

The Da Vinci Code—Decoded

from Art Lindsley's lecture at the C.S. Lewis Institute Seminar by the same title

by Art Lindsley, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute

I love a good novel, especially when it involves action, adventure, and mystery. *The Da Vinci Code* grabs your interest right at the start and doesn't let go. Except for a weak ending (we'll discuss that later), it doesn't disappoint as an action novel. What does disappoint is Dan Brown's attempt to turn a work of fiction into a "factual" attack on the foundations of Christianity.

Fact or Fiction?

This combination of readable fiction and "factual" claims contrary to Christianity has turned Brown's book into a surprise best-seller. It has sold over 6 million copies, been translated into over 40 languages, and will soon be made into a Hollywood movie directed by Ron Howard—a thrilling scenario for any author, but troubling for its problematic claims to so-called facts.

At the beginning of the book is a page labeled "Fact" claiming that certain secret documents were discovered in 1975 from the Priory of Sion (founded in 1099). At the bottom of the page is the statement: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." Presumably, this includes all the anti-Christian claims throughout the book. In interviews shortly after the book came out, Dan Brown seemed to indicate that he had come to believe that these various charges were true. It would be good to hear him answer questions about specific claims that he made, but, unfortunately, he is no longer granting interviews.

The "Fact" parts of the novel are mixtures of fascinating tidbits of esoteric knowledge, half-truths, and outright lies. When a novelist attempts to write history and theology, we can allow him some latitude. Rather than assuming he was consciously deceptive, I prefer to regard him as ignorant on some issues. Perhaps he listened to the wrong "experts" and thus would be willing to change his views if shown otherwise.

The Plot

The Da Vinci Code starts in Paris with the dramatic murder of Louvre curator Jacques Sauniere by an albino assassin (Silas) from a Roman Catholic order, Opus Dei. Before he died, the curator left a trail of symbolic clues leading to a deep, dark secret. Harvard professor of religious symbolism, Robert Langdon, is in town to meet with the curator and immediately becomes the prime suspect. Sophie

Neveu, police cryptologist and granddaughter of the curator, comes into the case, quickly takes Langdon's side, and helps him escape. She joins him in a cross-country race to find the Holy Grail all the while fleeing the police.

Along the way, they meet an expert, Leigh Teabing (Chap. 55f) who gives them *the* great secret: The Grail is not a cup, but the body of Mary Magdalene, Jesus' wife and the mother of a child that is ancestor to the kings of France. Somehow this secret knowledge will destroy the Church. Along the way, various other claims are put forth:

- "...that almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false." (p. 235)
- The Bible has had "countless translations, additions, revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book." (p. 231)
- At the Council of Nicea (325 AD), the Church decided to make Jesus into God. "Until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet." (p. 233)
- The vote on Jesus' divinity was "a relatively close vote." (p. 233)
- "More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament." (p. 231) Constantine made the choice.
- The Gnostic gospels discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 "highlight glaring discrepancies and fabrications... of the modern Bible." In these secret gospels we find the true original Jesus.

These and other contentions have shaken some people's faith and given fuel to those who don't believe. A recent visitor commented that *The Da Vinci Code* was the talk of dinner parties in educated circles in Europe. So, the impact is being felt in the U.S. and abroad.

What Are Brown's Sources?

I can locate at least four tributaries that flow into the river of information in *The Da Vinci Code*. First, and

most importantly, is a book called *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln. Note that Leigh Teabing's name is drawn from one author (Leigh) and the anagram of another (Baigent: letters rearranged = Teabing). This book talks about secret papers revealing the Priory of Sion and Mary Magdalene being the Holy Grail. Second, the Jesus Seminars' advocacy of the Gospel of Thomas. Third, the Sacred Feminine, from neopaganism, otherwise known as Wicca, the Craft or the Goddess movement. Fourth, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1971), by Elaine Pagels, who reinterpreted the significance of the Nag Hammadi texts. Numerous recent books have picked up on this fad.

Separating Fact from Fiction

Numerous little factual errors emerge as you look at Brown's book more closely. If small "facts" are inaccurate, what should that tell us about the larger claims the book makes?

- Mona Lisa is likely not Leonardo in drag (p. 120), but a real woman, Madonna Lisa, wife of Francesco di Bartolomeo de Giocondo — as documents contemporary to Leonardo claim.
- Leonardo is called a "flagrant homosexual." In fact, the only piece of evidence for this claim was that in the politically-driven Renaissance he was charged with sodomy as a young man, but the case was dismissed. Hardly enough for this broad generalization.
- The vote at Nicea (325 AD) was not close at all (p. 235). It was 316 to 2.
- The Gnostic Gospel of Philip doesn't say Christ kissed Mary on the mouth, (p. 246) because the words "Christ" and "mouth" are missing due to a damaged manuscript.
- The word "companion" used of Mary in the Gospel of Philip 63:34 could be stretched to mean "wife" (p. 246), but the Greek loan word (in the Coptic text) is *koinonos* (from which we get *koinonia* = fellowship). *Koinonos* means sharer, associate, companion, partner — more like fellow traveler, which is what Mary was. The specific word in Greek for wife is *gyne*.
- There was no smear campaign in the early church against Mary Magdalene (p. 244). Nobody said Mary was a prostitute till Pope Gregory the Great in 591 AD. Perhaps he confused the immoral woman of Luke 7 with Mary in Luke 8, out of whom is cast seven demons.
- The Dead Sea scrolls were discovered in 1947, not in the 1950s (p. 234).

- No gospels or Christian literature were found as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls (p. 234). There are definitely no gospels, and the few Greek fragments that have been claimed to be from Christian literature are extremely dubious according to one expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- That Mary Magdalene was included by DaVinci in *The Last Supper* (p. 243) is rejected by most art historians, including specialist Carmen C. Bambach, interviewed on *The Today Show*.
- Ancient Olympics were not held to honor Aphrodite but to honor Zeus.
- Knights Templar had nothing to do with building cathedrals.
- Silas is portrayed as the murderous "monk" of Opus Dei. The organization has no "monks."
- The Louvre Pyramid is said to have 666 panes; in fact, it has 673.

What are Brown's Major Claims?

We turn now to examine a few of Brown's major claims:

1. Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had a child.
2. Jesus' divinity was invented at Nicea (325 AD).
3. Eighty gospels were excluded to focus on four.
4. The Gnostic Gospels show us the true Jesus.
5. Christianity hurt the dignity, worth, and value of women.
6. The Priory of Sion was the keeper of the secret of the Holy Grail since 1099.

Let's examine them one at a time:

1. What is the historical evidence that Jesus was married?
Answer: NONE.

Jesus Seminar scholar John Dominic Crossan — by no means a partisan of traditional Christianity — said:

There is an ancient venerable principle of biblical exegesis (interpretation) which states that if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it must be a camel in disguise. There is no evidence that Jesus was married (looks like a duck), multiple indications that

he was not (walks like a duck), and no early texts suggesting a wife or children (quacks like a duck) ... so he must be an incognito bridegroom (camel in disguise). (See *Breaking the DaVinci Code*, p. 31-32)

Almost everyone maintains that Jesus chose to be single in order to focus on his ministry. But, what about Brown's claim that it was un-Jewish not to be married – that "the social decorum during that time virtually forbade a Jewish man to be unmarried" and that "celibacy was condemned" (p. 245). It is true that Jewish rabbis advocated being married, but exceptions were allowed to the general norm. Consider these facts:

- A respected group in Judaism of Jesus' day, the Essenes at Qumran (from which we got the Dead Sea Scrolls), were strong advocates of celibacy.
- Jesus taught that some (like himself) were called to be eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom (Matt 19:10-12).
- Paul, trained in the rabbinical school of Gamaliel, advocated a similar view of celibacy in I Corinthians 7. Some can choose to be single to give themselves to the work of ministry.
- Rabbinic opinion was not always absolute law.
- Even rabbis allowed postponing marriage in order to concentrate on study of the Law.
- Rabbi Simeon be'Assai never married – He taught that men should be married, but when asked why he was not married, he said: "What shall I do? My soul is enamored of the Law; the population of the world can be kept up by others."
- Wilderness prophets like John the Baptist and Banus (see Josephus Life 2:11) seem to have been unmarried.

Finally, even if Jesus was married and had children, that would be NO intrinsic obstacle to his divinity. Sex is good. Marriage is good. Family is good. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. There is no intrinsic problem with Jesus being married. The only problem is that there is no evidence that he was.

My biggest problem with *The DaVinci Code* as a novel is its weak ending. It ends with a whimper and a sigh. I would rather that the "secret" be revealed in the end and see what would happen. I'm sure Brown considered this type of ending. The problem (maybe Dan Brown realized this) is that the Church would have said, "So what?"

2. Was Jesus' divinity invented at Nicea? Was he "until that moment" thought to be "a mortal prophet" (p. 233)?

Answer: Absolutely not.

In my files I have four typewritten pages of verses that all point directly to Jesus' deity. Just a couple New Testament verses: Paul, writing in the 50s AD: Phil 2:6 – Jesus is the very "nature of God" (*morphe Theou*); Col 1:15-16 – He (Christ) is the "image of the invisible God ... by him all things were created." The classic verse is John 1:1 – "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

Also note quotes from various Church fathers before the Council at Nicea in 325 AD:

- "God Himself was manifested in human form." (Ignatius, 105 AD)
- "It is fitting that you should think of Jesus Christ as God." (Clement, 150 AD)
- "The Father of the universe has a Son. And He...is even God." (Justin Martyr, 160 AD)
- "He is God." (Irenaeus, 180 AD)
- "Christ our God." (Tertullian, 200 AD)
- "No one should be offended that the Savior is also God." (Origen, 225 AD)
- "He is not only man but God also." (Novatian, 235 AD)
- "Jesus Christ our Lord and God." (Cyprian, 250 AD)

(Above quotes from *Cracking DaVinci's Code*, p. 94)

Jesus' divinity was proposed from the beginning of Christianity, and Brown's claim that "until that moment in history (325 AD) Jesus was viewed as a mortal prophet" (p. 233) is clearly false. Whether he was deity or not is one kind of question. Whether he was believed to be deity (before 325 AD) is another. That he was believed to be God prior to Nicea is not in doubt.

3. Were eighty gospels excluded to focus on four?

Answer: Darrell Bock, in his helpful book, *Breaking the DaVinci Code*, says that this may be the most misleading statement of all (p. 62).

In the Gnostic Gospels found at Nag Hammadi, there are only five gospels – Truth, Thomas, Philip, Egyptians, and Mary. In Bentley Layton's *Gnostic Scriptures*, there

are only three gospels. Harvard professor Helmut Koester lists a total of 60 extra-biblical documents—most are not gospels.

With respect to the four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, they seem to have been accepted and circulated together from the earliest of times. Martin Hengel, German scholar, says that the Gospels first circulated between 69 AD and 100 AD. The case can be made [come to the C.S. Lewis Institute Conference, “Can You Trust the Bible?,” May 21-22, 2004 or order the conference recordings; see the back page of this issue] that the New Testament books were accepted as authoritative from the beginning. The Church didn’t create the canon (it only acknowledged those already accepted), but the canon created the Church.

Four-fifths of the New Testament books (the *prolegomena*) were universally accepted by all (including the four gospels). There were, to be sure, some like Marcion (90 AD-160 AD) who very early objected to the accepted books and attempted to alter the list. He put forth a truncated version of Luke and ten of Paul’s letters, all cleansed of Old Testament influences. The immediacy of the acceptance of Paul’s writings as authoritative is indicated in Peter’s referring to Paul’s writings as Scripture (II Peter 3:16). Paul, writing very early, refers to a passage from the Gospel of Luke as Scripture (I Tim 5:18; Luke 10:7). In Galatians 6:16 Paul talks about the rule to be followed—the *Kanon* [Gr.]—being the teachings of the apostles.

The Muratorian Canon, from 200 AD (or earlier) lists the books accepted everywhere including all our present New Testament books except for Hebrews, James, and I and II Peter. All the early Church fathers accepted the four gospels. There is no record of these other Gnostic gospels being accepted in the early church. (For a more detailed account, see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, as well as the books on *The Da Vinci Code* at the end of this article.)

4. Do the Gnostic Gospels show us the true Jesus? Does the Nag Hammadi discovery of Gnostic texts “highlight discrepancies and fabrications ... [of] the modern Bible”? (p. 234). Are these scrolls the “earliest Christian records”? (p. 245).

Answer: NO.

First, Gnosticism and Christianity are totally incompatible (See Bock, *Breaking the DaVinci Code*, chapter 4). Second, the argument for a pre-Christian Gnosticism tried by Bultmann in the last generation and by the Jesus Seminar and Elaine Pagels in this generation is very thin. For instance, the Gospel of Thomas found in full Coptic manuscript dated 350 AD (we have earlier Greek fragments) is argued to be as early or earlier than the four gospels. Why? Because it is similar to Q (from the German *quelle*, meaning “source”), the hypothetical—we don’t know

whether it ever existed—document containing the material, primarily sayings, that is common to Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. Since the Gospel of Thomas has only sayings, it is suggested, therefore, that the Gospel of Thomas is Q. The argument is a little more complex than that—but not much more so. (See *Thomas Gospel Tizzy* by J.P. Holding, found in the resources of <http://frontline.to>)

Consider that:

- (1) No one has ever seen Q—there is no early church evidence that it existed.
- (2) There is no need for Q to exist, because Luke could have used Mark and Matthew as sources (See Luke 1:1-4).
- (3) There is no reason to think that the Gospel of Thomas is Q or related to Q—except that it has sayings.
- (4) All the New Testament books, according to liberal scholar J.A.T. Robinson, can reasonably be dated earlier than 70 AD (*Redating the New Testament*).
- (5) The Gospel of Thomas in full manuscript in Coptic is dated 305 AD. Earlier Greek fragments may point to a date as early as 150 AD (but not earlier).

If you make the original Jesus a Gnostic and the Gospel of Thomas the earliest Gospel, then you have to explain the “invention” of a Jewish Jesus with such excellent early credentials:

- Paul had his gospel blessed by the first apostles in Jerusalem in the 30s AD. He wrote in the late 40s and 50s without any direct reference to Gnosticism.
- The early apostolic tradition goes from the apostle John to Polycarp to Irenaeus—without a hint of an “original” Gnostic Jesus.

It seems that the Jewish Jesus came first and then the Gnostic aberration came later, not the other way round. Proponents of Dan Brown’s position have to date the four Gospels as late as possible—against the evidence—and date the Gospel of Thomas—with no evidence—far earlier than seems justifiable.

Does the Gospel of Thomas exalt the sacred feminine? See Gospel of Thomas (Saying 114): “Simon Peter said to them ‘Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘See I am going to attract her to make her male so that she might become a living spirit that resembles you males. For every female that makes itself male will enter the Kingdom of heaven.’” It seems that this Gnostic was a sexist and was far from the superior view of the four gospels—and far from the Sacred Feminine Brown desires.

When Robinson wrote his book arguing that the whole New Testament can reasonably be dated earlier

than 70 AD, he took a lot of heat from fellow liberal scholars. C.H. Dodd (fellow scholar) wrote to J.A.T. Robinson, sympathizing with him:

You are certainly justified in questioning the whole structure of critical chronology of the New Testament writings, which avoids putting anything earlier than 70 AD so that none of them are available for anything like first generation testimony. I should quite agree that much of this late dating is quite arbitrary, even wanton, the offspring not of any argument that can be presented, but rather the position of the critics' prejudice that if he appears to assent to the traditional position of the early church he will be thought no better than a stick in the mud.

This same "quite arbitrary, even wanton prejudice" can be applied to those that date the Gospel of Thomas and other Gnostic gospels earlier than the Four Gospels. N.T. Wright says that the Gnostic writings disappeared from view because their writings have no narrative power. In other words, they are boring. In fact, if these were of the original Jesus, he would have disappeared from historical view in the first century.

5. Did Christianity hurt the dignity, worth, and value of women?

Answer: Yes and no.

There are to be sure tragic examples of sexism throughout the Church's history. If you look at these injustices, wrongs, and evils, the answer to the above question is "yes." However, if you look at the biblical teaching—that both male and female are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-28), you will find a basis for the equal worth, value, and dignity of men and women. The apostle Paul maintains that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). It is because of these and other biblical teachings that some in the Church have had a prophetic role in speaking against and reversing injustices to women. For instance:

- abolition of wife burning at funerals in India.
- abolition of foot binding in China.
- The feminist movement started in a Wesleyan Church in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848—hosted by Christians.
- Believers are at the forefront of the effort to stop sexual slavery in our time.

Mardi Keyes from the Boston L'Abri has sometimes spoken on a Christian view of feminism on secular college campuses. In such talks, her approach goes something like this: Your feminism is fueled by your view—rightly

so—that injustice, oppression, and evil things have been done to women. However, feminism has often chosen spiritualities that have no solid basis to call anything good or evil, just or unjust, right or wrong. Atheism has no basis for absolute moral values. Hinduism and Buddhism deny the ultimate distinction between good and evil. Even the most popular spirituality for radical feminism—neo-paganism, otherwise known as Wicca, the Craft, the Goddess movement (Dan Brown's Sacred Feminine)—strongly repudiates any absolute distinction between good and evil. It's only if you have a God who reveals a fixed standard for justice, good, and right that you have an adequate basis for injustice, evil, and wrong.

Mardi's argument is true and profound. Dan Brown's chosen spirituality, the Goddess movement or the Sacred Feminine, views good and evil as different sides of the same coin. At a meeting of neo-pagans, thirteen principles were agreed upon. One was "We do not accept any concept of absolute evil." Neo-pagan Erica Jong says, "Satanists...accept the duality between good and evil; pagans do not....Pagans see good and evil as allied, in fact, indivisible."

Starhawk, one of the best known advocates of the Goddess movement, says: "In Witchcraft, the dark waning aspect of the God is not evil—it is a vital part of the natural structure." Philip Davis, in his recent book *Goddess Unmasked*, says that neo-paganism's "denial of the transcendent essentially eliminates any foundation for absolute moral evil....In the goddess movement, consequently, the neo-pagan rejection of moral limits is most fully articulated in the realm of sex." It is this kind of relativism, the smashing of traditional moral boundaries, that is behind Brown's view of sex. However, once you pull the rug from under clear, fixed moral limits, you also have no clear basis whatsoever for the many moral judgments Brown has his characters make about Christianity, and other issues, including wrong treatment of women.

6. Was the Priory of Sion a keeper of the secret of the Holy Grail since 1099 as maintained on Dan Brown's "Fact" page?

Answer: It's all a hoax.

Supposedly, Knights Templar discovered a long lost document showing the history of this movement of which Leonardo DaVinci was said to be Grand Master from 1510-1519, and revealing the true nature of the "Holy Grail." Brown relies on the 1982 book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, and its authors relied on documents provided by Frenchman Pierre Plantard (who had spent time in jail for fraud in 1953). In 1954, Plantard and five other men started a small social club called the "Priory of Sion." (The club's first public notice was in 1956.) Its main goal initially was advocating low-cost

housing in France. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, Plantard forged a series of documents “proving” the existence of a bloodline from Mary Magdalene to the Kings of France. As early as 1971, one of Plantard’s club members, Philippe de Cherisey, publicly admitted that the parchments were forgeries. Plantard confirmed this fraud to French author Jean-Luc Chaumeil but later tried to redeem himself by saying that the forgeries were copies of original documents. Even later, he invented other documents with a whole new scheme, but Plantard made a fatal mistake—he listed one of the friends of the French president as a Grand Master of the Priory of Sion. In 1993, eleven years after *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, in a legal proceeding:

- Plantard testified under oath that he had made up the whole “Priory of Sion” scheme.
- The court ordered a search of Plantard’s house and found other documents “proving” that Pierre Plantard was the true King of France. The judge gave Plantard a stern warning and dismissed him as a harmless crank.
- Numerous books and articles (many French books and articles are untranslated) reveal Plantard’s hoax. Yet, millions of readers believe it to be fact. (For further information, go to Peter Jones and James Garlow’s excellent book *Cracking DaVinci’s Code* (pp. 112-113) or a helpful web site: priory-of-sion.com).

Conclusion

What about the central contentions of Brown’s book:

1. What evidence is there that Jesus was married to Mary? – *None.*
2. Was Jesus’ deity first thought up at the Council of Nicea, 325 AD? – *Absolutely not.*
3. Were 80 gospels excluded in order to keep four? – *This is a serious distortion of facts.*
4. Were the Gnostic Gospels about the true original Jesus? – *There is plenty of evidence against this idea and nothing of substance for it.*
5. Did Christianity help or hurt the dignity, worth, and value of women? – *Certainly, many Christians have hurt women in words and deeds. But, the revelation given in the Bible provides a solid basis to prophetically challenge such injustice, wrong words, or evil deeds. This solid moral ground is lacking in relativist views such as atheism, New Age, and above all in Dan Brown’s preferred Goddess spirituality.*
6. Was the Priory of Sion a keeper of the Secret of the Holy Grail since 1099? *No – this is Plantard’s hoax, which he admitted under oath in 1993 and documented in many articles and books since that time.*

This is not the end of the discussion or even the begin-

ning of the end (we still have a movie to endure), but it is perhaps the end of the beginning.

Recommended Resources:

BOOKS:

- Breaking the DaVinci Code*, by Darrell Bock (Thomas Nelson, 2004). *Excellent work documenting the evidence that Jesus was never married and giving a thorough discussion of the Gnostic Gospels.*
- Cracking DaVinci’s Code*, by Peter Jones and James Garlow (Victor, 2004). *Another excellent work; looks at aspects of the Goddess movement, the nature of our sexuality, the canon, the Priory of Sion, and other relevant subjects. Very readable.*

RECORDINGS:

- The Da Vinci Code Decoded*, a C.S. Lewis Institute Seminar, March 27, 2004 with speakers Art Lindsley and Catherine Sanders. Go to www.cslewisinstitute.org to order.

WEB SITES (as of March 2004):

- priory-of-sion.com
- frontline.to See especially “Resources.”



Dr. Art Lindsley

Dr. Art Lindsley is a Senior Fellow with the C.S. Lewis Institute where he has served since 1987. Formerly, he was Director of Educational Ministries of the Ligonier Valley Study Center and Staff Specialist with Coalition for Christian Outreach, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He received his B.S. (Chemistry) from Seattle Pacific University, an M.Div. from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and his Ph.D. (Religious Studies) from the University of Pittsburgh. He is author of the book, True Truth: Defending Absolute Truth in a Relativistic World (IVP, April 2004) and co-author with R.C. Sproul and John Gerstner of Classical Apologetics. Art, his wife, Connie, and their two boys, Trey and Jonathan, make their home in Arlington, Virginia.

Permission is granted to copy for personal and church use; all other uses by request.

© 2004 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300; Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind



*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*

