

## Archaeological Evidence and the Divinity of Jesus

**Peter S. Williams** - Philosopher in Residence at the Damaris Trust UK and Assistant Professor in Communication and Worldviews at Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication in Norway.

‘While the Council of Nicea had important consequences, its significance has been exaggerated into legend by a few conspiracy theorists, documentaries and books such as Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, historians say.’ – Livescience.com<sup>1</sup>

Dan Brown’s best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* popularised the false idea that belief in the divinity of Jesus was a late arrival on the theological scene, one foisted upon Christ by a narrow vote at the council of Nicea held in 325 AD. As Mark Mittleberg laments:

‘The common claim today is that belief in Jesus as a unique, divine person arose long after he walked the earth. Such books as *The Da Vinci Code* have popularised the notion that it was not until the Council of Nicea, three centuries after Jesus, that Christians started worshipping him as the divine Son of God...’<sup>2</sup>

In *The Da Vinci Code* Professor Teabing and Sophie Neveu discuss the council as follows:

“Constantine needed to strengthen the new Christian tradition, and held a famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicaea. At this gathering,” Teabing said, “many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon - the date of Easter, the role of bishops, the administration of sacraments, and, of course, the *divinity* of Jesus.”

“I don’t follow. His divinity?”

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

“Not the Son of God?”

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

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

“A relatively close vote at that,” Teabing added. “By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable.”<sup>3</sup>

However, as Mittleberg comments: ‘the best historical scholarship shows that simply is not the case.’<sup>4</sup> Even the sceptical New Testament scholar Bart D. Ehrman recognizes that Brown is incorrect:

‘Constantine did call the Council of Nicea, and one of the issues involved Jesus’ divinity. But this was not a council that met to decide whether or not Jesus was divine, as Teabing indicates. Quote the contrary: everyone at the Council-and in fact, just about every Christian everywhere-already agreed that Jesus was divine, the Son of God. The question being debated was how to *understand* Jesus’ divinity in light of the circumstance that he was also human.

Moreover, how could both Jesus and God be God if there is only one God? *Those* were the issues that were addressed at Nicea, not whether or not Jesus was divine. And there certainly was no vote to determine Jesus' divinity: this was already a matter of common knowledge among Christians, and had been from the early years of the religion... the view that Teabing lays out is wrong on all key points: Christians before Nicea already did accept Jesus as divine; the Gospels of the New Testament portray him as human as much as they portray him as divine; the Gospels that did *not* get included in the New Testament portray him as divine as much, or more so, than they portray him as human.<sup>5</sup>

### **Literary Evidence for Early Belief in the Divinity of Jesus**

In his book *A Case for the Divinity of Jesus* Dean L. Overman demonstrates that:

‘the earliest literary sources in our possession that we know for certain were written within decades of Jesus’ death... contain devotional creeds, hymns, and liturgical formulae that pre-existed these literary sources and were then incorporated into them. They present compelling evidence of a pattern of worship of Jesus of Nazareth as a resurrected, divine being, dating from a time almost contemporaneous with the events they describe... This means that we have solid, historical evidence that persons who were alive and presumably eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life worshipped him as divine within an astonishingly short time frame of the crucifixion.’<sup>6</sup>

This paper presents *a complimentary archaeological case* against Brown’s claim that divinity was foisted upon a previously merely human Jesus at a relatively late stage in the evolution of Christian theology. This cumulative case is built upon nine or so archaeological finds (depending upon how one counts them)...

### **Archaeological Evidence for Early Belief in the Divinity of Jesus**

#### **1) Prayers at Peter’s House, c. 50-300 AD.<sup>7</sup>**

According to the Emperor Constantine's mother, Egeria, writing c. AD 380: ‘In Capernaum the house of the prince of the apostles [i.e. Peter] has been made into a church with its original walls still standing. It is where the Lord cured the paralytic.’<sup>8</sup> In 1968 archaeologists working in Capernaum discovered that underneath the remains of an octagonal 5<sup>th</sup> century church lay the remains of 4<sup>th</sup> century church which had in turn been built around a 1st century house that had been used as a Christian meeting place since the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Several prayers to Jesus were found scratched into the plastered walls of the 1<sup>st</sup> century house. These prayers include mention of ‘Jesus Christ, the redeemer’ and ask ‘Lord Jesus Christ help your servant’. Peter Walker argues:

‘graffiti that referred to Jesus as Lord and Messiah... provides strong evidence that the room was used as a place of Christian worship – almost certainly because it was believed to be the room used by Jesus, perhaps the home of Simon Peter (Luke 4:38)... Given that the early tradition goes back to the first

century, this is almost certainly the very place where Jesus stayed – the home of his chief apostle, Peter.’<sup>9</sup>

Thus at least some Christians between the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the 4<sup>th</sup> century considered Jesus to be someone *to whom one could pray*.

## **2-5) Dura-Europos Wall Paintings, c. 232-235 AD.<sup>10</sup>**

The early third-century church at Dura-Europos (in modern-day Syria) contains a baptistery with four significant wall paintings dated to around 232 AD:

‘In total there are four scenes depicted from the Gospels. Christ Healing the Paralytic... shows one of Jesus’ earliest healings from Mark 2. Then there is a picture of the Good Shepherd, a popular image amongst the earliest Christian art. Also shown is the story from Matthew 14 of Jesus and Peter walking on the water... although Jesus’ face appears not to have survived. Lastly there is what appears to be part of a picture of the two/three women at Jesus’ empty tomb.’<sup>11</sup>

These paintings contain the earliest known paintings of Jesus, and bear testimony to belief in the divinity and resurrection of Jesus.

The painting of Christ healing the paralytic depicts a clean-shaved Jesus in a toga with an outstretched right arm, standing over and pointing at a figure lying upon a rather substantial bed. To their left, a male figure carries his robust bed upon his back. This is a ‘before’ and ‘after’ picture. Given the context, this painting is obviously a (culturally tinged) depiction of Jesus healing a paralytic. As Everett Ferguson writes: ‘The healing miracle might be either from John 5:2-9 (where the reference to the pool suggested a baptismal interpretation) or the synoptics (Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 2:1-12, where the healing of the paralytic is associated with Jesus’ power to forgive sins).’<sup>12</sup> However, it seems to me that the baptismal context favours the synoptic interpretation, where the event is focused upon *the apparently blasphemous authority of Jesus as ‘the Son of Man’ to forgive sin*, rather than the merely incidental mention of water in John 5. Hence one of the earliest extant paintings of Jesus may well depict an incident the central point of which is Jesus making an indirect claim to divinity.

Jesus’ self-designation as ‘the good shepherd’ (John 10:11) – represented in the painting directly above the baptistery - can be seen as a claim to both Messiahship (cf. Micah 5:2) and divinity (cf. Ezekiel 34:11-12; Psalm 23) as Jesus applies to himself a title that the Old Testament scriptures apply to God. Likewise, the picture of Jesus walking on the water, when read against the Old Testament background (cf. Job 9:8; Psalm 77:19), can be seen as depicting an enacted claim to divinity.

These painting demonstrate that around a century before the council of Nicea some people *believed* that Jesus did and said things that indirectly laid claim to divinity; and that they *believed* Jesus wrought miracles in confirmation of the truth of his claims. Against the background of his crucifixion for blasphemy, Jesus’ resurrection – referenced by the fourth painting - is obviously the premier miraculous confirmation thereof.

## **6 & 7) Christian Church Near Megiddo, c. 230 AD.<sup>13</sup>**

A Christian church or 'prayer hall' was discovered in 2005 near Megiddo. It has been dated to c. 230 AD, over a hundred years before the council of Nicea. The remains primarily consist of a series of mosaics grouped around a stone plinth that once held a table used for the celebration of communion.

One large mosaic displays at its centre a picture of several fish. The fish was an early Christian symbol due to the acrostic formed from the letters of the Greek word for fish: ΙΧΘΥΣ (Ichthys), namely Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ (Iēsous Christos Theou Yios Sōtēr), that is: 'Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour'. For example, discussing an early 5<sup>th</sup> century mosaic discovered at Stobi, Ruth E. Kolarik observes that: 'The large Greek letters ΙΧΘΥΣ inscribed into the geometric pattern, form the common acrostic for the name of Christ followed by a cross.'<sup>14</sup> Hence the fish mosaic at Megiddo plausibly testifies to belief in Jesus as 'God's Son'.

Even more impressive is a Greek inscription about the donation of the table placed in the centre of the hall (the plinth of which is still extant) for the celebration of communion. This reads: 'The God-loving Akeptous has offered the table to God Jesus Christ as a memorial'.

## **8) The 'Alexamenos' Graffito, c. 200 AD.<sup>15</sup>**

This stark piece of graffiti discovered on a wall near the Palatine hill in Rome dates to 'c. AD 200'.<sup>16</sup> It depicts a man named Alexamenos, who stands with an up-stretched arm facing a donkey-headed figure on a cross. The implied message is clear: the man on the cross is 'an ass'; but Alexamenos is perhaps even more stupid, for in rough-hewn scratches the picture is accompanied by the words: 'Alexamenos worships his god'. The only known crucifixion victim that Alexamenos might have worshiped is Jesus, and one only worships a deity.

## **9) NCE (Nuovo Catalogo Epigrafico) 156, c. 150-200 AD.**

According to a September 2011 report carried by Livescience.com:

'Researchers have identified what is believed to be the world's earliest surviving Christian inscription... Officially called NCE 156, the inscription is written in Greek and is *dated to the latter half of the second century*... NCE 156... alludes to Christian beliefs. "If it is in fact a second-century inscription, as I think it probably is, it is about the earliest Christian material object that we possess," study researcher Gregory Snyder, of Davidson College in North Carolina, told LiveScience. Snyder, who detailed the finding in the most recent issue of the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, believes it to be a funeral epigram, incorporating both Christian and pagan elements...' <sup>17</sup>

These pagan elements may suggest that the inscription is of a Valentinian (gnostic) province. As translated by Snyder, the inscription reads:

'To my bath, the brothers of the bridal chamber carry the torches,  
[here] in our halls, they hunger for the [true] banquets,

even while praising the Father and glorifying the Son.  
There [with the Father and the Son] is the only spring and source of truth.’<sup>18</sup>

Despite the possible influence of Gnostic beliefs, here we find ‘the Son’ being *glorified* in the same breath as praise is offered to ‘the Father’. We also find ‘the Father’ and ‘the Son’ being treated *together* as ‘the only spring and source of truth’. As Dean L. Overman observes: ‘the gnostic gospels, as the vast majority of New Testament scholars agree, proclaim a gnosticism that emphasizes that Jesus was too divine to be human, not that he was only a human and not divine.’<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

The extant archaeological material provides a cumulative case sufficient *in and of itself* to debunk Dan Brown’s claim that prior to the council of Nicea ‘Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet...’ The archaeological evidence demonstrates that a belief in the deity of Jesus pre-dates the council of Nicea by *at least* 125 years and, moreover, that this belief had by then been in existence long enough to spread over a wide geographical area. The archaeological evidence of belief in the divinity of Jesus takes us from Capernaum to Dura-Europos and from Megiddo to Rome.

Furthermore, this archaeological evidence contributes to the *indirect* case for thinking that Jesus’ own self-image was one that made his own person part-and-parcel of the God of Abraham. For, as Professor Craig A. Evans argues:

‘To assert that Jesus did not regard himself as in some sense God’s son makes the historian wonder why others did. From the earliest time Jesus was regarded by Christians as the son of God. Why not regard him as the great Prophet, if that is all that he had claimed or accepted? Why not regard him as the great Teacher, if that had been all that he had ever pretended to be? Earliest Christianity regarded Jesus as Messiah and as Son of God, I think, because that is how his disciples understood him and how Jesus permitted them to understand him.’<sup>20</sup>

But if Jesus made such claims for himself, then as Professor John Duncan (1796 – 1870) saw: ‘Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or He was Himself deluded and self-deceived, or He was Divine. There is no getting out of this trilemma.’<sup>21</sup>

## Recommended Resources

Bart D. Ehrman, ‘What was the council of Nicea?’

[www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2005/06/What-Was-The-Council-Of-Nicea.aspx](http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2005/06/What-Was-The-Council-Of-Nicea.aspx)

Dean L. Overman, *A Case for the Divinity of Jesus: Examining the Earliest Evidence* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

Greg Snyder, ‘A Second Century Inscription from the Via Latina’, *The Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19 (2011), 157-93.

Yotam Tepper, *A Christian Prayer Hall of the Third Century CE at Kefar 'othnay (legio): Excavations at the Megiddo Prison 2005* (Israelie Antiquities Authority, 2006)

Vassilios Tzaferis, 'Oldest church found? Inscribed "to God Jesus Christ"', *Biblical Archaeological Review* [www.bib-arch.org/online-exclusives/oldest-church-02.asp](http://www.bib-arch.org/online-exclusives/oldest-church-02.asp)

Peter S. Williams, 'Archaeology and the Historical Reliability of the New Testament' [www.bethinking.org/advanced/archaeology-and-the-historical-reliability-of-the-new-testament.htm](http://www.bethinking.org/advanced/archaeology-and-the-historical-reliability-of-the-new-testament.htm)

Peter S. Williams, *Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Paternoster, 2011)

---

<sup>1</sup> cf. <http://www.livescience.com/2410-council-nicea-changed-world.html>

<sup>2</sup> Mark Mittleberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask (with answers)* (Tyndale, 2010), p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (Doubleday, 2003), p. 232-233.

<sup>4</sup> Mittleberg, *op cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, 'What was the council of Nicea?', <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2005/06/What-Was-The-Council-Of-Nicea.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Dean L. Overman, *A Case for the Divinity of Jesus: Examining the Earliest Evidence* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> cf. <http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/sites/TScpmain.html>

<sup>8</sup> cf. [www.gohistoric.com/sites/house-church-peter-capernaum](http://www.gohistoric.com/sites/house-church-peter-capernaum)

<sup>9</sup> Peter Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus: An Illustrated Guide to The Places of the Holy Land* (Oxford: Lion, 2006), p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dura-Europos\\_church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dura-Europos_church)

<sup>11</sup> 'Earliest Known Picture of Jesus Goes on Display', [www.rejesus.co.uk/blog/post/earliest\\_known\\_picture\\_of\\_jesus\\_goes\\_on\\_display/](http://www.rejesus.co.uk/blog/post/earliest_known_picture_of_jesus_goes_on_display/)

<sup>12</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the early church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Eerdmans, 2009), p. 442.

<sup>13</sup> cf. [www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=1015916n](http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=1015916n)

<sup>14</sup> Ruth E. Kolarik, 'Mosaics of the Early Church at Stobi', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 41, Studies on Art and Archeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday (1987), p. 295-306.

<sup>15</sup> cf. [http://ntresources.com/alex\\_graffito.htm](http://ntresources.com/alex_graffito.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2011), p. 96.

<sup>17</sup> Owen Jarus, 'World's Earliest Christian Engraving Shows Surprising Pagan Elements', 30<sup>th</sup> September 2011, [www.livescience.com/16319-earliest-christian-inscription-pagan-artifacts.html](http://www.livescience.com/16319-earliest-christian-inscription-pagan-artifacts.html)

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Overman, *op cit*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Craig A. Evans, 'The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith' in *Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Paul Copan & Craig A. Evans ed.'s; London: Westminster Knox Press, 2001), p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis's\\_trilemma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis's_trilemma)