

The Da Vinci Deception

By Michael Raiter, © 2004.

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1. The Book the World is Reading

With 8 million copies in print, *The Da Vinci Code* has achieved unprecedented success since it debuted at Number One on the *New York Times* best seller list, simultaneously topping best seller lists on the *Wall Street Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and even the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Columbia films may turn it into a Ron Howard directed movie, slated to star either Russell Crowe, Tom Hanks, Hugh Jackman, or George Clooney. People are seen reading it in airports, trains, and buses; and when it won the Booksense 2004 *Book of the Year* award, it was described as “fast-paced, enthralling, and simply impossible to put down.” Forget Harry Potter: this is the book the world is raving about.

“So what?” we might ask. “There have been other action thrillers.” But this book does seem to do something more than just entertain. At the Booksense 2004 Awards, it also received praise on another level: “This is one of those rare books that comes along and makes you question everything you thought you knew about religion, art, and what you were taught in school.”

So significant and influential has this book been that it has given rise to a spate of responses. Leading New Testament scholars like Darrell Bock and Ben Witherington, amongst others, have written full-length books refuting claims made in *The Da Vinci Code* about Jesus Christ, the Bible and the Church. [See end of this article for details.]

What is this book, to cause these kinds of reactions and responses? The story goes something like this. (Spoilers do follow, although the ending won’t be revealed here.)

2. The Story

While in Paris to give a lecture, a Harvard expert in codes and symbols, ‘symbolist’ Robert Langdon, receives an urgent late-night phone call. The elderly curator of the Louvre has been found murdered inside the museum.

Near the body, police have found a baffling cipher, which includes Langdon’s name. And so begins an exciting search through numerous riddles and codes, many of which are hidden in Leonardo Da Vinci’s paintings, to discover not just the murderer of the curator, but something far more important: the truth about the greatest riddle and best kept secret of all time.

Langdon joins forces with a gifted French cryptologist and granddaughter of the murdered man—Sophie (‘wisdom’) Neveu (‘new’)—and learns the late curator was involved in the *Priory of Sion*, a secret society whose Grand Masters are said to have included Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Da Vinci himself.

Sophie and Langdon discover together (yes, there is a budding romance too!) that the Louvre curator has sacrificed his life to protect the Priory’s most sacred trust: the location and the truth about the most important, and desired, religious relic of all time—the Holy Grail.

Langdon and Sophie have to match wits with a faceless powerbroker, an ambitious bishop and a murderous monk, all of whom are connected with the conservative lay-Catholic organisation *Opus Dei*, which is plotting to seize the Priory's secret. *Opus Dei* has known the truth about the Holy Grail for centuries, and hopes that it will never be revealed.

What is this truth? That the Holy Grail was never an object (such as a cup), but a person. A clue is found in Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*: when you look closely at the painting, a figure on Jesus' right, usually presumed to be Peter, turns out on closer inspection to be feminine—an attractive woman with long auburn hair. She is none other than Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus and mother of his child. *She* is the Holy Grail: the 'vessel' containing the 'blood' (that is, the bloodline) of Jesus. Mary Magdalene fled Jerusalem after Jesus' crucifixion and settled in France, where her descendants have long lived.

3. The 'New Wisdom' about Jesus

Perhaps this story is just another ridiculous and fanciful tale. But Dan Brown is setting out to popularise the theories of scholars who believe this reading of Jesus' life is found in many of the Gospels. But by 'Gospel' they do not mean the biblical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John)—they mean a set of other 'more reliable' Gospels.

A long passage in the story revolves around another main character, Sir Leigh Teabing, a world expert on the Holy Grail. He tells Langdon and Sophie that in fact there were 80 gospels which were considered for the New Testament, but only a few were chosen by the emperor Constantine in the fourth-century AD. Why these few? To quote:

The fundamental irony of Christianity is that the Bible as we know it today was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great. [...] Constantine was a very good businessman. He could see that Christianity was on the rise, and he simply backed the winning horse. [p. 232, Bantam 2003 edition]

Then at the Council of Nicea the bishops declared Jesus divine:

[U]ntil that moment in history Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet ... Not the Son of God ... Many scholars claim that the early church literally stole Jesus from his original followers, hijacking his human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity and using it to expand their power. [p. 233]

Teabing (or is it Dan Brown?) continues [p. 235]: "What I mean is that almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*." Here is why the book has caused such a storm. It asserts we cannot trust our Bible, which is nothing more than a man-made document, the product of the 'winners' of history. In fact, there exist many other gospels, known as the Gnostic gospels, which actually give us a more historically accurate picture of the historical Jesus.

Nor can we trust the church, which has always hidden the truth and oppressed opponents, to increase and maintain its power. After all, a church which deliberately covers up the truth about the rampant sexual abuse by its clergy would certainly be willing to cover up the truth about Jesus.

Dan Brown himself has come out publicly and said that he believes the things he has written about Jesus Christ. When he was asked how much of the book is based on reality

he said, “Absolutely all of it—all of the art, architecture, secret rituals, secret societies, all of that is historical fact.” [<http://www.danbrown.com/media/todayshow.htm>]

4. Testimony to Jesus

One of the more uninformed claims of *The Da Vinci Code* is that these alternative Gnostic Gospels present us with the human and historical Jesus. But of course, what is most striking about the Gnostic accounts of Jesus is the way they actually *downplay* the historical Jesus in their preference for the spiritual, transcendent Jesus. So in a writing called *Acts of John*, dating from the 2nd century, John speaks about the risen Jesus and says, “I will tell you another glory, brothers: sometimes when I meant to touch him I encountered a material, solid body; but at other times again when I felt him, his substance was immaterial ... as if he did not exist at all.” When this ‘John’ checked for Jesus’ footprints, he found he’d left none.

But compare that account with the clear, emphatic, unambiguous words of the real John, who lived and worked alongside Jesus for three years, in the opening words to one of his letters:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ²The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴We write this to make our joy complete.
[1 John 1:1-4]

John begins with an almost laborious repetition of the way he has had *first-hand experience* of Jesus, ‘the word of life’. Three times John tells of his qualifications to speak and write about Jesus. In v1, he is someone whom they have heard, and have seen with their eyes, and looked closely at, and touched with their hands. In v2, “we have seen ... and testify” to this ‘word of life’. In v3, what they proclaim is “that which we have seen and heard”.

The evidence is overwhelming that John the Gospel writer is John the letter writer, and that John the writer is John follower of Jesus. This evidence includes the fact the earliest Christian writers all acknowledge that the writer of letters and Gospel was the ‘beloved disciple’ who outran Peter to the empty tomb of the risen Jesus. In his letter, John explicitly identifies himself as someone who knew, saw, spoke with and touched Jesus.

No-one denies that the man who wrote the letter called ‘1 John’ also wrote the Gospel of John; but even so, some scholars argue that this writer was not the apostle called John. We live in sceptical times. What scholars attempt to sidestep highlights a principle of the modern practice biblical studies: that if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a camel in disguise. Apparently then, if a writer says that he saw, touched and heard Jesus, and identifies himself elsewhere as the beloved disciple, and every ancient authority close to the event identifies him as John—then apparently, those who live two thousand years later may declare with authority that it must be anybody except John. We need to ask, firstly, who is in the more likely position to get it right; and secondly, whether there are questions of social standing within the ‘tribe’ of biblical scholars that prevent modern scholars from agreeing with the ancient authorities.

Of course, the whole matter is more than just a historical debate. The question of authorship goes right to the heart of the authority of 1 John 1:1. If we reject apostolic authorship, we can reject the claim of this verse, and so can reject all that John goes on to say about Jesus. Humans desperately want to reject the reliability of the eyewitnesses—not because we lack enough evidence that this was the apostle John, but fundamentally, because we don't want to submit ourselves to the Christ that John presents to us. If we can convince ourselves that the writer *didn't* see, hear, touch and know Jesus, then we can write off the Jesus of the Bible, as Dan Brown presumably does, as so much historical fiction.

Who, then, is the Jesus Christ of the Bible?

5. The Incarnate Jesus

a) Divine

In John's opening words, Jesus Christ "was from the beginning". He is divinity incarnate. In *The Da Vinci Code* however, Teabing claims that Jesus' divinity was merely the result of a close vote of the bishops at the Council of Nicea in the fourth century AD. But that is not John's experience. Writing probably no later than in the last decade of the 1st century, but possibly as early as 70 or even 65 AD, those who knew Jesus intimately knew him as the one who "was from the beginning," and who could also be described as "the word of life." It gradually became clear to John and others in Jesus' circle that this man Jesus was with the Father "from the beginning," who was then revealed and made known in the flesh.

Here is the very same point made in the Gospel of John: that Jesus was pre-existent, and with God before all things. This is a truth John has *heard*, because of course it was the words of Jesus that unveiled his eternal relationship with the Father. But John has also *seen* it. Before his very eyes, the reality of God living amongst them had become clear.

On the other hand, others had seen that same life, and witnessed the same signs that John did, but had failed to draw the same conclusion. Why? Because John heard, saw, and *beheld*. That is, he understood and grasped what was right before his eyes. The followers of Jesus understood who he was.

Jesus' divinity wasn't the result of the misguided devotion of his followers after his death, or the apotheosis of Jesus by the heretic Paul, or the collusion of power-hungry bishops centuries later. It was the undeniable conclusion of all who walked, talked, touched, and lived with this man.

But if the Christ they saw was "from the beginning," he was also every bit a man.

b) Human

One of the most provocative claims of *The Da Vinci Code* is that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, who gave birth to a daughter. Actually, the only evidence Brown mounts for this claim comes from fourteenth-century paintings by Da Vinci: hardly compelling proof. Even the supposedly authoritative Gnostic gospels don't make that claim. The closest they come is a reference to Jesus kissing Mary. Most commentators agree the kiss is metaphor, not literal.

Even so, we must ask: would it matter if Jesus kissed Mary? Would it matter if Jesus married, or had children? If we somehow thought that Jesus *couldn't* have had legitimate

sexual relationships with a woman and been a father, that would be what theologians call a 'docetic' view of Christ—meaning a view of Christ that simply cannot believe that God is able to become properly human. (Such views were connected to early Greek thought, like that of the fifth century BC philosopher Plato. These Greek views held that the 'reality' that is truly 'real', and which matters most, is hidden somewhere off in a spiritual world; whereas our material reality here is lowly, temporary, decaying, and contemptible.)

Christians believe that Jesus was *fully* human: that he was a physical, emotional, intellectual, and sexual being. His body could produce sperm as much as it could produce sweat and saliva. There is nothing about the nature of Jesus' humanity that would lead us to an ancient Greek view of Jesus which thinks of his physicality as unreal, or unimportant, or contemptible.

Why, then, do we believe Jesus did not marry Mary? Simply because all the earliest and most reliable documents present him as single. It is our commitment to respect historical data that leads us to affirm Jesus' singleness.

The apostle John proclaims to us the Jesus he knew. He knew Jesus as well as you know your closest friend. The Jesus he knew was the Christ, who is God-with-us.

c) Life-giving

John tells us why this knowledge is so important. Why can't we just ignore the Dan Browns of this world every time they raise their unbelieving heads? We must respond to books like *The Da Vinci Code* because John tells us it is a life-and-death matter [vv 2b-3]. This Jesus is about "eternal life". To respond to Jesus is to enjoy fellowship with the community of believers, but more importantly, fellowship with God himself. Nothing less than a person's eternity is at stake.

Elsewhere in his letter, John goes on to explain the straightforward consequence of this life-and-death aspect of Jesus. "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also." [1 Jn 2:22-23]

Like the antichrists of John's church, Dan Brown calls himself a Christian. Like them, he is deceiving people and ultimately severing their relationship with the Father, by destroying their knowledge of Jesus, in whom is eternal life.

6. Conclusion

In a very fine review of *The Da Vinci Code*, Mike Frost asks where are the Christian novelists, filmmakers, poets or painters? Where are the evangelical Dan Browns who will write true blockbuster thrillers that storm to the top of the bestselling charts?

That is a good question. But on the other hand—who is really going to read such books? Who will read and love a book which tells the truth about Jesus Christ? Will a book about the historical Jesus Christ who was pre-existent with the Father before the world was made really take the publishing world by storm? Does anyone want a novel about the One who came to lay down his life for a sinful and rebellious humankind, and who rose victorious and who will come again to judge the living and the dead? By all means write it. But don't expect to win the 2005 Booksense *Book of the Year* award.

People with “itching ears”, as they are called elsewhere in the Bible [2 Timothy 4:3], have always preferred the new, the mythical, the bizarre, and the godless. But our task is the same task as that of the apostle John:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

7. Further reading

The following two books are written by Christian biblical scholars, and are available through Moore Books (<http://www.moore.edu.au/moorebooks/intro.htm>). Unfortunately online purchasing is not yet available, although you can purchase:

by email: books@moore.edu.au;

by phone: +61 (0) 2 9577 9966;

by fax: +61 (2) 9550 5393;

by mail or in person: 21 King Street Newtown NSW 2042.

Prices shown are subject to change.

- Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Da Vinci*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2004. (252pp., \$A23.95)
- Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Code: Answer to the Questions Everybody's Asking*. Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004. (208 pp., \$A19.95)

The following book is available through major bookstores. It is not written from a Christian perspective, but by specialists in Gnostic esoterica. It is of interest to anyone who is suspicious of Christian responses to Dan Brown's book, because it contains several very serious critiques of Brown's accuracy, ranging from simple errors of geography to misrepresentations of the Gnostic documents themselves.

- Dan Burstein (ed.), *Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorised Guide to the Mysteries Behind the Da Vinci Code*. London: Weindenfeld and Nicolson, 2004. (375 pp., \$A29.99)

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