

The Da Vinci Code Phenomenon: A Brief Overview and Response

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<http://faithalone.org/journal/2004ii/hixson.html>

I. Introduction

Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*,^[1] gives a fictional account of a Harvard researcher named Robert Langdon. In the story, Langdon is called upon to analyze Leonardo Da Vinci's work and decode its hidden mysteries. What he uncovers is an elaborate scheme of secret societies, religious conspiracies, and centuries old cover ups. His investigation does not sit well with the religious establishment and he quickly becomes a marked man. So goes the plot of this entertaining and influential novel.

Dan Brown's novel has generated no shortage of analysis. To date, the Code has been cracked, broken, solved, decoded, exposed, scrutinized, dismantled and otherwise deftly refuted in at least thirteen published books and hundreds more electronic articles on various websites.^[2] Both evangelical Protestants as well as conservative Roman Catholic scholars have united to reject the myths put forth in *The Da Vinci Code*. At the same time, however, this national best seller has received widespread acclaim and become a cultural phenomenon. What is all the fuss about?

At a time when the distinction between truth and error is becoming increasingly blurred, books such as this one find a ready and willing audience. The pervasive pluralism that characterizes postmodernity usually leads to the creation of truth rather than the declaration of it. Such is the case with *The Da Vinci Code*. Although it is a novel, it has been hailed for its "historical accuracies." Without taking the time to verify the radical claims of this novel, naïve readers are increasingly accepting its truth claims. Major media outlets have presented documentaries on the "real Jesus." Enlightened liberal professors are telling their students that Brown may be on to something. And all the while an unwitting and ill-equipped culture is being duped.

The problem is the alleged historical accuracies are at odds with the only true source of absolute truth: God's Word. Defending his book, Brown claims, "One of the many qualities that makes *The Da Vinci Code* unique is the factual nature of the story. All the history, artwork, ancient documents, and secret rituals in the novel are accurate as are the hidden codes revealed in some of Da Vinci's most famous paintings."^[3] If Brown's claims are true, then the Bible cannot be true. Indeed, Brown rejects the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. Although he claims to be a Christian, Brown espouses an inclusivist soteriology saying, "We're each following our own paths of enlightenment."^[4] He intimates that the "belief that all those who do not accept Christ as their personal savior are doomed to hell" is ridiculous.^[5]

II. Points of Contention

There are several significant assertions that have come out of *The Da Vinci Code* and have the conservative evangelical community up in arms. These all flow from one central belief: that the Christian message as revealed in the Bible is false. It is the result of a conspiracy in which the real truth about Jesus has been covered up for centuries. Indeed, the book's marketing tag line reads: "The greatest conspiracy of the last 2000 years is about to unravel." Enlightened thinkers should be wise enough to reject the simplistic claims of God's Word and search out the real story by finding and reading the hidden documents which prove that Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible. Some of the more troubling claims of Brown's novel include:

1. Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus and the mother of His children. Throughout history, church leaders kept this information hidden and perpetuated an enormous fraud upon the world by insisting that Jesus was the divine Son of God. The Holy Grail is not some elusive holy relic that has been the subject of much speculation and countless quests throughout church history. Rather the Holy Grail is Mary Magdalene herself who represents suppressed feminism.^[6] The search for the Holy Grail is the search for the truth about Christianity's matriarchal roots.

The novel gets its name from the myth that Leonardo Da Vinci was aware of this conspiracy and gave the world a clue about it in his famous painting *The Last Supper*. As one faces that well-known painting, a "V" shape to the left of Jesus is evident. This "V" is said to be the symbol of feminism and the person seated next to it is said to be Mary Magdalene.

2. The novel also paints Christianity as misogynist. During the Middle Ages, the church hunted down and "burned at the stake an astounding five million women."^[7] The church has consistently persecuted and demonized

women in an attempt to hide the shameful fact that Jesus was really a feminist. “True” Christianity is militantly feministic but due to the cultural bias of the church throughout history this “fact” has been kept secret for hundreds and hundreds of years.

3. Jesus is not divine. “The early church literally stole Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity.”[8] Jesus’ divinity was invented by the church at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. The church father Constantine was the driving force behind the deification of Jesus.

4. The secret Gnostic Gospels are more accurate portrayals of Jesus than the biblical Gospels. The Bible is not the self-revelation of God to mankind, but rather the creation of man.[9] The NT is “false testimony.”[10]

Taken as a whole, these and many other absurd contentions in Brown’s book serve as a profound example of what happens when absolute truth is denied and pluralism is embraced. Books such as this one not only perpetuate pluralistic thinking, they flow from it. The reason The Da Vinci Code has sold more than 7.5 million copies[11] and been published in more than 40 languages around the world[12] is because it feeds postmodernism’s insatiable desire to tear down any and all truth claims. Although it is a novel, its theories are being blindly accepted by readers who are eager to believe that there is no grand metanarrative that serves as the basis for truth and provides the meaning of life. To the extent that The Da Vinci Code seeks to unravel the metanarrative of Scripture, it is welcomed into the postmodern milieu.

III. A Scholarly Response to The Da Vinci Code

Of the many responses to The Da Vinci Code in print, there is one that has risen to the top. Darrell Bock, Research Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, has provided a valuable and credible critique of Brown’s novel. Breaking the Da Vinci Code[13] is a succinct, well-researched, scholarly answer to the theories put forth by Dan Brown. Bock exposes Brown’s claims as weak and largely unattested. He is to be commended for disproving Brown’s claims by not only using the biblical record, but using much of the same extra-biblical evidence upon which Brown based his tenuous conclusions.

Bock begins his book with a look at the evidence regarding Mary Magdalene. He concludes that based on both biblical and extra-biblical evidence all that can be said of Mary is that she was “a faithful disciple, a witness to the cross, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. She was not a prostitute. She was not married to Jesus.”[14] Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that Jesus was married at all. “Jesus could well be single and fit into the practice of pious Jews…there is good cultural precedent, as well as good evidence, to see that Jesus was single.”[15]

Next Bock addresses the so-called “secret gospels” that contradict the biblical record. The claim in The Da Vinci Code that more than eighty gospels were considered for inclusion in the canon but only four were chosen “may be the most misleading statement of “fact” in the entire novel.”[16] The existence of more than eighty gospels is not attested in any historical record. Brown’s appeal to the Gnostic gospels is nothing new. Liberal theologians have long sought to elevate such extra-biblical writings to authoritative status. Bock demonstrates that even in their own day the Gnostic gospels did not represent viable alternatives to the divinely inspired texts. Rather they were debated from the moment of their inception. “The impression that Christians shared a vast array of writings that some reduced in number to produce Scripture of their own later design ignores this debate’s contentious nature from early on.”[17]

Continuing his systematic dismantling of Brown’s claims, Bock next addresses the canonization process for the NT Gospels. The Da Vinci Code gives the impression that this process was rooted in humanistic agendas and conspiracies. Bock ably demonstrates that early believers, from the first century on, attested to the authority and distinctiveness of the NT Gospels. In other words, there never really has been a question as to which gospels are authoritative and which are not.

When all is said and done, Bock determines that only two historical claims of the novel stand: 1) women were elevated by what Jesus taught; and 2) Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute.[18] The plotline of The Da Vinci Code is not only historically inaccurate, when the evidence is evaluated, it is not even plausible.

For this reviewer, the most impressive and intriguing section of Bock’s book is the final chapter entitled “The Real Jesus Code.” In it, Bock eloquently confronts his readers with the gospel message of Jesus Christ. His assumption, it is presumed, is that many unbelievers who have been captivated by The Da Vinci Code phenomenon might pick up a copy of Bock’s book as well. Therefore, he seizes the opportunity to explain God’s plan of salvation in hopes that some of his readers might become enlightened by the truth and express faith in Jesus Christ for eternal salvation.

Using language contextualized for his postmodern audience, Bock explains the concept of sin in the lives of human beings. “It is not a popular word in our culture,”[19] he admits. But our world is not a world of “virtual

reality that pretends everything is pretty much okay. It is a world of reality that humbly faces the fact that left to ourselves and our independence, we will act in destructive ways.”[20] He goes on to say, “Jesus came to show us how seriously God took sin and the restoration to life. Jesus also came to show that God loved us so much that God would give up a precious life into death so that we could experience life.”[21]

Bock explains to his readers that there is a way out of this sin predicament. It involves “admitting our need for God and for forgiveness.”[22] The only provision for our sin problem is Jesus and the forgiveness He offers. “The church has called this acknowledgment faith. It is faith in Jesus the Savior.”[23]

One might raise several objections here. First, Bock’s phraseology regarding “the church” is misleading. It is not simply the church but the NT itself that conditions eternal life upon faith alone more than 160 times.

Second, “admitting our need for God and for forgiveness” is not in and of itself faith in Jesus for eternal life. Multitudes admit their need for God and for forgiveness and yet do not trust Christ to give them that forgiveness. Faith in Jesus is being convinced He guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him for salvation (John 6:47).

Third, Bock could be clearer in his expression of what Jesus promises to the one who believes in Him: eternal life. He does say that Jesus died “so that we could experience life.” But “experiencing life” and “having eternal life” are two completely different things. The closing words of his book are compelling, but fall short of clarity:

God says simply, “Believe in Him. Trust in the work He has done and will do for you.” What lies ahead of such an embrace of faith is a new and unending life of fellowship with God lived through God’s forgiveness and spiritual provision. That is the real Jesus code. That is something worth believing.[24]

Bock’s reference to “an embrace of faith” is more poetic than it is helpful. What does this mean, exactly? Why not avoid any potential confusion by saying simply “what lies ahead of such…faith is…unending life”?

Additionally, while the reference to “unending life of fellowship with God” approaches the biblical expression eternal life, this too could be stated more clearly lest the reader miss the precise nature of the gift that comes by faith in Christ, namely eternal life. While this reviewer appreciates the centrality of faith in Bock’s evangelistic appeal, he wishes it had been clearer with the inclusion of biblical language.

IV. A Practical Response to The Da Vinci Code

What can the average believer do to combat the myths perpetuated by Brown’s popular novel? In the first place, we must funnel everything we hear or read through the grid of Scripture. Any truth claim that contradicts the claims of the Bible is to be rejected. If man is made to be the source of truth, there is no truth. Truth is absolute. It is not a creation. Hold fast to the authority of God’s Word. Do not be afraid to publicly reject the erroneous claims of this book even if it is counter-cultural to do so.

Secondly, much like the Mel Gibson movie The Passion of the Christ,[25] which itself is fraught with biblical inaccuracies and a dependence upon extra-biblical myths and yet nevertheless serves as a springboard for evangelism, likewise we should allow the phenomenon of The Da Vinci Code to serve as a starting point for sharing the gospel with unbelievers. As you see others captivated by the novel (which is after all engaging and well-written), seize the opportunity to present the true gospel: salvation is only by faith alone in Christ alone.

[1] Dan Brown, The Da Vinci Code: A Novel (New York : Doubleday, 2003).

[2] See Richard Abanes, The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code (Eugene , OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004); Darrell L. Bock, Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everybody's Asking (Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 2004); Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorized Guide to the Mysteries Behind The Da Vinci Code, ed. Dan Burstein (New York: CDS Books, 2004); Simon Cox, Cracking the Da Vinci Code (New Dehli: Sterling Publishing, 2004); James L. Garlow and Peter Jones, Cracking Da Vinci’s Code (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2004); Brandon Gilvin, Solving the Da Vinci Code Mystery (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); Hank Hanegraaff and Paul Maier, The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction? (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004); Steve Kellmeyer, Fact and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code (Peoria, IL: Bridegroom Press, 2004); Martin Lunn, Da Vinci Code Decoded (New York: Disinformation Co., 2004); Erwin W. Lutzer, The Da Vinci Deception (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publisher, 2004); Carl Olson, The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in the Da Vinci Code (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004); Amy Welborn, Decoding the Da Vinci Code (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Pub., 2004); and Ben Witherington, The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Da Vinci (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

[3] See "A Conversation with Dan Brown" at www.bookbrowse.com, italics added.

[4] See www.danbrown.com.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 253.

[7] Ibid., 125.

[8] Ibid., 233.

[9] Ibid., 231.

[10] Ibid., 345.

[11] AP article "Da Vinci Code Author: I left Out Material," May 19, 2004 accessed at www.foxnews.com.

[12] See www.danbrown.com.

[13] Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everybody's Asking* (Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 2004).

[14] Ibid., 30.

[15] Ibid., 58.

[16] Ibid., 61.

[17] Ibid., 97.

[18] Ibid., 154.

[19] Ibid., 163.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 164.

[22] Ibid., 165.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 167.

[25] For a detailed discussion of The Passion of the Christ see the articles by the present reviewer available online at www.hixson.org/Studies.html.