

# THE DA VINCI CODE

## Why Should We Worry About a Book That is Essentially Fiction?

The *Da Vinci Code* is written by Dan Brown. He taught English at Philips Exeter Academy in the USA and lives in New England. Apart from the *Da Vinci Code* he has written a number of best selling novels: *Digital Fortress*, *Angels and Demons* and *Deception Point*. I haven't read any of those, but the book reviews in the more serious newspapers seem to indicate that the content is vastly different from the *Da Vinci Code*. The *Da Vinci Code*, however, though essentially a novel, is a book about truth, Christianity and the reliability of the gospels. It is the publishing phenomena of the last 12 months, and it sat at No.1 on the New York best sellers list for 35 weeks. It has sold over 8 million copies and counting. It has been translated into 40 languages. It is marching off the shelves in Singapore and Mumbai. Everybody is reading it, and apparently, there's a movie coming out in 2005 to be directed by Ron Howard.

As a novel at that level, it's well written and a real page-turner, but the plot relies on a number of falsehoods about Jesus, the formation and reliability of the Bible, and Church History. That, of course, is not new. Many books of fiction are based on myths and falsehoods. That's what fiction is – a work of “imaginative narration ... feigned, invented or imagined: a made-up story.” (Macquaril Dictionary). Normally it wouldn't matter. We wouldn't bother to spend a Sunday evening critiquing the plethora of novels that end up on the shelves of Exclusive Books and C.N.A. But this one is different. Hundreds of S.A.'s are reading a book based on misinformation about Jesus. Christians and the church should be making a response.

## What Is It About?

The *DC* is basically a pulp fiction murder mystery. One reviewer described it as an 'airport novel'. But it is well written and has been well marketed. Harvard Professor of Religious Symbology, Robert Langdon is awakened in the middle of the night by an urgent phone call. The concierge informs him that the French police are already on the way up to his hotel room. Jacques Sauniere, the highly regarded curator of the Louvre has been murdered inside of the famous art museum, and mysterious symbols have been discovered on and around his body. Professor Langdon was only visiting Paris to talk about the release of his new book on religious symbolism. But now he is being asked to go with the police to the scene of the crime to help them solve this intriguing murder.

The clues surrounding Saunier's body brings Langdon into contact with cryptologist, Sophie Neveu. Together they discover that Saunier was a senior member of a religious sect known as *The Priory of Sion*, of which the great Leonardo Da Vinci had also been a high-ranking member. For centuries, this mysterious society has been entrusted with the duty of guarding the greatest secret of all time – a secret that, if revealed, would rewrite history and shake the Christian Church to its very foundation. Now as two of the few remaining people in the world capable of deciphering and unlocking the secret of the *DC*, Langdon and Neveu have inherited some very powerful and dangerous enemies. If the two can't crack the code and get to the secret before their foes, then the truth will be lost forever.

Now the secret is the location of the Holy Grail. The Novel races through the streets of Paris into the French countryside and eventually to London. There's a maze of codes, riddles and symbols which lead Langdon and Neveu to the final location of the Holy Grail. The *DC* has to do with the location or identity of the Holy Grail.

Let me briefly give you some background on the Holy Grail. According to legend, which goes back over a 1000 years, and was recently popularised by Monty Python, the Holy Grail is the cup that Jesus used during the last supper from which they drunk the wine. That cup was then used by Joseph of Arimathea to (according to legend) collect blood from the crucified Christ on the cross. One version of the legend is that Joseph brought the cup to Glastonberry in South England. Its whereabouts is now shrouded in mystery. In Dan Brown's book, the secret code which Langdon, Teabing and Sophie eventually discover is that the Holy Grail is not an object, but a person. So, to quote Brown; The Holy Grail is Mary Magdalene, the mother of the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ. So, at the heart of the Book, is the discovery of the secret code – that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were sexual partners, and they had a daughter, Sarah. When Jesus died, Mary and Sarah travelled to France. There Sarah married, had children and established a royal French dynasty called the Merovingian Dynasty. This French dynasty constitutes the bloodline of Jesus to this present day, and it is to be found in this secret organisation, the Priory of Sion. According to Brown, the Priory of Sion was founded in 1099, and included Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, and of course, Leonardo Da Vinci. They were able to preserve the information about the real Jesus through various codes, the most important being the secret code painted by Da Vinci in the Last Supper.

May I just say at this point (there won't be time to come back to this). I've consulted biographies of Leonardo Da Vinci this past week. There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever amongst respected mainline historians who've studied Leonardo Da Vinci, that he deliberately put encoded messages into his paintings. That's Dan Brown's fiction; it's not fact. So the book should have been called *Dan Brown's Code*, not the

*Da Vinci Code*. There wasn't a Da Vinci Code. My purpose is to unravel Dan Brown's Code, (there is no Da Vinci Code to unravel), and I'll try to show you the real facts behind Dan Brown's code.

The bad guys in the book are the Catholic Church and especially Opus Dei, which is a powerful conservative Catholic organisation. Opus Dei believed that if this information was made public it would destroy the Christian faith and the church would be exposed as a fraud. So we're introduced to Silas, the albino monk, a key player in the 600 pages, who is really the church's enforcer, taking out those who seek to find the secret manuscripts. In fact, for me personally, the role of Silas, tells me it is all just a big pretend, which is the job of the 'airport novel'. However, Dan Brown wants us to believe that it's based on historical facts. It's not based on historical facts – it's based on fiction. Though the characters and storyline are fictional, nevertheless, in my opinion, there is a very definite agenda behind the book and the plot line, and I think his agenda is to overturn some of the central beliefs of the Christian faith. To deny the authenticity and historicity of New Testament documents is his agenda.

Dan Brown wants us to read the book as historical fiction. What does he mean by that? Though the characters and the plot are fiction, he wants us to think it's based on real history and real fact. For example, on the opening page of the book, it says:

*Fact: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate"*

So although it's a novel and fiction, Dan Brown wants us to understand it's fact and based on history, and on two separate interviews in late 2003 on ABC & NBC Dan Brown reiterated that statement.

If what Dan Brown writes in this novel is true, it would mean that the deity of Christ was only established in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by a closed vote of bishops. It would mean that there are hidden documents, which, if found, would show that Jesus was merely a man; a man who had sexual relations with Mary Magdalene, and that they had a daughter called Sarah, and that his bloodline is still alive today. If Dan Brown's claims are true, it means that the church has suppressed all this information, and presented a one-sided account of the faith that the gospels and New Testament documents are unreliable.

So what we have here is more than just a novel; it's an attack on the Christian faith and the beliefs of the Christian faith, and actually on Christ Himself. That's why it's important for us to spend this time examining this book and its claims.

David Kunghoffer – National Review, 8 December 2003: *“What is at stake in the Da Vinci Code is nothing less than traditional Christianity itself. If true it would overturn the traditional views of Christians.”*

### **Why Are so Many People Reading the Book?**

We live in a biblically illiterate culture. Most people reading the book don't know the Bible, and for most of them the Da Vinci Code is the only book they will ever open which makes claims about the formations of the Bible. Most of the readers of the DC have no real historical information with which to critique (ask questions about) what they read in the DC. It also makes fashionably indignant noises about the attitude to women in Christian history, and the book comes at a time when we are highly receptive to conspiracy theories and the idea of secret organisations. It's also a time when some mainline (especially Roman Catholic) churches have been exposed for past abuse and deceptions. I wonder whether the book would have been such a hit 10 years ago.

A quick word regarding Dan Brown's sources.

Samuel Cox (not a Christian, but a critic) says: *“Dan Brown undoubtedly drew on a small handful of books for his main themes and background material. For the general idea that there exists a bloodline of Christ, and that this was through the union of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, along with the theory that a secret society known as the Priory of Sion exists to keep this arcane secret safe, Brown has used the controversial best-seller, ‘Holy Blood, Holy Grail,’ by Michael Baigent, Henry Lincoln and Richard Leigh, as his basis. For the idea that Leonardo Da Vinci encoded some of these themes and secrets into his paintings he has turned to ‘The Templar Revelation’, by Lyn Picknett and Clive Prince, and for his material on Mary Magdalene and the Sacred Feminine he has used ‘The Woman with the Alabaster Jar’ by Margaret Starbird. Those who have read ‘The Da Vinci Code’ will be familiar with the fact that these three books adorn the bookshelf of the fictional Grail scholar, Leigh Teabing, at his home, Chateau Villette. The books are named, but their authors are not.”*

**How Should We Respond to the Phenomenal Success of This Novel?** (And, inevitably, its corrosive effect on the gospel in popular opinion)

As Churches around the world are doing, we call a meeting like this to try to respond to some of the obvious errors of the book, and to help Christians who perhaps feel ill-equipped to respond to the book's claims. With the movie due to be released in 2005, it seems as though the issue is going to remain current for some time.

Many of the conspiracy theories found in the book surrounds the 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman Emperor, Constantine. The motive, according to Brown, is that by 325 AD Christianity had spread so rapidly in the Empire that it was threatening to take over pagan Rome, therefore the politically astute Constantine, though a pagan at heart, decided to back the winning horse and convert to Christianity. Once he had his foot inside the church, he used his influence to rewrite the Jesus story to suit his own agendas. In the process, according to Brown, it gave the 4<sup>th</sup> century church a power-monopoly by squashing all other versions of the Jesus story. According to Brown's Da Vinci theory, the truth regarding the real Jesus has been hidden away for centuries waiting for the right moment to be revealed. Let's take a closer look at some of the key components of the theory:

**“The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor, Constantine the Great, in 325 AD”** (The Da Vinci Code, p.231)

### **Did Constantine compile the modern Biblical canon (or definitive list of authoritative books)?**

According to Brown's Da Vinci theory, Constantine's first step in his political scheme was to create his own authoritative Bible that was based only on the documents that best served his purposes. However, the historical facts of this matter are that the 66 books of our modern Bible were recognised as authoritative Scripture long before the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, and the emperor Constantine had nothing to do with bringing these books together. Biblical scholars agree that the current books of the Old Testament were already in use and being treated as sacred Scriptures centuries before the time of Christ.

The Council of Jamnia in 90AD reaffirmed the books of Old Testament Canon more than two centuries before Constantine, so Constantine had no influence over the Old Testament (and the O.T. comprises 2/3 of the modern Christian Bible). However, the books of the New Testament Canon were not officially finalised until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but that doesn't mean that the early Christians didn't have any idea about which N.T. books were or weren't to be viewed as God's word. In fact we know that the early Church leaders were already quoting the 4 gospels as Scripture by the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. An important early Christian document known as the Muratorian Fragment (dated about 170 AD) includes in its list 22 of the eventual 27 N.T. books that were eventually included in the Canon. That means that at least 61 out of 66 books of our (modern) Bible were already treated as sacred Scripture almost a century before Constantine was even born.

Let me summarise this section by quoting from Darrell Bock's book: *'Answers to the Questions Everyone's Asking Regarding the Da Vinci Code'*:

*"This council and the creed represented what a sizable number of Christian communities had believed for more than 2 hundred years. That was a major reason this view found support at this council. The Nicene Creed put in precise philosophical and theological language what had been expressed in more general terms for years. It also affirmed which texts taught such views. What is more, the four Gospels highlighted at this council had been solidly established and recognized in these communities for more than a century before Nicea. The vote at Nicea, rather than establishing the church's beliefs, affirmed and officially recognized what was already the church's dominant view. The canon and how we got it is a story that starts with beliefs about Jesus."*

Now, having said that, Brown is right in saying that there were other (non-biblical) records that existed about Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, but the truth surrounding these other sources about Jesus' life and why there are now only four gospel accounts in the N.T. is far less intriguing than what is suggested by Brown's conspiracy theory.

Just like modern believers, first century Christians also wanted accurate details of the life of the person they called 'Lord' and 'Saviour'. We need to keep in mind that under the emperor Nero, many first century Christians faced intense persecution and even death, simply for following Jesus. If these believers were going to suffer and die for their faith in Jesus, then it only makes sense that they would have wanted to know the truth about His life and His teaching. Biblical Christians have never been willing to accept just any written account of Jesus' life, but only those that can be historically connected to the Apostles and Prophets; this too is confirmed by the apostle Paul's companion, Luke, in the dedication of his gospel:

*"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us... Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."*  
(Luke 1:1,3-4)

So, to help him establish his plot, Brown takes some of his information from and puts forward the Gnostic Gospels as contenders for sources of information about the life of Jesus versus traditional historical gospel accounts of Jesus' life. Besides the fact that the Gnostic Gospels were not considered to be sufficiently historically reliable to be

included in the Canon by the early church leaders there are two other major problems with these Gnostic writings.

1. Most scholars agree that the Gnostic writings were written at least a century too late for them to have been authored by the people after whom they are named. For example, Thomas, Philip and Mary. They are 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century writings; by then Thomas, Philip and Mary, etc, were dead. Yet this is where Dan Brown is getting his views from, eg., Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.
2. Secondly, the Gnostic gospels are comprised of alleged sayings of Jesus, written down without historical setting or context. They obviously assume that the reader already knows who Jesus is (a vital detail that the first century gospel writers couldn't and didn't take for granted). Furthermore, although the Gnostic gospels do record some teachings of Jesus found in the canonical gospels, they contain obvious Gnostic embellishments. They are a different genre to the four biblical gospels; they do not give actual details – time, place, etc., of the life of Jesus. Therefore, these documents were never serious contenders for the Biblical canon. In fact, even the famous second century Gnostic leader, Marcion, did not list these Gnostic writings as part of his canon, but only books found in our current New Testament! So at the end of the day, the church included only our four gospels because these were considered to be accurate accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and because they contained the authoritative testimonies of Jesus original disciples.

Therefore, there is ample evidence to prove that Constantine had nothing to do with bringing together the books of the Bible, or with conspiring to keep certain books out of the Bible. In fact, the Biblical canon wasn't finalised until about 30 years after Constantine's death.

Did Constantine have a hand in embellishing the Biblical documents? Dan Brown says:

*“To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history – Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike.”*  
(The Da Vinci Code, p.234)

And elsewhere the claim is made by Teabing, one of the characters in the book, that these issues of Christ's divinity and humanity were decided by the votes of

the bishops at the Council of Nicea – 316 for and 2 against. In regard to the New Testament, I have already mentioned that the early Church leaders were quoting from our current New Testament books as early as 95 – 100 AD. Furthermore, the Bodmer Papyrus contains large portions of John and Luke’s gospels, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude. These manuscripts pre-date Constantine by more than a century, and yet are similar to our current versions of these books. These documents can be viewed at <http://biblefacts.org/history/oldtext.html#P66>. There are literally thousands more very early New Testament manuscripts in existence in museums and libraries around the world (and on the web), far more than for any other ancient literary work. By comparing these manuscripts with our current New Testament, it is easy to prove that the original 1<sup>st</sup> century New Testament documents have been reliably passed down to us. Frederick Kenyon, former director of the British Museum in London, and a leading expert on ancient manuscripts has stated in regard to the authenticity of our New Testament documents,

*“The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for a doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed.”* (The Bible and Archaeology. 1940, pp. 288 f.)

3. **“Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false.”** (The Da Vinci Code, p235)

***“Until (the time of Constantine), Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet ... a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal. Not the Son of God.”*** (The Da Vinci Code, p.233)

Interestingly enough, we don’t even have to turn to the Bible to prove that Christians believed that Jesus was more than a mere mortal, long before the time of Constantine. For example, in 112 AD the Roman governor, Pliny, records that,

*“Christians were in the habit of meeting regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god.”* (Pliny, Letters x.96)

The first century Jewish historian, Josephus, also speaks of Jesus being a wonder worker and of His followers’ belief in His resurrection. The Roman historian Tacitus, a contemporary of Pliny and an obviously hostile critic of the Christian movement, writes of Christ’s crucifixion and of ‘the deadly superstition’

that broke out among His believers after Christ's death (almost certainly referring to His resurrection).

Clearly, Christians did believe that Christ was more than just a man, long before Constantine. But Brown doesn't just suggest that Constantine embellished Jesus' godlike traits. He also asserts that Constantine edited out the gospels that spoke of Christ's humanity.

***“Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits...”*** (The Da Vinci Code, p.234)

This is a bizarre notion since Jesus' humanity is as central to Christian doctrine as is His deity. In fact, some of the early heresies that the church fought against had to do with the belief that Jesus wasn't truly human, but instead was like an angelic figure.

Because the Biblical doctrine of the incarnation of Christ is so important to the Christian faith, the four gospels are filled with references to Jesus human traits. In these gospels we are told of Jesus' birth and given his human ancestry (Matthew 1). We are told that He grew in physical maturity and understanding (Luke 2:52); that He felt hunger (Luke 4:2), that He felt tired and slept (Mark 4:38); that He felt overwhelmed (Matthew 26:36-38); and, most significantly, that He died (John 19:28-30). In fact, the charge of blasphemy that led to Jesus' crucifixion was based on the fact that Jesus was making Himself out to be like God, although He appeared to be a mere man (John 10:31-33). So the notion that Constantine edited out all mentions of Jesus that made Him appear human is clearly not true.

Then, very quickly to bring up one of the ideas that run throughout the book.

P.331 – Teabing

*“Sophie read the passage from the Gospel of Philip (written 250-399AD). ‘And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, ‘Why do you love her more than all of us?’ The words surprised Sophie, and yet they hardly seemed conclusive. ‘It says nothing of marriage.’ ‘Au contraire.’ Teabing smiled, pointing to the first line. ‘As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant*

*spouse.’ Langdon concurred with a nod. Sophie read the first line again. ‘And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene.’*

So it's the old idea from the book I mentioned earlier, the Holy Blood, Holy Grail; that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Christ and the bearer of his daughter, Sarah who perpetuates a whole dynasty on the line of David. The Dynasty goes on to become the Merovingian line of the kings of France, eventually being driven underground and protected by a secret society, the Priory of Sion.

What do we know about Mary? She appears, surprisingly only 4x in the N.T.; with a travelling entourage, at the Crucifixion, at the burial of Christ, and at the resurrection. One thing we can say for certain: the long held belief that Mary Magdalene was a repentant prostitute is a false one. And so the conclusion reached by Simon Cox (not a Christian) is; “There is no direct evidence of such a union between Christ and Mary Magdalene.” (Pg.10 in the introduction)

As Daryl Bock says, had Jesus married, such a woman would hardly have disappeared without any historical trace. He goes on to say: *“In my office there are 38 volumes of early church documents, each of several hundred pages, double columns, in small print. The fact that out of all this material, only 2 texts can be brought forward as even ancient candidates for the theory shows how utterly unlikely it is.”*

(I add. Those 2 texts belong to the Gnostic Gospels I mentioned earlier, which in the view of many scholars are extremely unreliable, having been written at least 100 years later than the biblical gospels.)

A good question then is, where does Brown get his information from, that Jesus and Mary were married, had children, that the bloodline is still alive? Remember the Priory of Sion, one of the oldest secret societies still in existence? They were charged with guarding the secret of the Holy Grail. According to Brown, the Priory of Sion started in 1099 when the Knights Templar discovered long lost documents beneath the ruins of Solomon's temple. From those documents we get this information. What you need to know is that it is a complete hoax. Dan Brown got his information from a book published in 1982 called “Holy Blood, Holy Grail”. In fact, he mentions and quotes from the book in the novel. It's written by Bagent, Lee and Lincoln. They relied on documents supplied by a man called Pierre Plantard, who was a Frenchman. You need to know something about Pierre Plantard, because this is where this whole theory comes from. Brown got it from the Holy Blood, Holy Grail and Holy Blood, Holy Grail got it from Plantard. He was a butler born in 1920 and died in 2000 at age of 80. He's described as an odd ball in two French Secret Service reports. He was imprisoned in

1953 for 6 months for fraud and embezzlement. In 1954, with 3 others he started an organisation called The Priory of Sion, taking the name from a nearby mountain. The organisation's cause was for more low cost housing in France. The organisation disbanded in 1957, but Plantard held on to the name. From 1961 – 1985 he created a series of articles 'proving' the existence of a bloodline descending from Jesus and Mary Magdalene, through the kings of France, down to the present day, which included Pierre Plantard. In 1993 Plantard's name came up in a political scandal involving a close friend of the then President of France, President Francois Mitterand. Plantard had in one of his documented lists of the Priory of Sion, listed Roger Patrise as grand master. When called before the court, under oath, he admitted that he'd made up the whole Priory scheme. The court ordered a search of Plantard's house, which revealed further documents claiming Plantard to be the true king of France. The judge gave Plantard a stern warning, and dismissed him as a harmless crank.

There we have the true source re Dan Brown's theory of the Priory of Sion who was the organisation guarding this secret.. There is no evidence of this story of Jesus being married to Mary Magdalene and having a bloodline. There's no evidence in N.T. gospels or the Gnostic gospels, and there's no evidence anywhere else. This comes from *'Holy Blood, Holy Grail'* and they got it from Pierre Plantard.

It seems to me, on the basis of evidence that what we have here is a hoax. There's nothing wrong with fiction except where it claims, as this book does, to have a historical basis for it.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The roots of the Da Vinci Code and its real argument is fuelled by the arguments of a new school of theology (emanating mainly from the eastern seaboard of USA). Their claim is that Christianity needs a new story because the old one was bad historically in which the suppressed losers were denied a hearing. Injustice needs correcting. The technical term is 'revisionist history'. In effect, the early church is called a liar. So the agenda of the new school is the rejection of the Christian faith as a historically united set of core beliefs held over centuries starting from the earliest centuries. If this new school is right then the Man who gave us the gospels, the New Testament, the Christian Church, and other Christian movements, Christmas, Easter, our system of dating history (AD and BC), the symbol of the cross, and the hope of resurrection is nothing more than an embellished fraud.

If the Da Vinci Code is right, Brown's mere man and misunderstood Messiah is not the same Jesus of history who came as the Son of God to die for the sins of the world.

Either Jesus really is God's appointed Saviour of the world , or the entire Christian message is the greatest hoax of all time.

As I've tried to show, the book's claims are quite easily refuted, and as Christians we need to know what the answers are. The D.C. is yet another reminder to us that through the centuries the gospel message has been subject to almost every attack imaginable. But whereas Dan Brown seems to hide his critique of Christianity behind secret codes of fictitious documents and completely unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, in contrast the Biblical testimony about Jesus has been openly proclaimed and intentionally circulated since the time of Christ, and it still stands the test of time.

Like Christians in every age we have to defend the historicity of the gospel event, and the integrity of the scriptures on which our faith is founded.