

The Bible and *The DaVinci Code*
Luke 1:1-4; Philippians 2:5-11
June 26, 2005

Dan Brown's murder mystery, *The Da Vinci Code*, has been on the best-seller list for over two years. A major motion picture is in the works. The book is a fascinating read which claims some radical notions about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Bible. These ideas offer us an opportunity to clarify what is known about the Bible and how it came to be, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and their relationship.

First, a brief synopsis of the plot: Jacques Sauniere, the renowned curator of the Louvre in Paris, has been murdered. Bizarre religious symbols left at the crime scene, drawn by the victim himself just before his death, lead investigators to seek the expertise of Robert Langdon, a master of religious symbology and professor at Harvard. He is joined by a police cryptographer, Sophie Neveu, who happens to be Sauniere's granddaughter; they have been estranged for ten years. They eventually learn that Sauniere was the head of a secret religious group known throughout history as the Priory of Sion, which has guarded the secret to the true nature and whereabouts of the Holy Grail. According to legend, the Holy Grail is the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper.

Langdon and Neveu go on an adventurous search to find the murderer and the long sought Holy Grail. They meet with Sir Leigh Teabing, a wealthy aristocrat and expert on the Grail, who discusses the historical background with them. Teabing explains that the Grail is not the cup of Christ but the container that held his seed—it is in fact a person, Mary Magdalene, who was Jesus' wife and lover, who became pregnant by him and bore him a daughter. After his crucifixion, Mary and her child fled to France, and there the divine ancestral line of Christ was continued down through the ages.

If this sounds like something you've never heard in church, that's true. According to Brown's fictional account, over eighty gospels were suppressed by Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. He supposedly destroyed all accounts that elevated Jesus from a mere mortal to the Son of God and silenced the tradition about Mary and the divine feminine. But for centuries, the Priory of Sion has known the truth about Mary and Jesus and harbored documents that told of this truth.

There is much to unpack in this thesis. This morning I want to share some historical background to help us discern what is actually known about the writings of the early Christian gospels, the role played by Constantine,

the historical Jesus, and the historical Mary. The source for much of this information is Bart Ehrman, Chairperson of the Religious Studies Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.¹

Jesus' public ministry took place in the late 20s of the first century CE. He was executed by the Romans sometime around 30 CE. The first Christian books were written sometime soon after that. The earliest Christian writings that survive are those of Paul, written around 50-60 CE. The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were probably written between 70 and 95 CE. The other books of the New Testament were written around the same time, with the latest, 2 Peter, possibly written as late as 120 CE. The New Testament books, in addition to some other early Christian literature not included in the New Testament, were written roughly between 50 and 120 CE. By the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century, hundreds of years before Constantine, Christians were already accepting some books as canonical. A canon is the authoritative list of books included as Holy Scripture.

There were four general criteria for selecting books for the New Testament. One was ancient, dating back to the time of Jesus. Second was apostolic, written by an apostle or a companion of the apostles. Third was catholic, meaning universal; this referred to books that had widespread acceptance among established churches. Finally, books were orthodox, representing a correct interpretation of Christ's teaching.

There was no resolution as to the complete content of the New Testament during Constantine's reign. This was not an issue dealt with by the Council of Nicea. It was nearly fifty years after Constantine's death that there was an understanding as to which books would be considered as the sacred canon.

Teabing erroneously says that more than eighty gospels were considered for inclusion in the New Testament and that Jesus may have kept a chronicle of his ministry. It is not known how many other Gospels were written; eighty are not available to scholars today, although about two dozen are known. It is not true that thousands of Jesus' followers wrote accounts of his life during his lifetime. As far as scholars know, no one did. Most likely Jesus' followers were illiterate. Most people in Jesus' time could not even write, let alone did they keep a journal of their own lives. There is no evidence to indicate that Jesus kept a record of his ministry or wrote anything.

In fact, we have no documents written by any eyewitnesses of Jesus' life. Given that Jesus' followers were peasants of the Jewish lower classes,

they were illiterate, unable to read or write. The gospel accounts we have of his life all come from later writers who were not among his immediate disciples. The four Gospels were written in Greek, by highly educated and well trained authors, some thirty to sixty years after Jesus' death. His followers, however, were Aramaic-speaking peasants from Galilee who did not speak Greek. These narratives were based upon oral traditions in circulation during the years after Jesus' death. The titles were added by second-century Christians, decades after the books themselves had been written, in order to claim that they were apostolic in origin.

In the early fourth century prior to Constantine, Christians were a small minority within the Roman Empire and subject to persecution by pagans and the government. The bulk of the population was pagans, who worshiped many gods. Christianity was unique in that it insisted that there was only one God, the God of Jesus, and this God alone was to be worshiped. However, pagans understood natural disasters to be punishments sent from their pantheon of gods because Christians refused to worship them. Thus Christians became victims of mob violence and imperial persecution.

Constantine established peace from the Christian persecutions in 313 CE, the year after he himself converted; it was not the year 325 as Leah Teabing indicates. Another fact contrary to Teabing's assertions is that Constantine did not remain a committed pagan his entire life. Upon his conversion experience in 312, Constantine certainly began to see himself as a Christian in some sense, even though he appears to have simultaneously continued to worship the sun god for a time. The next year the Edit of Milan brought an end to the pagan-Christian hostilities by providing freedom of religion for all people in the empire, Christian, pagan, and Jew, to worship whichever god(s) they chose. Teabing is correct in saying that Constantine was not baptized until he was on his deathbed in 337, but at that time it was not uncommon for Christians to wait to receive baptism until the end of their lives.

The significant event of 325 was not the unification of the empire behind Christianity, as Teabing implies. That was already in the process of happening. Christianity itself was torn over several fundamental issues. In 325 Constantine called a council of Christian bishops to resolve problems that had been causing internal squabbles among the Christians. The gathering was held in the city of Nicea and is therefore called the Council of Nicea. The council was not to decide whether or not Jesus was divine; it was already a matter of consensus that Jesus was divine, the Son of God.

The question debated was how to understand Jesus' divinity in light of the fact that he was also human. Moreover, how could both Jesus and God be God if there is only one God? Contrary to Teabing's indications, Christians before Nicea already accepted Jesus as divine; the Gospels of the New Testament portray him as human as well as divine; and the gospels not included in the New Testament also portray him as divine as much as human.

Another error in Teabing's discourse is the idea that Constantine commissioned a "new Bible" that omitted references to Jesus' human traits. Constantine didn't commission a new Bible at all. The historical reality is that he had nothing to do with the formation of the canon of scripture. He did not choose which books to include or exclude. He did not order the destruction of the Gospels that were left out of the canon. The formation of the New Testament canon was a long process that began centuries before Constantine and did not conclude until long after he was dead. Based on the historical record, Constantine was not involved in the formulation of the Bible at all. Regarding the omission of references to Jesus' humanity, the books that are included in the Bible are full of indications of Jesus' human traits: he gets hungry, tired, angry, and upset; he weeps, bleeds, and dies.

Undoubtedly the most radical suggestion in *The DaVinci Code* is the idea that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and that she bore him a child after the crucifixion.

In the first century, women were typically under the authority of the men in their lives. The vast majority of women were peasants who would have spent most of their time at home working. Jesus appears to have involved women in his public ministry. He was accompanied by women in his travels; women provided him with financial support; he helped women in need on several occasions. The women who went with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem during the last week of his life were present at his crucifixion when all of the male disciples fled. All four gospels indicate that women followers were the first to believe that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb. Jesus' association with women is congruent with his preaching about the kingdom of God in which there would be a reversal of fortunes.

While Jesus did not consider women inferior, as was customary in his patriarchal society, none of the early Christian sources refer to Jesus' marriage or to his wife. His mother, father, brothers, and sisters are mentioned, but never a wife.

It is also not necessarily true that Jewish men were expected to be married and that celibacy was “condemned.” There were Jewish men of the time who were single and not “condemned” for it. The tradition of remaining single and celibate was found in the same theological circles as Jesus. The Essene community which produced the Dead Sea Scroll was comprised of predominately single, celibate men. Jesus’ worldview, as recorded in the gospels, appears to emphasize the importance of single-minded devotion to the coming of the kingdom without the distraction of marriage.

Mary is called Magdalene to differentiate her from other Marys named in the New Testament, including Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She was from the town of Magdala, a fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. If people wanted to differentiate her from other Marys, why not indicate that this was the one to whom Jesus was married, rather than to name her hometown?

Mary Magdalene is mentioned a mere thirteen times in the four Gospels, compared to the ninety times Peter’s name occurs. She is said to have accompanied Jesus on his travels in Galilee and provided funds for his itinerant ministry out of her own pocket. She witnessed the last week of Jesus’ life, his crucifixion, and burial. She is the one credited with discovering Jesus’ empty tomb and was one of the first witnesses to the resurrection.

Legend has it that Mary was a prostitute; however, this is not based upon any biblical source. The idea came about 500 years after the gospels were written, when Pope Gregory the Great delivered a sermon in which he indicated that Mary Magdalene was none other than the woman of ill repute mentioned in Luke 7:36-50. But scholars do not find this identification credible.

Nor is there any evidence to indicate that Jesus entrusted the mission of his church to Mary; that Jesus married her; that he had sexual relations with her; or that she ever traveled to France. The earliest, most historically reliable sources do not tell us much about Mary Magdalene. The sources do not answer the kinds of curiosity-driven questions that our contemporary culture hungers to ask. We must be cautious in applying our creative imaginations to try to fill in missing information.

Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is a fascinating fictional novel. As with any work of historical fiction, it is important to discern what fact from fiction. Hopefully readers will be spurred to go back to the original sources, the Holy Scriptures, to probe their origins, contexts, settings, and the

fascinating history which they have had and the Christian community which they have created and continue to create.

If you haven't read it, you might want to add it to your summer reading list. Whether you have or haven't read *The DaVinci Code*, be sure that the Bible is on your daily reading list!

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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