of the original Jesus movement and the creator of Christianity as we know it today. One element of this reconstruction allegedly took place at the Council of Nicaea, convened by Constantine in 325 CE, where Church leaders voted to declare Jesus' divinity. Until that time, Brown claims that Jesus was viewed by his followers as a human prophet (DVC page 233).

Although today, the claim by traditional Christians that Jesus' followers believed he was divine is debatable, this claim of divinity became the accepted belief by the end of the second century. Those who deliberated at Nicaea already believed in the divinity of Jesus – the only controversy was how this divinity was to be understood.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, where Dan Brown's Teabing claims that the vote at Nicaea was relatively close (DVC page 233), the vote was actually 316 to 2.<sup>11</sup>

Another achievement attributed to Constantine by *The Da Vinci Code* was establishing the official canon of the Christian bible. Purportedly, the emperor carried this out by suppressing Gnostic texts which supposedly were the most accurate historical sources that portrayed Jesus as merely human (DVC pages 231-234, 244). Unfortunately, historical accuracy is betrayed by Brown's mangling of the facts. The canonization of the Christian scriptures was actually a process that began long before Constantine and wasn't finalized until the 6th century. And contrary to Brown's assertions, the so-called Gnostic gospels (which actually *don't* portray a human Jesus) date from the 2nd to 4th centuries – quite a bit later than the canonical writings which were composed in the 1st and 2nd centuries.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Da Vinci Deception* (Carol Stream, IL, Tyndale Publishers, 2004), pp.5-8; Abanes p.37; Ehrman pp.14-23; Price, pp.117-142; De Flon and Vidmar, pp.33-37.

<sup>11</sup> Hanegraaff and Maier, p.15; Lutzer, p.10.

<sup>12</sup> Ehrman, pp.36-44, 47-94; Price, pp.145-168; Abanes, pp.23-27; De Flon and Vidmar, pp.15-27.



## WHAT DOES ALL THIS HAVE TO DO WITH JUDAISM?

Are the claims of *The Da Vinci Code* a concern *only* for Christians? Should Jews today care about Brown's version of history?

*One Sunday, the priest got up in his church and said, "Some day, every man in this parish must die!" In the back of the church, a little man was sitting and laughing. Disconcerted, the priest approached him and asked, "Why are you laughing?" The little man smiled and said, "Because I'm not from this parish!"*

Unfortunately, Dan Brown's brush tarnishes *our* parish as well. One of the most outrageous claims that Brown makes about the idea of the "sacred feminine" is that its paganism is rooted in ancient Judaism! He claims that the Temple's Holy of Holies housed not only God, but also His powerful female equal called the Shekhinah, and furthermore, men seeking spiritual wholeness came to the Temple to cohabit with priestesses (DVC page 309).

Of course, these ideas are totally preposterous. The foundational idea of Judaism's Bible is the absolute Unity of God (Deuteronomy 6:4). The Shekhinah is not a goddess; it is a term for the Divine presence – the immanence of God in our world. Although the word as a noun never appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, its variant "v'shachanti" (and I will dwell) occurs numerous times describing the indwelling of God in the world.<sup>13</sup>

Brown's suggestion that ritualistic sex in the Temple was sanctioned is equally as abhorrent. The Torah consistently and forcefully condemned this and any kind of behaviour that was practiced by the pagan world (Deuteronomy 12:29-31, 23:18-19, 29:15-16). The book of Kings does mention periodic intrusions of Canaanite idolatry and ritualistic sexual practices, but these defilements were blatant violations of Jewish law and were eradicated by righteous kings, such as Asa and Josiah (I Kings 15:11-12 and II Kings 23:6-7).

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 25:8, 29:45; Ezekiel 43:9; Zechariah 2:14-15, 8:3. See also Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem, Israel, The Magnes Press, 1975), pp.7-65; Louis I. Newman, *The Talmudic Anthology* (New York, NY, Behrman House, 1945), pp.171-173; Burstein, pp.219-220.



## THE CODE'S THESIS REVISITED

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* postulates a *real* story of Christian origins that has been covered up. While this basic thesis may have merit, we've seen that Brown's alternative narrative lacks credibility and is based upon sloppy research and misrepresentations of historical facts. Hundreds of serious scholars who have done meticulous research into the formative years of the Christian religion have unearthed no evidence supporting Brown's far-fetched theories.

However among scholars, there is an emerging acceptance that in the history of Christianity, there is a real story that *has* been obscured. While this approach is not fully developed or totally conclusive and may be controversial, unlike *The Da Vinci Code*, it is based upon solid scholarship.

A clue to the basic nature of this cover-up is provided by Professor Bart D. Ehrman, a leading authority on the early Church and life of Jesus:

To say that one of the ensured results of historical scholarship is that Jesus was a Jew may sound a bit trite, like saying that one of the assured results of modern science is that paper is combustible. Still, not a century ago, the Jewishness of Jesus was a matter of real dispute among serious scholars of ancient Christianity. Moreover, throughout the history of the Christian church, even when Jesus' Jewish identity has not been denied it has been compromised, overlooked, or ignored.<sup>14</sup>

The implications of this *real* story of Christianity and its transformation can be highly significant for Jews and Judaism. In order to take a peek under the curtain of this ongoing scholarly approach, we will examine the stories of three pivotal personalities in the Christian story.

<sup>14</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2003), p.95.



## MOTHER AND FATHER

Although Jesus was a Jew who grew up in Israel's Galilee region 2000 years ago, within 200 years, his followers had come to view him as God incarnate. As a result, his mother Miriam (Mary) was seen by many as "the mother of God". The Catholic Church consequently developed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception that maintained Mary was born without the stain of Adam and Eve's "original sin".

At some point during the decades that followed Jesus' crucifixion, a number of his followers began to propose the idea that he didn't have a human father, and that his mother Mary became impregnated via God's Holy Spirit. This became known as the doctrine of the "virgin birth".<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, the Catholic Church extended this concept to include the perpetual virginity of Mary.<sup>16</sup> These ideas certainly had the effect of dissociating Mary from normal women of her time and culture.

While the vast majority of Christians accept Jesus' alleged virgin birth as an article of faith, many scholars suggest, in all likelihood, that Mary's husband Joseph was his father.<sup>17</sup> Yet other scholars suggest that another scenario might lay buried beneath the surface of the Christian scriptures and in other historical sources.

The first book of the Christian Bible, the Gospel of Matthew, begins with a recounting of Jesus' genealogy. Although such genealogies were normally based upon male lineage, Matthew includes four women in his list: Tamar, Rachab, Ruth and "the wife of Uriah". Each woman was involved in a relationship with

<sup>15</sup> In the Christian scriptures (Matthew 1:20-23), the sourcing of this concept in a verse from the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 7:14) is based upon a well-known mistranslation of the Hebrew word "almah". Numerous contemporary Christian translations and commentators acknowledge that the correct translation of this word is "young woman" or "young maiden" and not "virgin".

<sup>16</sup> Most Protestants have not accepted this idea, and believe that Mary and her husband Joseph did begin to live together as man and wife after the birth of Jesus and had other children.

<sup>17</sup> Clayton Sullivan, *Rescuing Jesus from the Christians* (Harrisburg, PA, Trinity Press International, 2002), pp.34-41; Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Macmillan Company, 1925), pp.232-233.

some degree of suspicion and impropriety, yet each has an honoured place in Jewish tradition. Some scholars have suggested that Matthew included these names to anticipate questions that would be raised about Mary's pregnancy.<sup>18</sup>

Within the pages of the Christian Gospels, whispers can be heard concerning the rumours circulating about Jesus' illegitimacy. Mark 6:3 calls attention to the question of the identity of Jesus' father, "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?" Therefore, Matthew rephrases this passage to deflect the potential problem, "Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?" (13:55). In the Gospel of John, the innuendo is less subtle. In a tense confrontation, Jesus is challenged by opponents, "We were not born out of wedlock!" (8:41). The implication is clear that Mary's husband, Joseph, may not have been Jesus' biological father.

Several ancient writers speculated that Jesus' real father may have been a Roman soldier named Pantera.<sup>19</sup> The Church was aware of this claim, and strove to neutralize it. In the 4th century, Epiphanius maintained that Joseph's father was named Jacob Pantera, and in the 8th century, John of Damascus contended that Pantera was the name of Mary's great-grandfather.<sup>20</sup>

In 1906, Adolph Deisman discovered the tombstone of a Roman soldier named Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera who died at age 62 after 40 years of military service. He died in the middle of the 1st century after coming to the Rhine River region of Germany from Palestine in the year 9 CE to fight on the frontier of the Roman Empire. Pantera was originally from Sidon, just north of Tyre in present day Lebanon, and about 40 miles from Nazareth. His name reveals that he was not a native born Roman, but a former slave who had been freed and was definitely Semitic, possibly Jewish.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Julie Galambush, *The Reluctant Parting* (New York, NY, Harper Collins, 2005), p.61; Sullivan, pp.36-37.

<sup>19</sup> One of the first was the pagan philosopher Celcus in 178 CE, see his *On the True Doctrine* (New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1987), p.57; see also Robert Sheaffer, *The Making of the Messiah* (Buffalo, NY, Prometheus Books, 1991), pp.16-20, 91-93; Origen, *Contra Celsum* (New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 1953), p.31.

<sup>20</sup> James D. Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty* (New York, NY, Simon & Schuster, 2006), pp.64-65.

<sup>21</sup> Tabor, pp.65-70. However, see also July 20, 2006 update at [www.jesudynasty.com/blog/](http://www.jesudynasty.com/blog/)

Dr. James Tabor, a trailblazer in the field of Christian origins, points out an intriguing passage from the Gospel of Mark that may be highly significant in terms of the Pantera thesis. While teaching in the area of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus takes a mysterious and unexplained side trip:

And from there he arose and went away into the border of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered into a house, and wanted no man to know of it, yet he could not escape notice (7:24).

This mysterious journey may be as difficult to decipher as the open question regarding the actual father of Jesus. While clues and sound reason point to either Mary's husband Joseph or another man such as Pantera, the Church insists that Jesus had no earthly father. It is important to realize that the doctrine of a virgin birth serves not only to address the potentially embarrassing question of Jesus' paternity, but also to move the Jesus story away from its Jewish context toward a pagan one.<sup>22</sup>



## JOHN THE BAPTIST vs. JOHN THE BAPTIZER

John the Baptizer (Immerser) was one of many apocalyptic preachers in the 1st century according to the historian Josephus (*Antiquities* Book XVIII, 5:2). His message was that "the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). This meant that the evil age of Roman domination was about to come to an end and that the day of judgment and rule of God was coming soon. This was totally consistent with the basic goals of Judaism's Messianic age (Isaiah 11:1-10, Zechariah 14:9). John urged people to prepare for this

<sup>22</sup> Ancient pagan deities and saviours were often believed to have had virgin births. See Timothy Freke & Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries* (New York, NY, Three Rivers Press, 1999), pp.35-38, 93-94; Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ* (Toronto, Ontario, Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004), p.34,82; Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Putting Aside Childish Things* (New York, NY, Harper Collins, 1992), pp.33-43; Sullivan, pp.37-38. R. Joseph Hoffman, *The Origins of Christianity* (Buffalo, NY, Prometheus Books, 1985), pp.244-245; Edward Carpenter, *The Origins of Pagan and Christian Beliefs* (London, Random House, 1920), pp.21-24; Michael Arnhem, *Is Christianity True?* (Buffalo, NY, Prometheus Books, 1984), pp.16-25.

time and hasten its coming by repenting their sins and immersing in the Jordan River as a sign of purification.<sup>23</sup> Calling him “John the Baptist” has the ring of John the Presbyterian or John the Anglican. In Hebrew, he would have been called Yochanan HaMatbil. John the Baptist is a title that has obscured his Jewishness and clouded the perception many people have of him.

John was extremely popular, and according to the Christian scriptures, some thought that he may have been the Messiah (John 1:19-20). When Jesus was about 30 years old, he joined the crowds of people streaming to hear John’s preaching. Jesus was baptized by John and sought to join his movement. Decades later, this subordination was to become highly problematic for the nascent Christian religion as it was seeking to emerge from Judaism.<sup>24</sup>

According to Dr. Tabor, the Christian Scriptures reveal an attempt to deal with this annoying historical fact by progressively downplaying and marginalizing the role of John the Baptizer while striving to magnify the status and significance of Jesus.

There are four Gospel accounts that present the biography of Jesus. According to most scholars, Mark is the earliest document, composed around the year 70 CE. Matthew was written around the year 80 CE, Luke around 90 CE and John about the year 100 CE. Matthew and Luke base themselves upon Mark and all three are called the Synoptic Gospels. John’s version is totally independent. Many scholars believe that there is an even earlier stratum of material that can be found embedded in Luke that is called “Q”. Carefully following the sequential development of the story of John the Baptizer as recounted in these sources is highly revealing:

**Q:** Jesus says that John is not just a prophet, “He’s more than a prophet... and among those born of women, there is no one greater than John!” (Luke 7:26-28)

Jesus learns the famous “Lord’s Prayer” from John (Luke 11:1-4).

<sup>23</sup> Joel Carmichael, *Christian Origins* (Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 1995), pp.45-47; Klausner, pp.239-250; Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York, NY, Random House, 1999), pp.184-191; Jacques Baldet, *Jesus the Rabbi Prophet* (Rochester, VT, Inner Traditions, 2003) pp.89-96; Tabor, pp.125-128.

<sup>24</sup> E.P. Sanders *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York, NY, Penguin Books, 1993), pp.92-94; Carmichael, pp.47-49; Baldet, pp.101-106; Tabor, pp.134-137.

**Mark:** Jesus comes to be baptized by John (1:9).

**Matthew:** Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. John is reluctant to do this, and prefers that Jesus baptize him. Jesus persists and John complies and baptizes him (3:13-15).

**Luke:** Jesus is immersed with no mention of John doing it. He probably immerses himself (3:21).

**John:** There is no mention of Jesus being baptized at all. John falls all over himself praising Jesus (1:26-36).

We see, once again, that there is a real story of Jesus that has been obscured and then reworked in the official documents of Christianity. Our character study of James will clarify how and why this cover-up emerged.



## JAMES WHO?

If Mary was dehumanized and deified, and John demoted, the fate of James was the most tragic. Although an important figure in the early history of Christianity, he has been marginalized almost to the point of being obliterated from memory.

This is especially ironic because many scholars believe that James (Yaakov) is the most critical link to truly understanding the historical Jesus.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it might not be coincidental that James has been so obscured.

Who was James? When an ancient ossuary (bone box) surfaced in Israel in 2002 bearing the inscription, “James son of Joseph brother of Jesus”, it created quite a stir.<sup>26</sup> Many people were totally shocked to hear that Jesus had a brother because the belief in Mary’s perpetual virginity has been so widespread. Although the Christian scriptures report that Jesus actually had four brothers and

<sup>25</sup> Robert Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus* (New York, NY, Penguin Books, 1997), pp.xvii-xxxi; Tabor, pp.272, 310-311.

<sup>26</sup> Hershel Shanks & Ben Witherington III, *The Brother of Jesus* (New York, NY, Harper Collins, 2003), pp.93-96, Tabor, pp.15-22.

two sisters, the Catholic Church has consistently maintained that these were really his cousins.

One thing we *do* know about this brother of Jesus is that he was known as “James the Just” because of his righteousness and strict adherence to Jewish law.<sup>27</sup> In addition, one of the 27 books in the Christian Bible is attributed to him. And most significantly, because he was Jesus’ brother, James served as the leader of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem for 30 years after the crucifixion.<sup>28</sup>

And nevertheless, James is mysteriously downplayed in Christian sources. Very little has ever been written about him, and he almost never appears in Christian art or iconography. In fact, many Christians are totally unaware of his existence! James seems to be the target of a conspiracy to obscure his memory from history.<sup>29</sup>

How could this have happened? If, as many scholars believe, James is the best and most direct link to the historical Jesus, we would assume that great care would have been taken to accurately preserve his legacy. Ironically, it may have been the very importance of James that led to his suppression!

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul* (Macmillan Company, 1943), p.278; Eisenman, pp.233-238; Shanks & Witherington, pp.112-114.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey J. Butz, *The Brother of Jesus* (Rochester, VT, Inner Traditions, 2005), pp.12-13, 59-67, 121; Eisenman, pp. 154-156, 165-168; Tabor, pp.244-258; Shanks & Witherington, pp.111-125.

<sup>29</sup> Butz, pp.xi-xii, 18-19; Tabor, 246-247; Eisenman, pp.3-5. An amazing example of how well-entrenched the negation of James has become emanates from a very unlikely source. A recent book by an Israeli Messianic Jew attempts to show that Jesus and his followers were Torah observant. Incredibly, the author offers very tenuous evidence to rehabilitate Paul as pro-Torah, but totally ignores James. See David Friedman, *They Loved the Torah* (Baltimore, MD, Lederer Books, 2001).



## THE GENESIS OF CHRISTIANITY

Many people remain unaware of the complexity and profound tensions that existed during the early days of the Christian movement. The common assumption is that Jesus founded a new religion that completely repudiated Judaism, and the rupture began at that time and continued thereafter until today. This does *not* seem to be the case!

Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776), one of the greatest Talmudists of the past 350 years, authored a famous letter about early Christianity in 1757 and he offered the following appraisal:

Therefore, you must realize – and accept the truth from him who speaks it – that we see clearly here that the Nazarene and his Apostles did not wish to destroy the Torah from Israel, God forbid; for it is written so in Matthew (5:17-19), the Nazarene having said, “Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the Torah. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. I tell you this: So long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter, not a stroke, will disappear from the Torah until all is accomplished. If any man therefore sets aside even the least of the Torah’s commandments, and teaches others to do the same, he will have the lowest place in the Kingdom of Heaven, whereas anyone who keeps the Torah, and teaches others so, will stand high in the Kingdom of Heaven.” This is also recorded in Luke 16:17. It is therefore exceedingly clear that the Nazarene never dreamed of nullifying the Torah.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Harvey Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee* (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1985), pp.17-18. See also Mark 10:17-19, Matthew 19:16-17: And behold, one came to him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why are you asking me about what is good? There is only One who is good; and if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” Also, Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, p.261, 581; *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.366-367; Tabor, p.109; Baldet, pp.77-80; Irving M. Zeitlin, *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time* (Cambridge, MA, Polity Press, 1988), pp.47-52; Sanders, pp.210-224; Hyam Maccoby, *Revolution in Judaea* (New York, NY, Taplinger Publishing Co., 1980), pp.93-124. For a discussion on whether the Talmud regarded Jesus negatively, see the two articles by Rabbi Gil Student at [www.angelfire.com/mt/talmud/jesusi.html](http://www.angelfire.com/mt/talmud/jesusi.html) and Hyam Maccoby, *Jesus the Pharisee* (London, England, SCM Press, 2003), pp.139-152. See also Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial* (London, England, Associated University Presses, 1982), pp.26-34 which cites Rabbi Yechiel of Paris’ famous line, “Not every Louis is King of France” and insists that Talmudic references to Jesus are not to the Jesus of the Christian faith.

In the Christian scriptures, the Book of Acts follows the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, and is actually called The Acts of the Apostles. Paradoxically, this book barely speaks about the Apostles (Jesus' disciples) – it is primarily about a person named Paul.

Paul, author of some of the most important theological books of the Christian Bible, never met Jesus! Paul claimed, however, that Jesus appeared to him in a vision after his crucifixion. After this encounter, Paul did not go to Jerusalem to meet with and learn from Jesus' relatives and disciples, but instead traveled around the Diaspora to preach to Gentile communities (Galatians 1:11-17).

Examining Paul's message reveals the following significant points:

- Paul almost never mentions anything about the life of Jesus or anything that he taught.
- The message taught *by* both John the Baptizer and Jesus (the need to repent in preparation for the coming earthly Kingdom of God) is transformed by Paul into Jesus *as* the message whose redemption is non-terrestrial.
- Paul teaches that Jesus was a Divine, pre-existent being who took on human form.
- Paul teaches that the mitzvot/commandments of the Torah are no longer binding.
- Paul teaches that the definition of who constitutes the chosen people of Israel is not determined by lineage, but through faith in Jesus.

Paul's unique and radical teachings put him on a serious collision course with the followers of Jesus who were based in Jerusalem with James as their leader. The only difference between the traditional Jewish community and James' movement was their belief that Jesus was the promised redeemer, and their hope that he would return soon to bring about the final redemption.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> In normative Judaism, someone who dies or is killed without fulfilling the Biblical criteria of the Messiah is clearly not the promised Messiah, see Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and Their Wars*, 11:4. For a discussion of the psychology of belief in a failed Messiah, see Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York, NY, Harper Torchbooks, 1956).

However, James' movement found itself critically out of sync with the followers of Paul and the greatest tension was the problematic issue of Torah observance.<sup>32</sup>

The Torah-positive stance taken by Jesus was maintained after his death by his disciples based in Jerusalem under the leadership of his brother James. Many of this group believed that non-Jews recruited by Paul should fully convert to Judaism by becoming circumcised and observing the entire Torah. Paul disagreed, and James chaired a conference in Jerusalem to decide the issue (Acts 15:1-29). Obviously, if the Jewish disciples led by James were not totally Torah observant themselves, they would have *never* insisted that all converts must maintain this standard and become Torah observant.<sup>33</sup> James resolved the issue by deciding that Paul's Gentile recruits would not have to convert to Judaism, but just observe the seven universal Noachide laws.<sup>34</sup>

Later, when Paul returns to Jerusalem in Acts 21, his heresies catch up with him. Members of the Jesus movement led by James accuse him as follows:

And they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. (Acts 21:21)

A crushing blow, however, was dealt to the original Jesus group when many of them were killed during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. The survivors scattered and during the 2nd century, the Jewish followers of Jesus became

<sup>32</sup> Hugh Schonfield, *Those Incredible Christians* (Bernard Geis Associates, 1968), pp.63-72; Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (New York, NY, Harper & Row, 1986), pp.119-171; Tabor, pp.266-271; Butz, pp.65-90; Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, p.278, 503-504; Ehrman, pp.96-99. Some typical passages showing Paul's disparaging view of Torah, see Romans 3:20-22; 8:2; 10:4, Galatians 2:21; 4:9; 5:1-4, Ephesians 2:14-15, I Corinthians 9:20-21, II Corinthians 3:6-7, Colossians 2:13-17.

<sup>33</sup> It is important to understand that the original followers of Jesus were all Jewish. He charged his disciples, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans." Matthew 10:5, cf. 15:21-26.

<sup>34</sup> These are prohibitions against idolatry, murder, sexual immorality, blasphemy, stealing, eating from any body part of a live animal, and the requirement to set up courts of law. See Maccoby, *The Mythmaker*, pp.139-144.

known as Ebionites and Nazarenes. Their conflicts with the Gentile Christian movement founded by Paul persisted and intensified as Paul's group slid further and further away from Judaism.<sup>35</sup>

An example of this rift appears in the 4th century *Pseudo-Clementine* literature. A document called the "Preaching of Peter" claims to be a letter sent from Peter to James and clearly reflects the tensions that existed in the 1st century. In this document, Peter is upset that his letters have been intercepted and corrupted by people associated with Paul. Peter is extremely critical of Paul for elevating his own personal visions and mystical experiences above the clear teachings that the original disciples learned personally and directly from Jesus.<sup>36</sup>



## THE MUTING OF JAMES

As the Gentile Church propagated by Paul quickly grew, it overcame the original Jewish Jesus movement and became the dominant voice of Christianity.<sup>37</sup> Torah observance was completely jettisoned for doctrines about Jesus' divinity and atoning death. The chasm between the two groups widened to the point where ultimately, the leaders of Paul's *new* Christianity branded the Jewish followers of Jesus as heretics and actively persecuted them.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Gerd Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN, Augsburg Press, 1989), pp.117-195; Ehrman, pp.99-103; Butz, p.131; Maccoby, pp.172-183; Schonfield, pp.150-155; Klausner, pp.601-602; Stuart Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem* (New York, NY, Hippocrene Books, 1986), pp.17-30.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Tabor, page 303.

<sup>37</sup> A.N. Wilson, *Jesus* (London, England, Sinclair-Stevenson Limited, 1992), pp.248-256; Maccoby, pp.184-205; Joel Carmichael, *The Birth of Christianity: Reality and Myth* (New York, NY, Hippocrene Books, 1989), pp.121-149; Butz, pp.99-101, 172-177.

<sup>38</sup> Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Jerusalem, Israel, Magnes Press, 1988), pp.15, 19-82, 109; Hugh J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity* (London, England, Duckworth, 1936), pp.63-94; Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1999), p.43; Tabor, p.303; Butz, pp.161-164; Wilson, p.248; Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York, NY, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1976), pp.42-43, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *The Messianic Legacy* (New York, NY, Henry Holt and Company, 1986), pp.91-93; Ehrman, pp.253-254.

The dominant voice of today's Christian Bible is clearly Paul's, either through his letters and epistles or through the writings of others under his influence. What a stunning example of history being written by the victors! For all intents and purposes, Christianity as we know it today is an invention of Paul.<sup>39</sup> And all this, despite the fact that Paul never even met Jesus!

No wonder the Epistle (Letter) of James is the most neglected and marginalized book in the Christian Bible! It is rarely encountered in Church readings, and many Christians are unaware that it even exists. There was actually great controversy regarding the inclusion of James' Epistle in the Christian canon while it was being assembled in the 3rd to 6th centuries. Martin Luther, architect of the Protestant Reformation, had a very low opinion of this Epistle. He referred to it as "the straw Epistle" and preferred its exclusion from the canon.<sup>40</sup>

When we examine James' Letter, it is easy to understand why the historical Christian Church has been so uncomfortable with it. There is no mention of any of the doctrines that are so central to Paul's teaching, such as Jesus' divinity or atoning death. Whereas James stresses the ethical teachings and message of Jesus, Paul's emphasis is on Jesus *as* the message. Whereas Paul negates the importance of observing the Torah and maintains that salvation is exclusively through faith, James has a very Torah-positive message and insists that "faith without works is dead!" and that "man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (2:17, 24).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Gerd Luedemann, *Paul: The Founder of Christianity* (Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 2002), pp.213-225; Klausner, pp.303-304,581-582; Wilson, pp.40-43; [www.geocities.com/paulintobin/paulorigin](http://www.geocities.com/paulintobin/paulorigin)

<sup>40</sup> Tabor, p.273,277; Galambush, pp.233-234; Butz, p.145.

<sup>41</sup> Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, p.280; Tabor, pp.273-277.



## HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

For nearly 2000 years, Christians have been oblivious to what truly transpired during the formative years of their religion. However, the veil has been slowly lifting over the past decades. A Christian professor at Cambridge University expressed this viewpoint when he wrote, "We look at the earliest Christianity, the data given to us in the New Testament, as a *problem* [his italics], in a way that seems to be new. We are able, in fact compelled, to look at Christian beginnings objectively, as no previous generation of Christians, sincere or nominal, was ever able to look at them."<sup>42</sup>

Lutheran minister Jeffrey Butz began researching the origins of Christianity after discovering the conspiracy to erase James from history. The following is how Butz summed up the unsettling results of his explorations:

If the first followers of Jesus – including the apostles and Jesus' own family – were thoroughly Jewish in their belief and practice and opposed to Paul's interpretation of the gospel, then just what is (Christian) "orthodoxy" and what is "heresy"? Is Christianity, as it has come to be practiced for close to two millennia, in fact based upon a heresy? And is the "heresy" of Jewish Christianity in fact the original orthodoxy?

These are disturbing questions indeed. To even consider them is heresy in the minds of many Christians today. But these questions are being addressed by more and more scholars, and if we want to learn the truth about James and Jesus, we must address them too.

James Dunn is one leading scholar who has made the effort to rise above the treeline. In his examination of the three distinguishing features of the later Jewish Christian communities

such as the Ebionites (faithful adherence to the Law of Moses, reverence for James, and an adoptionist christology), Dunn sees something the majority of Christian scholars would prefer to ignore:

*If these are indeed the three principle features of heretical Jewish Christianity, then a striking point immediately emerges: heretical Jewish Christianity would appear to be not so very different from the faith of the very first Jewish believers (followers of Jesus).*

The three main tenets of Jewish Christian belief and practice that Dunn enumerates are what led to the Jewish Christians being labeled as heretics by the emerging Catholic Church. The Jewish Christians, on the other hand, thoroughly rooted in the teachings of James and the apostles, thought of the Pauline churches as heretics. And this brings us to the trickiest question in the study of Christian origins: What is orthodoxy, and what is heresy?<sup>43</sup>

Dr. Tabor, as well, entertains the puzzling question of why Christianity, as it has been practiced for the past 1900 years, has so seriously distorted its original teachings.<sup>44</sup> He echoes a critical point made by author Hugh Schonfield:

We have to draw a sharp line of distinction between what Jesus and his Jewish followers represented and the character and content of the Christian religion as it progressively evolved. We have to detach ourselves completely from the view that the latter gives us direct access to the former, and consequently we must revise the judgments and beliefs that have been current for many centuries.

One residual effect of *The Da Vinci Code's* enormous popularity is the book's ability to get many Christians to think about the history of their religion. Not long ago, I received the following email from India:

<sup>43</sup> Butz, pp.138-139, 161-162. It should be noted that today's "Hebrew Christians", "Messianic Jews" and so-called "Jews for Jesus" are not reversionists to the Jewish Christians of the 1st century. Although they do assume some of the external trappings of Judaism, they are not truly Torah observant and maintain doctrinal beliefs identical to those of the historical Pauline/Protestant churches.

<sup>44</sup> Tabor, pp.306-307; Schonfield, *The Pentecost Revolution*, p.33.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Pentecost Revolution* (London, England, Macdonald and Jane's, 1974), p.10.

Though I was a Fundamentalist Christian minister, there were several questions for which I have not gotten answers for several years. The Christian theological nature of Jesus has been one big question I could not reckon with – that he was 100% man and 100% god and yet without sin. The inerrancy of the Christian Bible has been another big question, as I could see several contradictions. Being so confused, I was searching for answers. During that time last year, my friend, a very staunch Fundamentalist Christian, passed on Dan Brown's "*The Da Vinci Code*" to me. This book prompted me for [sic] an intense and thorough research for many weeks. I began to study the history of Christianity and its evolution into modern forms. My search led me to the study of Judaism, finally I became a Noachide! I must be thankful to Dan Brown!

The Maggid of Dubnow, a famous Jewish teacher from the 18th century, told the following story to explain why he always used parables to convey his messages:

A man hoarded his fortune of gold under the floor boards of his house. When he died, everyone assumed that he was poor. One day, an heir dropped a small coin on the floor, and it rolled between the cracks of the boards. There, to his astonishment, he found the buried treasure. That man treasured that small coin and preserved it to remember how it led him to his good fortune.

So too, the Maggid explained, a person might read one of his light stories or parables in a book. This may cause him to think, study deeper and pursue a solid education. The student will cherish the book of stories that led him to the more serious material because through this simple parable, he eventually became a scholar.

Could Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* exert a similar influence on its millions of Christian readers by encouraging them to explore the roots of their religion and develop a more profound understanding of their faith?

Even though Paul's Christianity was a religion that had its roots in Judaism, he and his followers pursued a trajectory that led

them further and further away from those roots. However, Paul, unlike Marcion after him,<sup>45</sup> felt it was important to link his innovations to the Hebrew Bible. By retaining this treasure, Christianity has preserved the seeds that will ultimately pave the way for the true Messianic redemption.

In the 13th century, Maimonides articulated this vision in a passage from his magnum opus that was censored by the Church and recently recovered:

Nevertheless, the intent of the Creator of the world is not within the power of man to comprehend, for His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts, our thoughts. [Ultimately,] all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah and the improvement of the entire world.<sup>46</sup>

May it come speedily in our days!



<sup>45</sup> Marcion led a 2nd century Christian movement that repudiated everything connected to Judaism, including the Jewish Scriptures. See Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, pp.103-112.

<sup>46</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Their Wars 11:4; Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, *Kuzari* IV:23; Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters* (Nanuet, NY, Feldheim Publishers, 1995), pp.126, 138-140; Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, pp.605-610; Ben Zion Bokser, *Judaism and the Christian Predicament* (New York, NY, Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp.207-208; Schonfield, *Those Incredible Christians*, pp.216-225; Leah Rafaeli, *The End of Exile* (self-published, 2003).

## JEW FOR JUDAISM: The Response to an Urgent Need

According to recent Gallup and Harris polls, there are over 70 million “born again” Christians in North America, many of whom are totally focused on trying to convert Jews to Christianity. Christian denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of G-d and others contribute over \$300 million annually to aggressively evangelize Jews. These evangelical Christians have established special “Hebrew Christian synagogues” to attract Jews. Such “synagogues” have grown in number from 20 to nearly 500 in the last 30 years.

Missionaries convince their recruits that they are not complete as Jews until they accept Jesus as the Messiah, and that a Jew retains his or her Jewish identity even after converting to Christianity. Over the past 25 years, more than 275,000 Jews worldwide have been converted by missionaries using deceptive tactics in which the Gospel is preached by “Messianic rabbis” wearing yarmulkas (skullcaps) and talleisim (prayer shawls) at “Shabbat” and “High Holiday” services.

Contrary to popular perception, it is not only emotionally vulnerable Jews who fall prey to the missionaries’ efforts; in fact, most Jews are susceptible. Missionaries often target college campuses, hospitals, drug rehabilitation programs, seniors’ residences and shopping malls in Jewish neighbourhoods, as well as the Israeli community, immigrants from the Former Soviet Union and intermarried couples. They misquote, mistranslate and misinterpret Jewish scriptures and rabbinical texts in order to “prove” that Jesus was both the Jewish Messiah and G-d. They delegitimize Judaism! Furthermore, in concert with their misleading exploitation of Jewish symbols, religious artifacts and even traditional music, they confuse potential converts and make them even more vulnerable.

These missionary groups – over 900 in North America alone – are active worldwide, and can be found in almost every Jewish population centre. Several groups have founded “Messianic Jewish” day schools for children and “yeshivot” where they train and ordain “Messianic rabbis.” In Israel, there are over 100

“Messianic” congregations, fellowships and yeshivot. These groups prey almost exclusively upon uneducated, unaffiliated and alienated Jews.

In response to this ever-growing threat, Jews for Judaism was established in 1985 as the only full-time counter-missionary resource and outreach network spanning North America and beyond. Jews for Judaism has branches in Los Angeles, Baltimore, Toronto, and Johannesburg, South Africa. Our branches work closely with Jewish communities in Israel, the Former Soviet Union, Australia and other locations around the globe in responding to the missionary threat. Our two primary goals are preventive education to strengthen vulnerable Jews and winning back those who have been influenced by missionaries.

Jews for Judaism achieves these goals through counseling “Hebrew Christians”, monitoring missionary activity, a speakers’ bureau and intensive counter-missionary courses. Jews for Judaism is also a pioneer in worldwide advertising of counter-missionary materials, and has produced an outstanding selection of literature and audio tapes in English, Russian, Hebrew, Spanish, Portuguese, German and French. In addition, we have created three award-winning websites on the Internet:

[jewsforjudaism.org](http://jewsforjudaism.org) [jewishpassion.com](http://jewishpassion.com) [tworoadsonepath.org](http://tworoadsonepath.org)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rabbi Michael Skobac**, *Education Director* and *Senior Counselor* for Jews for Judaism, Canada, was educated at Northwestern University and Yeshiva University. He has been

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Rabbi Skobac has lectured extensively on missionaries and cults as well as on issues of Jewish continuity and spirituality across the United States, Canada, Israel, the Former Soviet Union, England, India, Australia and South Africa. He has acted as a consultant to communities worldwide in developing responses to missionary and cult activity and has extensive experience working with affected families and counseling people who have embraced Christianity. He has developed and taught numerous courses on Jewish-Christian polemics and has produced a highly acclaimed counter-missionary tape series entitled *The Counter-Missionary Survival Seminar*. Rabbi Skobac has written for a wide range of Jewish publications and has appeared internationally on radio and television programs to discuss his work.

