

A LOOK AT THE DA VINCI CODE: THREE MAJOR ERRORS PLUS A FEW MORE

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Darrell Bock engages with yet another, and quite specific, expression of the contemporary spiritual climate, namely, the block-buster best seller, The Da Vinci Code. With sales figures second only to the Bible, what is the great intrigue? There is an important connection here with Partridge and Drane in that both recognise that there is a cultural quest for explanations – of the mysterious, the spiritual and the “other” – and acknowledge that the answers are not being sought within the traditional mainstream religions. The Da Vinci Code epitomises this issue by providing an exciting and seditious vehicle to devalue Christianity, and Bock carefully and meticulously uncovers the historical errors upon which Dan Brown frames his fictitious thesis. LS

There is little doubt that The Da Vinci Code has hit a cultural nerve. It has been on the bestseller list in various countries for several months. The combination of mystery, history, conspiracy and the use of romantic locations and figures has made it a popular piece of non-fiction.

The controversy surrounding the book stems from the author's claim that the backdrop to the novel is rooted in historical fact. In an interview on Good Morning America, a national morning television programme in the USA, Dan Brown declared, “I began the research for The Da Vinci Code as a sceptic. I entirely expected as I researched the book to disprove this theory, and after numerous trips to Europe and about two years of research, I really became a believer.”¹ His claims include: (1) Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalene; (2) the four Gospels were chosen from among several that existed in the fourth century because they presented a divine Jesus; and (3) the divinity of Jesus became orthodoxy by a close vote at the council of Nicea in AD 325. The key to the novel is that many in the Church knew that Jesus was married and to protect his divinity conspired to not let that become known, even to the point of murder. Now as fiction, this makes an intriguing story, but what about as a historical skeleton that lays claim to being almost quasi-non-fiction? There are three major problems in the book we shall look at before making an observation about the nature of our times that such a book can garner such numbers.

THREE MAJOR PROBLEMS PLUS

Problem 1 – Was Jesus married?

Basic to the storyline is the claim that Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalene and that many in the Church knew (as did people like Leonardo Da Vinci later on in history). The evidence for this claim comes from two extra-biblical Gospels, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and The Gospel of Philip. Both contain remarks that Jesus had a special relationship to Mary or that he loved her more than any of the twelve disciples. In addition, there is an appeal to a text where Jesus is said to kiss Mary on the lips. So the inference is that if he kissed her in public he must have been her husband.

Now the facts are these. First, almost all scholars question whether these extra-biblical Gospels contain anything of value in terms of the historical Jesus. However, even if they did, the texts noted do not actually affirm that Jesus was married. In fact, the famous kiss on the lips text actually has a blank in the original manuscript

right at the point where it describes where Mary was kissed. So it could be the lips or the cheek, which would simply refer to a kiss of fellowship. More than this, we have volumes of texts about Jesus from the first five centuries. I have a series in my library of 38 volumes from this period. They are small print, single space, double columned texts of several hundred pages each. They include traditional orthodox texts and those that were rejected as heretical. In all of these materials not a single text describes Jesus as married and most assume he was not, as that was a basis for some arguing that priests should be single. In 1 Corinthians 9, the argument appears that spouses of those married should be supported. Had Jesus been married, Paul could have clinched his argument by noting this fact. All of this leads to the conclusion that Jesus was single.

John Crossan and I were both asked to write articles for beliefnet.com about whether Jesus was married when the novel came out. He is a liberal; I am a conservative. We both agreed that Jesus was single. I tell my classes that when a liberal and a conservative believe something is true about the historical Jesus, then it probably is true. In sum, there is no evidence Jesus was ever married. If this is so, then entire backdrop to the novel collapses.

But one final point needs to be made. The novel claims that a married Jesus would need to be covered up by the Church because it would expose the fact that Jesus was not divine. However, it is not at all a given that, had Jesus been married, this would have resulted in a question about his divinity, because the Church has always confessed the full humanity of Jesus and the status of marriage would fit in nicely with such a claim. Thus, even the premise of the theological problem the novel sees for a married Jesus is false.

Problem 2 – The emergence of the Gospels

The novel also claims that the four New Testament Gospels were chosen late to be a part of the Bible because they had a divine Jesus as opposed to other Gospels that had a human Jesus. Once again, we are at a place where liberal and conservative scholars agree. The study of what is called the canon (or the recognition of the books that comprise the New Testament) is a complex area when it comes to the compilation of the entire New Testament. Athanasius in AD 367 is the first figure we have who lists the 27 books of the New Testament as we have them today. It may be that Dan Brown rested his view on this fact, although he never mentions it. However, this does not take into account the fact that the books that were under discussion in the third and fourth centuries were some epistles (e.g. 2 Pet, Jude, 2 and 3 Jn) and Revelation, and not any of the Gospels.

Scholars of the canon agree that by the end of the second century the fourfold Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) was recognised as authoritative. This is a full 125 years before Constantine and the Nicean Council came on the scene to do the defining work for orthodoxy according to the novel. The evidence for this includes: (1) Irenaeus' majestic description of the gospel needing to have four Gospels like the world has four zones and there are four winds. This text appears in his *Against Heresies* 3.11.8, a famous and oft-cited text from the end of the second century; (2) The attempt of Tatian to combine the Gospels into one running account in AD 170 in his *Diatessaron* failed. This effort on the surface appeared to make sense, but it failed because the four Gospels were already too well established in the Church to be replaced, even by a seemingly more efficient way to present the Gospels; (3) We also have a citation from Origen in the early third century that Gospels such as Thomas are not read in the churches because they are not seen as having authority; (4) Justin Martyr's description of the Gospels in

the middle of the second century explains why they were so highly valued. He calls them the “memoirs” of the apostles, a description that notes they are rooted in testimony that goes back to the apostles. Thus, the idea that the Gospels emerged as a reflection of orthodoxy about the time of the fourth century around the time of Constantine and the Nicean council is just bad history.

Problem 3 – Did a belief in Jesus’ divinity receive its decisive sanction through a “close vote” at Nicea in AD 325?

This claim is probably the worst of the three problems. What we know about Nicea is this. It gathered not to determine the divinity of Jesus but to discuss the Arian view of Jesus, who saw Jesus as Son and even divine, but appointed to that role rather than having it from before his birth. So the debate was the type of divine Jesus in view, not whether Jesus was divine. Constantine did call this council together because he wanted peace and unity in the Church. The council had about 200 bishops from around most of Christendom in attendance, but the vast majority were from the East. There was no close vote. What the bishops did was sign a statement and only two out of the entire group refused, so the “vote” was hardly close. There was pressure to accept this confession at the council, as originally 17 opposed it, but when Constantine threatened exile, that number reduced to two. However, even if we take 17 as the number opposed, this is still a significant minority of less than 10% of the total in attendance. Brown’s claim, then, is false here as well.

It also ignores the fact that the acceptance of the divinity of Jesus is something fundamental to the earliest documents we have from Christianity. One can look at the writing of Paul (1 Cor 8.5–6; Phil 2.9–11), the unknown author of Hebrews (Heb 1.3), the author of Revelation (Rev 1.1–7 and chapters 4–5), the Gospel of John (Jn 1.1–18), or even Jesus’ own testimony at his Jewish examination (Mk 14.62–65 and parallels) to see that the claim was that Jesus was at the side of God in a position of status equal to his, receiving worship as he does. When one adds to this the testimony of Pliny the Younger, writing as a Roman governor to the Roman Emperor Trajan in around AD 115 speaking of Christians singing hymns to Jesus as a god, we can see that even non Christian texts corroborate the views we see in the earliest Christian texts. The belief in Jesus as divine was a core belief of the earliest Church. It was not the result of a close decision in the fourth century.

Other problems

There are a host of other problems with the “historical backdrop” of the novel. (1) The idea that Mary was an apostle to the apostles misquotes Hippolytus, a church father of the later second century. When he made this remark, Hippolytus was not describing an office that Mary held. Rather, he used the phrase to describe all the women who saw the resurrected Jesus and reported his resurrection. In this sense, all of these women were apostles in a generic sense, namely, commissioned messengers sent on behalf of another, rather than being members of a church office. In fact, the exact phrase in the singular “apostle of the apostles” comes from the ninth century at the earliest. (2) The other Gospels that the novel claims have a human Jesus in most cases have a more divine Jesus than the biblical Gospels. What do I mean? Well, Jesus is so transcendent that he cannot be completely human. So some of these Gospels portray Jesus as laughing from heaven because they think they are crucifying him or else they describe him walking on the beach but leaving no footprints. So Brown’s description of these other Gospels is quite misleading. (3) Leonardo Da Vinci would never have painted a Last Supper scene and replace one of the twelve disciples with a woman. An art historian whose work

we included in the latest editions of *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* made this point to me, originally in an email. He notes that when Mary is present at the scene she is placed at Jesus' feet. This scene is so stereotyped in the period of this painting that there had to be twelve apostles present as that is the content of the biblical account the paintings reflect. In a lecture given by three art historians at the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, in January 2004, the experts on the period present said simply that Dan Brown had got his art history wrong.

WHAT TO MAKE OF THE NOVEL?

It is my view that the interest in this novel shows a few things about contemporary culture. There is a keen interest in things related to the origins of Christianity and there is a spiritual hunger of sorts out there. However, it is not a very discerning kind of quest. This makes it all the more important that ministers of the gospel today know the roots of the early history of Christianity and communicate some of that to their parishioners, who in turn can have informed discussions with their inquisitive neighbours. The fact that this book has put this history into the public square is a good thing, if Christians know their history well enough to explain what really happened. For those who wish to know about the history of the canon, Bruce Metzger's *The New Testament Canon* is quite helpful. For those wanting the details of the acceptance of the Gospels as Scripture, Martin Hengel's *The Four Gospels and The One Gospel of Jesus Christ* is a good starting point. For more details assessing *The Da Vinci Code*, see my *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* or one of the many other critiques of the novel. Perhaps if Christians are well equipped, there may be opportunity for the more than 15–20 million who have bought this novel to find the real code that opens up the way to life.

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NOTES

This interview from November 2003 can be viewed online at http://www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci_code/breakingnews.html

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