



## Thoughts from the Bible and Books

4930 S. Hagadorn Rd., E. Lansing, MI 48823 - 517.351.6810

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### DaVinci Delirium

I admit I have not read Dan Brown's immensely popular *DaVinci Code*. The book has sold 43 million copies worldwide, or about 42,999,950 more books than I've ever sold. And yet, I haven't read the book, probably won't, and don't plan to see the movie. But with the movie due out May 19 you can be sure the *DaVinci* phenomenon is not over. So there's some wisdom in knowing what the book says and where it gets the church's story all wrong.

There's no shortage of *DaVinci* related materials out there. In fact, there's probably enough church resources and sermon packages to preach on the *DaVinci Code* until Christmas (I'm sure someone has an advent series in the works; maybe we could call it *Christmas Code* or *DaViNavitiy*). You won't be hearing any sermons on the book, but if you want to know more, a great place to start is [thetruthaboutdavinci.com](http://thetruthaboutdavinci.com). The cite is sponsored by Westminster Theological Seminary and hosts a number of good articles, frequently asked questions, and a helpful resources page.

The website recommends several good books (and there's plenty more out there): I've read Erwin Lutzer's *The DaVinci Deception* (Tyndale, 2006). It's not terribly in-depth, but it is useful. Although I haven't read it, the book I would warmly recommend *Breaking the DaVinci Code* by Darrell Bock (Nelson Books, 2004). Bock is a highly respected conservative evangelical scholar and his take on Brown has been highly praised. For a Catholic perspective you could pick up *The DaVinci Hoax* (Ignatius, 2004) by Carl Olson and Sandra Miesel.

If you are too busy to read a book or track down articles on the web, let me make your job easier by noting five false claims in the *DaVinci Code*. In so doing, I will sim-

ply be summarizing Bock's excellent article, "Critical Analysis of the DaVinci Code: What Dan Brown Did Not Tell You – Three Errors Plus a Few More." All of my information comes from Bock's article which can be accessed on the aforementioned website.

#### **Claim One: Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.**

The evidence for this claim comes from two extra biblical gospels—the Gospel of Mary Magdalene 17:10-18:21 and the Gospel of Philip 63:33-36. These texts claim that Jesus had a special relationship with Mary, that she was his "companion" and that he kissed her on the lips in public (indicating they were married, Brown argues). Now, Jesus could have been married. That would not have compromised his divinity. Marriage is not a sin. But the fact is that there is no credible evidence to suggest that Jesus was married or had a romantic relationship with Mary Magdalene.

Consider these facts from Bock's article: (1) Almost all scholars of every stripe question the historicity of these extra biblical gospels. They are of late origin and considered of little historical value. (2) The text with the kiss on the lips does not even have the word "lips." There is a blank in the original manuscript. Even if there was a kiss, it could have been a kiss of fellowship on the cheek. (3) The term "companion" is thought by most interpreters to refer to a spiritual relationship not to a marital one. This would make sense because of the gnostic nature of these gospels. (4) Bock alludes to the 38 volumes of small print, single spaced, double-columned texts of the early church fathers that he has on his shelf (I have them in my study too). In all of these materials (approximately 20,000 pages worth), not one text mentions that Jesus was married, and many make much of the fact that he was not. (5) Conservative scholars like Bock and liberal scholars like John Crossan who don't agree on much, agree on this point: Jesus was definitely single.

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**Claim Two: The four gospels were just a few of the eighty different gospels circulating. The New Testament gospels were chosen late and only because they had a divine Jesus.** Brown doesn't come out and say it, but he may be basing this assertion on the Athanasian Letter of the late fourth century. Athanasius is the first person we have record of who listed the 27 books of the New Testament as we have them now. But this does not mean that the authority of the biblical books was in limbo before this time. And it certainly does not mean that the four gospels were chosen centuries later from among eighty rival gospels, as Brown claims. Conservative and liberal scholars agree that the gospels were among the first to be agreed up on as canonical books. There is evidence from Irenaeus, Tatian, Origen, and Justin Martyr that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were recognized as authoritative by the end of the second century, 125 years before Constantine and Nicea and much earlier than Brown alleges.

Brown's claim about eighty gospels is also wrong. There were other gospels besides the four we have in our Bibles, but the number is two or three dozen, not eighty. Besides, many of these gospels also have a divine Jesus. In fact, the problem with many of them is that they don't have a human Jesus! The gnostics, the group Brown appeals to for many of his claims, were never considered orthodox not because their Jesus was too earthly, but because the gnostic Jesus was too "spiritual" to be considered human.

**Claim Three: The church decided Jesus was divine by a close vote at the Council of Nicea in 325.** Not only can belief in Jesus' deity be traced back to the New Testament itself (1 Cor. 8:5-6; Phil 2:9-11; Rev. 4-5; John 1:1-18 to list but a few texts), and not only do we have secular record that the Christians worshiped Jesus as a god (from Pliny the Younger circa 117 A.D.), but Brown's portrayal of Nicea is simply historically false. The debate at Nicea was not even, strictly speaking, about Jesus' divinity. It was about the Arian claim that Jesus was not eternally the Son of God. But leaving that aside, the vote at Nicea was not close. Of the 216 to 316 bishops at the council, only 17 opposed the creedal statement that came out of Nicea. The number of opposing votes went down to two after Constantine threatened the dissenters with exile. But even taking the number at seventeen, the vote (199-17 or 299-17) was hardly close.

**Claim Four: Mary Magdalene was an apostle.** This claim is based on a misquotation from the second century father Hippolytus. He used the phrase to describe the witnesses to the resurrection. It was not a suggestion of office, but a reference to the women at the tomb as messengers of the good news.

On a related note, Brown suggests that the early church, by demonizing the "sacred feminine", created patriarchal Christianity out of matriarchal paganism. Again, this is more fiction than fact. Even ancient Roman historians recognized that the advent of Christianity marked a turning point for the freedom and dignity of women. And the Greco-Roman world was positively not matriarchal to begin with. Moreover, the gnostic tradition, from which Brown draws for his idea of the sacred feminine, is not feminist friendly ground. The gnostic Gospel of Thomas, for example, records "Simon Peter said to them, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'" Sure, that's much less patriarchal!

**Claim Five: Mary Magdalene is painted in Leonardo DaVinci's Last Supper.** Art historians agree that the Twelve with Jesus are certainly all men. Granted, John looks somewhat feminine in the painting, but the picture of John and the apostles is very stereotyped and common to DaVinci's time. No one would have thought Mary was pictured next to Jesus as one of the twelve disciples. An art history professor at Temple sums up Brown's claims succinctly "Just about everything [Dan Brown] says about Leonardo is wrong."

Two final thoughts. One, there are difficult intellectual problems we need to wrestle with as Christians. The problems posed in the *DaVinci Code* are not those problems. It's a work of pseudo-historical fiction that does not hold up under even mild scholarly scrutiny. Two, be patient with Christians and non-Christians alike who are puzzled by Dan Brown's claims. Carefully rehearse some of the basic facts and point them to a good website, article, or book.

Or better yet, invite them to read the Bible.