

I Want to Believe, But...

What about “The Da Vinci Code”

by Steve Hixon



Looking at Current Issues from a Biblical Perspective

In 2003 Dan Brown published a novel that quickly ascended to the top of the bestseller charts and became the most successful adult fiction book of all time. It's still number one as of this writing, and it's not going away; Tom Hanks recently signed on to play the lead in a movie version in the near future. The novel has a winning formula: fast-paced action (it all happens in 24 hours), glamorous settings (Paris, London, Scotland), and an intriguing plot (a who-dun-it murder mystery laced with secrets from the worlds of art & religion). For entertainment value, it's hard to beat.

So, what's the big deal? What's so controversial about a simple work of fiction? Why are so many Christians concerned?

The answer is: because the book, while entertaining, weaves its own alternative view of Jesus' character, his life, and some of the most foundational concepts about Christianity. Dan Brown, the author, creates fictional characters whom

the reader tends to trust implicitly, even as they spout some pretty bizarre theories as though they were incontrovertible facts. In fact, the book even has a “fact” page at the very beginning, claiming that “all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.”

Subliminally, the reader therefore assumes that everything in the book must be based on good evidence. But it's not. And that's the problem. Brown neglects to tell us that, oh, by the way, the theories that run through the narrative are just theories, and are only meant to create a lively discussion rather than subvert people's most cherished beliefs. Sandra Miesel (“Dismantling the Da Vinci Code”) comments:

“Brown invites readers to identify with his

smart, glamorous characters who've seen through the impostures of the clerics who hide the “truth” about Jesus and his wife. Blasphemy is delivered in a soft voice with a knowing chuckle: “Every faith in the world is based on fabrication.”

The Main Plot

Michael Gleghorn (“Decoding the Da Vinci Code”), describes the premise:

“The story begins with the murder of the Louvre's curator in the museum. But this curator isn't just interested in art; he's also the Grand Master of a secret society known as the Priory of Sion. The Priory guards an ancient secret that, if revealed, would undermine the authority of the church and completely discredit biblical Christianity. Before dying, the curator attempts to pass on the secret to his granddaughter Sophie, a cryptographer, and Harvard professor Robert Langdon, by leaving a number of clues that he hopes will guide them to the truth.

So what's the secret, you ask? The location, and true identity of the much-sought-after Holy Grail. But in this novel, the Grail is not the cup allegedly used by Christ at the Last Supper. Rather, it's the person of Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus, who carried on the royal bloodline of Christ by giving birth to his child!”

Langdon, a smarter version of Indiana Jones, teams up with Sophie (for the budding love interest), and runs into an even more educated royal historian, Professor Leigh Teabing. With a trio this intelligent, the average reader is going to have a hard time questioning their claims. It's easier to just go along with the dialogue until you find yourself saying, “Wait a minute! Does this mean...?” And that's exactly where some Christians and non-Christians find themselves – wondering about the trustworthiness of the Bible, the church, and even Jesus Himself.

“Every faith
in the world
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- Leigh Teabing,
fictional character in
The Da Vinci Code

The Basic Problems

What claims does the book make? Here's a brief list:

- Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had children whose line continues to the present day.
- Jesus was a good man but not God.
- The early church knew all this, but that knowledge was suppressed in AD 325 by Emperor Constantine, who substituted and imposed his own male-dominated version of Christianity. Therefore, the four gospel accounts we have now in the New Testament are not trustworthy.
- The true early Christians were Gnostics. Salvation doesn't come by faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ but by becoming enlightened with secret knowledge.
- The church (mainly the Catholic Church) is a giant conspiracy bent on control and domination through suppressing the real truth of the "sacred feminine."

Let's take these issues one at a time.

1. Was Jesus married, and to Mary Magdalene?

There is simply no evidence at all for this, not even from spurious Gnostic documents. True, most Jewish men of Jesus' day married. But not necessarily Jewish men who were devoted to a religious ministry lifestyle (like the Qumran community, the source of the Dead Sea Scrolls). Jesus himself said that, "some have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven." (Mathew 19:12) Jesus never said there was anything wrong with marriage, and the gospels are thorough enough in their details that it would be difficult to imagine they would omit such a critical fact as his marriage.

2. Did Jesus claim to be God, and did the early church believe that? Absolutely. Jesus repeatedly claimed a unique relationship with the Father. In John 10:30 Jesus states, "*I and the Father are one.*" A few chapters later comes the following exchange:

Jesus: "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.*"

Philip said, "*Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.*"

Jesus answered: "*Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.*"

The apostle Paul also made it very clear that Jesus was God, in passages like Colossians 1:19, "*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him {Jesus} ...*"

The early church not only believed in the divinity of Jesus, but they were willing to die for it. The Romans asked every citizen to acknowledge that Caesar was Lord. If Christians believed that Jesus was simply a great teacher they wouldn't have had a problem giving lip service to emperor worship. But they consistently refused, saying their allegiance was to Jesus alone, and they paid for that allegiance with their lives. Even Pliny, a Roman politician, wrote to Caesar and described the Christians worshiping Jesus, "like a god."

3. Did Constantine change the church's basic beliefs? No. Constantine was the Roman Emperor who followed some of the most scathing empire-wide persecutions of Christians. In fact, had Constantine continued those persecutions, Christians might have been wiped out completely. But he experienced a conversion to Christ after a dream one night, and thus became the first emperor who not only allowed Christians to worship freely, but also instituted Christianity as the state religion. Followers of Christ suddenly went from being hunted and killed to being privileged citizens. About this time, a heretical teaching arose (Arianism) that questioned Jesus' divinity, so Constantine called the Council of Nicea in 325. Among other issues, the council decided to confirm the books that had been circulating among the churches for the last 250 years. The Council did not impose a New Testament, instead, they simply affirmed as Scripture the books that Christians had recognized as inspired over two centuries.

The Da Vinci Code claims that the Gnostic gospels (ancient writings, some of which were discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945) represented the real beliefs of the early church. That isn't true. Not only were these documents written almost 200 years after Jesus' death (as opposed to 20+ years for the New Testament books), but they describe a Jesus who was not fully human and would not have been interested in marriage (contrary to what the book claims).

4. What is Gnosticism?

With roots in various religions, Gnosticism came to full force in the 2nd and 3rd centuries after Christ. It believed in antithetical dualism (spiritual things are good, physical things like the earth, bodies, sex, etc. are bad). They believed that the creator of the earth was an evil god. (We have a modern version of dualism in Christian Science.) The word “Gnostic” comes from the Greek word “gnosis”, which meant “knowledge.” Gnostics believed they were the only ones who had and understood a secret knowledge, and that enlightened status made them special. The Gnostics held to a totally different worldview than the rest of the Bible. Dr. James Hitchcock (Beliefnet.com, December 30, 2003) writes:

“The Gnostics did not accept the Incarnation of Jesus and treated doctrinal orthodoxy as being too literal-minded. Thus it was possible to write new “gospels” since the Gnostics were not bound by what may or may not have happened while Jesus was on earth. Modern people like Dan Brown, who treat the Gnostic gospels as history, miss the point – to the Gnostics themselves it was irrelevant what actually happened when Jesus was on earth, if he ever was.”

Gnosticism has been around for a long time; it’s no “secret.” Christians understood it and rejected it almost 2000 years ago, realizing the vast differences between Gnostic beliefs and Biblical teachings. Fred Hutchison (“The Da Vinci Code, Gnostic feminists, and other Nonsense”) writes, “Gnosticism was the first heresy to be rejected by the early church.” But because many people today have never heard of it, Dan Brown’s book makes it sound intriguing and appealing, as if it were something that has been purposely withheld from us, like a conspiracy designed to keep us in the dark. Like many cults and alternative philosophies, they seem attractive initially. But with a little research, their bizarre, unfounded, often-irrational beliefs become evident. Another modern example would be Mormonism, which looks harmless on TV commercials showing happy families and nice people. But once you study and discover the actual Mormon theology, it defies trustworthiness.

5. Have we all been duped by a giant religious conspiracy?

Conspiracy theories usually involve wishful

thinking, short cuts to careful research, and too-easy answers for complicated paranoid feelings. If we don’t like something, we assume a small group of people gathered somewhere in a smoke-filled room and planned to fool us by telling lies. Now, we know that people can be evil, and tell lies, and hide the truth, and that absolute power tends to corrupt. And it’s easy to target big power structures. But Christianity is a belief system based on good evidence that goes way beyond the human structures of the Roman Catholic church or any other church. In addition, there exists today an emotional backlash against the recently publicized abuses of some Catholic priests, and The Da Vinci Code plays upon some of that. Brown’s book uses our natural suspicions of large organizations as a kind of smoke-shield to keep us from thinking too clearly about his characters’ bizarre claims.

The Books Behind the Da Vinci Code

From interviews and TV specials, it appears that Dan Brown and his wife did all their own first-hand research and “discovered” these theories all by themselves. However, it doesn’t take much research to see that Brown lifted most of his information from a group of esoteric writings that can be found in the occult section of any bookstore. Here’s a brief list:

- The Gnostic Gospels by Elaine Pagels
- The Templar Revelation by Lynn Pickett
- Holy Blood, Holy Grail by Michael Baigent
- The Goddess in the Gospels by Margaret Starbird
- The Women’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets by Barbara G. Walker.

These books hardly represent reputable scholarship. But when you’re writing sensationalistic fiction, I guess reputable scholarship isn’t all that important. And yet the New York Daily News book review of the Da Vinci Code states, “Brown’s research is impeccable.” Brown also assumes his readers don’t know that much about history, or at least aren’t going to take the time to look things up. So he can throw in totally bogus “facts” such as the claim that “the Church burned 5 million women as witches.” Yes, there were medieval witch-hunts, but the actual numbers weren’t impressive enough for Brown, so he made up new ones.

A Post-Modern Mentality

Another reason that the Da Vinci Code is successful is that it appeals to the mindset of many in our culture whose philosophy of life can be described as “postmodern.” Postmodernism is the prevailing attitude of Generation X, especially today’s 20-and 30-somethings. Some of the tenets of postmodernism:

- My own experience is the most authoritative value in my life.
- Personal relationships are extremely important.
- There are no absolute truths. What is true for you may not be true for me, and vice-versa. Truth is not objective and “out there.” It is subjective and “in here,” in the world of my relationships and personal experiences.
- Disillusionment with the “modern” worldview that promised science and industry would solve all our problems.
- History is not seen as linear, moving purposefully towards a meaningful conclusion. Instead, there is a distrust that we can know with any certainty anything that happened in the past. Therefore, a religion based on historical events, like Christianity, seems irrelevant.
- A distrust of large authoritative organizations or structures, (such as corporations, or the Roman Catholic Church).

Looking at Postmodern thought, it is easy to see why people are drawn to a novel that appeals to experience, personal relationships, secret esoteric knowledge, and conspiracies in high places. Brown himself gives a typically postmodern answer to what seems to be a fairly straight-forward question about his own personal faith. (This is taken from an interview posted on Dan Brown’s own web site.):

Interviewer: *Are you a Christian?*

Brown: *“Yes. Interestingly, if you ask three people what it means to be Christian, you will get three different answers. Some feel being baptized is sufficient. Others feel you must accept the Bible as immutable historical fact. Still others require a belief that all those who do not accept Christ as their personal savior are doomed to hell. Faith is a continuum, and we each fall on that line where we may. By*

attempting to rigidly classify ethereal concepts like faith, we end up debating semantics to the point where we entirely miss the obvious--that is, that we are all trying to decipher life's big mysteries, and we're each following our own paths of enlightenment. I consider myself a student of many religions. The more I learn, the more questions I have. For me, the spiritual quest will be a life-long work in progress.”

A Christian response

Christianity is rooted in historical events which no secular archaeologist or historian has ever been able to disprove. In fact, of all religions on earth, Christianity is most dependent on history, to the point where, if these events did not really take place, the entire foundation for faith would be removed. The apostle Paul underlines this when he wrote to the Corinthians: “... if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” (1 Cor. 15:14)

It can be infuriating that a book which attacks biblical Christianity without any foundation of real reputable scholarship is so widely popular. After reading such a book, unbelievers may feel more settled or even justified in their unbelief. It is even more disheartening when it causes Christians to wonder about the foundation of their faith. But when people openly verbalize their spiritual questions, good things can start to happen. When doubt and confusion are brought out into the open, God begins to work. People find themselves in the middle of conversations that might never normally happen. Boring dinner dialogues turn into lively discussions about the truth of the Bible, and who Jesus Christ really was, and what we really believe in, anyway. So in a strange way, Dan Brown has done us a backhanded favor, by surfacing some of the issues that Christians have always wanted to be talking about, but which people weren’t always ready to listen to. Until now?

Recommended for Further Study

- [Breaking the Da Vinci Code](#), by Darrell Bock