



Some thoughts about 'The Da Vinci Code'

by Peter & Liz Mallen

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The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown is already a bestselling book and promises to be an equally popular film (directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks). The book is a well-written and fast paced mystery-thriller with plenty of unexpected twists. Numerous cryptic codes and riddles have to be deciphered along the way as the plot moves from the Louvre in Paris to various locations in London and Scotland. What has added considerable appeal to the book is its controversial claim that the Catholic Church has perpetrated a great conspiracy by covering up important 'facts' concerning Christ. Some thought starters on the book's take on history and theology are given below. For those interested in going deeper, a list of further resources is attached (books and websites).

The important point to remember when reading this book or watching the film is that it is a *fictional work* (i.e. a made up story). It should be enjoyed as a fun film along similar lines to *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (about the search for the Holy Grail) or *National Treasure*, but not as an accurate representation of history. The claims made by some of its characters concerning Jesus and the church, as well as about art and architectural issues, do not agree with the multitude of both Christian and non-Christian historical evidence. By contrast, evidence for the supposedly ancient origins of the book's secret organisation, the Priory of Sion, and its leadership by historical celebrities has been shown to be no more than an elaborate 20th century hoax.

Unfortunately, many people may be tempted to believe the story because of their ignorance of history and suspicion of the church. The book and film may also arouse feelings of doubt or anger in some Christians and thus create an unhelpfully defensive stance. On the positive side, the release of the film may well give Christians new opportunities to discuss their beliefs about Jesus and the Bible with non-Christians. Open and respectful dialogue is surely better than no engagement at all. As always, however, the key question for people to decide – in the light of all the available evidence – is who, they say, Jesus is.

The central historical claim of the story is that the 4th century church under pagan Roman Emperor Constantine conspired to rewrite the Christian faith, changing Jesus' status from human to divine and suppressing important aspects of his life including his marriage to Mary Magdalene and the physical bloodline they established. The result was a powerfully patriarchal church that eliminated all reverence for the 'sacred feminine' and scorned the role of Mary by portraying her as a prostitute. The 'true' version of history was supposedly recorded in a multitude of Gospels and other documents written before Constantine's revisions, which have been suppressed by the church up to the present day.

Enter now the heroes of the book, a secret organisation called the Priory of Sion, whose founders allegedly discovered the 'true' documents about Jesus in Jerusalem in 1099 during the First Crusade. This society is claimed to have safeguarded the truth about Jesus ever since, protected his physical descendants (the French Merovingian lineage) and promoted worship of the sacred goddess as represented by Mary. Its members have included famous historical figures including Leonardo Da Vinci, Isaac Newton and Victor Hugo.

Although Brown boldly and repeatedly claims that his version of history is supported by substantial evidence, at almost every point his story conflicts with the available historical record.

- There is considerable evidence that Jesus was considered to be divine much earlier than the 4th century (e.g. John 1:1-5; 10:33; early Christian worship of Jesus as Lord (the name of God in the OT); baptism in the name of Jesus (Matt 28:19); prayer in the name of Jesus);
- The four Gospels in our Bible were written in the 1st century and accepted as authoritative in the church by the early 2nd century, based on the reliability of the disciples' eye-witness accounts of Jesus' life. None claim that Jesus was married or had physical descendants;
- Many so-called Gnostic Gospels were written in the 2nd and 3rd centuries but were regarded as distortions of the true faith (i.e. heretical) and denounced by the church. Neither these documents, nor the Dead Sea Scrolls, nor the Nag Hammadi texts support Brown's claims;
- Ireneaus was an influential theologian and bishop of Lyons in France during the 2nd century. He defended the divinity of Christ in his writings but makes no mention of any descendants of Jesus living in France;
- Constantine certainly had a major impact by making Christianity the official state religion in the 4th century but did not personally make any significant decisions regarding the status of Jesus, the books to be included in the Bible, or about Mary Magdalene. In short, there is no substantiated evidence that the church suppressed any of the 'facts' mentioned by the characters in *Da Vinci Code*;
- The one document that supposedly shows the ancient origins of the Priory of Sion has been widely debunked as an elaborate hoax carried out by a French conman (Pierre Plantard) who planted the document into the French National Library in the mid 1960s.

The *theology* contained in Brown's book has attracted less publicity than its historical claims but needs to be recognised. The book implies that up until the 4th century all religions were balanced in their worship of masculine and feminine, gods and goddesses, including Judaism and Christianity. Brown even suggests that sacred ritualistic sex was regularly practiced in the Jewish Temple to reflect the union between Yahweh (the Hebrew name for God in the OT) and his female equal Shekinah (Hebrew for glory and often associated with God's presence). It was supposedly Constantine who scorned the female aspect and so created a patriarchal church. In the book, the Priory of Sion seeks to redress the imbalance by promoting worship of the feminine goddess.

While Brown's theology may sound appealing, the religion promoted in the book is actually a return to the ancient fertility cults that are denounced so strongly in the OT. Worship of the Canaanite gods, Ba'al and Asherah, was a constant threat to God's people, as described in an early incident in Num 25:1-9 and regularly throughout the OT. These cults celebrate the cycle of nature from birth to death to rebirth, with a particular focus on the physical sexual act as necessary to sustain life and bring fertility to crops and people. Note that the one-flesh sexual union is celebrated in the Bible – within marriage – and is even used to depict the covenant between God and his people but is never part of public worship. The fertility cult practices clearly arouse God's intense jealousy and judgment (e.g. Hos 2:2-13; Jer 7:9-29) as well as rejecting Jewish and Christian (and Muslim) claims that God alone is the Creator and Sustainer of all life. Such cults have ancient origins and were well represented at the time of Jesus by the cults of Isis, Aphrodite and Venus. Yet the Bible makes clear that we must choose whether we worship God alone or seek other gods, which leads only to depravity and judgment (e.g. Paul's stark critique in Rom 1:18-32).

Further Resources

Bock, Darrell L. *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (from a conservative scholar)
Gumbel, Nicky. *The Da Vinci Code: A Response* (written by the founder of Alpha)
Strobel, Lee and Garry Poole. *Exploring the Da Vinci Code* (from Willowcreek Church)
Witherington, Ben. *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci* (by a respected Evangelical scholar)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticisms_of_The_Da_Vinci_Code (secular critique)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Priority_of_Sion_hoax (secular evaluation of this organisation)

<http://www.envoymagazine.com/PlanetEnvoy/Review-DaVinci-part2-Full.htm#Full> (Christian critique)

<http://store.yahoo.com/biblestudies/dedavicone.html> (Bible study attacking the book)

<http://store.yahoo.com/biblestudies/enourcu.html> (Bible study supporting interaction)