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# Decoding the Da Vinci Code (The Associate Editor's Desk)

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Gerhard Pfandl

Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* has been shown in cinemas around the world. The film, based on the life of Christ, has been glorified and vilified, debated and debunked. Leon Wieseltier, the editor of *The New Republic*, said *The Passion* is "a repulsive, masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film" that is "without doubt an anti-Semitic movie,"<sup>21</sup> and Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* accused Gibson of "courting bigotry in the name of sanity."<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, the book *The Da Vinci Code*, clearly identified as a novel, has been hailed as a "compelling blend of history and page turning suspense," a "masterpiece" that should "be mandatory reading."<sup>23</sup> *The Publisher's Weekly* called the book "an exhaustively researched page-turner about secret religious societies, ancient cover-ups and savage vengeance."<sup>24</sup>

It is ironic, yet symptomatic for the times in which we live, that the

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historical event of Christ's passion, made into a film, is called "a repulsive, masochistic fantasy" while a fictional conspiracy theory implicating a major world religion, the Catholic Church, is described as "a compelling blend of history and page turning suspense."

### The Plot

This "page-turner" begins with the murder of a French museum curator who was involved in the Priory of Sion—a secret society whose members, it is claimed, included Leonardo da Vinci. Sophie, a French cryptologist, and the victim's granddaughter, and Robert Langdon, a scholarly Harvard professor, are commissioned to decipher a cryptic message left by the curator before his death. In solving the enigmatic riddle, they are stunned to discover a trail of clues hidden in the paintings of da Vinci. They leave Paris for England one step ahead of the police—and of a character named Silas, a mad albino monk who works for

Opus Dei, a Roman Catholic organization, and who will stop at nothing to prevent them from finding the Holy Grail, which is at the center of this mystery novel. In the course of the story, the reader is confronted with a barrage of codes, puzzles, mysteries, and conspiracies. When Sophie and Robert finally solve the code, they discover that the Holy Grail was not the cup Jesus Christ allegedly used at the Last Supper but the body of Mary Magdalene. She was the vessel that held the blood of Jesus Christ in her womb while bearing His child.

### The Priory of Sion

The book makes two initial claims that are not supported by history. On page one, the book claims as fact: (1) the Priory of Sion is a real European secret society; and (2) in 1975, Paris's Bibliothèque Nationale discovered parchments known as Les Dossiers Secrets, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Sandro Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo da Vinci.

The Priory of Sion was supposedly founded in Jerusalem in 1099 by a crusading French king named Godefroi de Bouillon. Its purpose, according to the author, Dan Brown, was to preserve a great secret that had been handed down from generation to generation of Godefroi's ancestors since the time of Christ.

Hidden documents buried beneath the ruins of the temple in Jerusalem allegedly corroborated this secret.

And the great secret they supposedly sheltered was Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene, which resulted in a daughter named Sarah. Jesus' bloodline supposedly continued through the Merovingian dynasty of French kings and survives even today. The Priory of Sion exists, Brown claims, to keep a watchful eye over the descendants of Jesus and Mary and wait for the perfect moment to reveal the secret to the world.

The facts are that in the 1950s, a man by the name of Pierre Plantard began promoting himself in Catholic circles as the Merovingian pretender to the throne of France. In 1956, Plantard and others created a society named the Priory of Sion, a right-wing political action group. Plantard's hoax was actually exposed in a series of French books and a BBC documentary in 1996, but this news—fortunately for Dan Brown—has not reached too many of his readers. Plantard turned out to be an anti-Semite with a criminal record for fraud, while the real Priory of Sion is a little splinter social group founded half a century ago. Thus the most important strand in the central plot of *The Da Vinci Code* is a total hoax.

### Christian History Under Attack

*The Da Vinci Code* portrays Christianity—and specifically the

Catholic Church—as the real villain of the story. The many outrageous and false claims scattered throughout the book include:

1. Not the canonical Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John but the Gnostic gospels are the earliest gospels. The book's fictional historian, Sir Leigh Teabing, claims that more than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament and that only four were chosen. The rest, many of which, he claims, were earlier than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were suppressed.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, there are only about 35 extant non-canonical gospels, and there is general agreement among scholars of all persuasions that the canonical Gospels were written in the first century A.D., while the non-canonical gospels, also called Gnostic gospels, come from the second and third century A.D. Gnosticism, from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge,” was an early Christian heresy in the second and third centuries that sought to combine Christianity with various ancient philosophical systems from Greece, Persia, and India. Gnostics claimed to have secret knowledge from and about Jesus not contained in the New Testament. They produced books like the gospels of Thomas, Philip, and Mary, which contained sayings of Jesus and stories about His life not contained in the canonical Gospels. In rewriting the life of

Christ, Dan Brown relies heavily on the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Mary. The historical record, however, clearly indicates that the Gnostic gospels were written no earlier than the late second or early third centuries. Nevertheless, in *The Da Vinci Code*, these books are portrayed as the real gospels.

2. Jesus was considered by His followers as a mortal prophet. He was deified by the Roman emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D.

The historical fact is that Jesus was worshiped as God from the first century on. In the New Testament, Jesus is called God a number of times (John 20:28; Phil. 2:5, 6; Titus 2:13), and He repeatedly accepted the worship of human beings (Matt. 14:33; 28:9; John 9:38). The Council of Nicea in 325 did not deify Jesus; it merely formalized and clarified the first-century belief that Jesus was God in human flesh. New Testament scholar Darrell L. Bock says, “The deity of Jesus was not a creation of a fourth century vote or council but is based on the teaching of the four Gospels and the other New Testament books. These four canonical Gospels are rooted in apostolic tradition, and they were firmly established as the defining texts of the Christian Church by the end of the second century, if not earlier.”<sup>6</sup> The fictional Sir Leigh Teabing's claim that the vote at Nicea was a close

one<sup>7</sup> is also pure fiction. The vote to affirm Christ's divinity was a landslide: only two of the 318 bishops dissented.

3. Teabing claims that "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 earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burnt."<sup>8</sup>

There is not a shred of historical evidence for this claim. Though the complete New Testament canon with the 27 books we have today was not accepted by all the churches until the middle of the fourth century, most of the New Testament books were accepted as Scripture in the second century A.D., 200 years before Constantine. Second Peter 3:16 already refers to Paul's letters as Scripture; and the church fathers in the second century (Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus) quote from 24 of the 27 books of the New Testament, indicating that by that time the New Testament canon had by and large been established. Thus, if most of the books of the New Testament canon were already widely used 200 years before Constantine, how could the emperor have invented or altered them? The topic of the canon did not even come up at the Council of Nicea.

4. Brown's scholarly protagonist

Teabing claims that Jesus must have been married because he was a Jew,<sup>9</sup> and that he secretly married Mary Magdalene because, according to Gnostic writings, Jesus kissed Mary on the mouth and the disciples were jealous of their special relationship.<sup>10</sup>

To support his first assertion, Teabing says that, according to Jewish custom, every man had to get married. Celibacy, he claims, was condemned; therefore, Jesus, as a good Jew, must have been married. There is no historical evidence that Jesus was married, nor is it correct to say that all Jews had to marry. The Essenes, a Jewish sect in the first century, were largely celibate. The Jewish historian Josephus commends the Essenes for their lifestyle and says, "There are about four thousand men that live in this way, and neither marry wives, nor are desirous to keep servants."<sup>11</sup> As far as we know, John the Baptist was also not married. There is no reason to assume that Jesus could not have remained celibate, considering the mission He had to fulfill. Jesus' own teaching in Matthew 19:12: "There are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it" (NKJV) appears to be based on His commitment to His

mission and bachelorhood.

The second claim that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene is pure speculation. Since the New Testament provides absolutely no support for this assertion, Teabing must again resort to later Gnostic writings, particularly the Gospel of Philip (late third century A.D.). Teabing reads from the Gospel of Philip as if the text were clear and unambiguous, "And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalen. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on the mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval." The relevant portion is in fact fairly sketchy. The fragment from the Gospel of Philip reads, "And the companion of the . . . Mary Magdalen . . . Her more than . . . the disciples . . . kiss her . . . on her . . ." (63:33-36). Teabing makes a romantic relationship out of this passage, though the text could also be a reference to the holy kiss, a chaste kiss of fellowship, mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:20. But even if this is a reference to a romantic relationship between Jesus and Mary, it is the invention of a third-century Gnostic writer and not a historical fact based on evidence.

Other historically inaccurate statements in the book include the claims that the Jews worshiped Yahweh and His feminine counterpart, the Shekinah, in Solomon's temple

through the services of sacred prostitution; that thousands of secret documents disprove key points of Christianity; that the Dead Sea Scrolls speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms; and that "the modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda—to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use His influence to solidify their own power base."<sup>12</sup>

### The Relevance of *The Da Vinci Code*

Attempts to undermine the Christian tradition—to show that it is a fraud with no basis in history or reason—are not new. *The Da Vinci Code* is doing it on a popular level. For the past 20 years, a similar attempt on a scholarly level has been taking place in America through the Jesus Seminars. The Jesus Seminar is a group of New Testament scholars. The original 200 have dwindled to less than half that number, who focus on the sayings of Jesus within the four Gospels to determine the probability of His actually having said the things attributed to Him.

After discussing a statement of Jesus, they vote with different colored beads as to the probability that Jesus actually said what the Gospels claim He said. A red bead means Jesus undoubtedly said it; pink means He probably said it; gray means He did not say it, but the

ideas are close to His own; and black means He did not say it and the saying represents a later tradition. “Their voting conclusions: Over 80 percent of the statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are, by voting consensus, either gray or black. This means that only 20 percent of Jesus’ statements are likely to have been spoken by Him.”<sup>13</sup>

The Jesus Seminar is a scholarly attempt to replace the canonical Gospels—Matthew Mark, Luke, and John—with a speculative document known as Q (from the German word *Quelle*—“source”) and the second-century Gnostic Gospel of Thomas. Like the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Mary in *The Da Vinci Code*, the Gospel of Thomas is regarded as carrying more authentic traditions than the canonical Gospels. *The Da Vinci Code* and the Jesus Seminars, one popular and the other scholarly, are a concerted effort by the enemy of all righteousness to attack the very foundation of Christianity—the salvation history as recorded in the four Gospels.

### Conclusion

Since *The Da Vinci Code* was published in 2003, more than 30 million copies have been sold in 40 languages. Because many Christians are biblically and historically illiterate, they will be easily led astray by the fictional Sir Leigh Teabing’s “scholarly pronouncements” about

Christ, Mary Magdalen, and the history of Christianity. Through *The Da Vinci Code* the esoteric teaching of Gnosticism has become mainstream, and many readers will not recognize the blatant inaccuracies put forward as buried truths.

The Priory of Sion is a hoax; that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene is fiction; that He had a daughter is fiction; that the French Merovingian kings are the descendants of Jesus is fiction; that the Gnostic gospels were written before the canonical Gospels is fiction; and that Jesus was not recognized as divine until the Council of Nicea in 325 is fiction. Fiction is defined as “something feigned, invented, or imagined, a made-up story.”

### REFERENCES

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- <sup>5</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 231.
- <sup>6</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* (Nashville, Tenn.: Nelson Books, 2004), p. 153.
- <sup>7</sup> Brown, op. cit., p. 233.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 234.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 245.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 246, 247.
- <sup>11</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.5.20, 21.
- <sup>12</sup> Brown, op. cit., p. 234.
- <sup>13</sup> Jimmy Williams, “The Jesus Seminar”: <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/jesussem.html>. Downloaded on February 27, 2006.