

Responding to *The Da Vinci Code*

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What is *The Da Vinci Code*?

The Da Vinci Code, by Dan Brown, is one of the most commercially successful books in history. It debuted at number one on the *New York Times Bestseller List for Hardcover Fiction*, and three years later it remains near the top of the list. More than 15 million copies have been sold, and it has been published in more than forty languages. According to its publisher, *The Da Vinci Code* sold more copies during a one-year period than any other adult novel in history.

Before long, the best-selling novel will likely be a hit movie, as well. On May 19, Sony Pictures will release a movie based on *The Da Vinci Code*, directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks.

The Da Vinci Code is also one of the most controversial books in recent history.

Why is *The Da Vinci Code* controversial?

Although *The Da Vinci Code* is fiction, it is filled with references to historical people, places, documents, and events. In an introduction to the book, author Dan Brown writes that it is largely based on “accurate” historical information.

This is important because much of this “information” relates directly to the foundation of the Christian faith. In fact, much of this “information” is a direct frontal assault on Christianity.

The following information summarizes much of the book’s plot (so, if you plan on reading the book, be warned that reading this article will take away much of the book’s suspense!):

One night, four people are killed. These four people, it turns out, were responsible for guarding one of the most explosive secrets of all time: the location of the Holy Grail. The last of these four, before dying, manages to leave behind several clues to keep the secret from being lost. These clues are directed to his granddaughter, Sophie Neveu, who specializes in cryptology (the study of codes), and Robert Langdon, a professor at Harvard who specializes in the study of religious symbols. Together, Sophie and Robert seek to unravel the clues and locate the Holy Grail — all the while being chased by French investigators who have identified Langdon as the prime suspect in the four murders. As the plot unfolds, it is revealed that it is not only the *location* of the Holy Grail that has been hidden — its *identity* has also been kept secret. It is claimed in this book that the Holy Grail, which in literature often refers to the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper, is not that at all. Rather, it is claimed here that the Holy Grail actually refers to the remains of Mary Magdalene and a huge cache of documents which show that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus and bore His daughter, and that their bloodline has been carried on through the centuries. It is also claimed that Jesus intended Mary to be the leader of the Christian Church, and that this Church was intended to include worship of “the sacred feminine.” The Roman Catholic Church, it is claimed, has suppressed the truth about Jesus — by making up the story that He was God, by suppressing the truth about Mary Magdalene, by concocting the Bible (which supposedly misrepresents Christ and hides the truth from us), and by suppressing the “goddess worship” that the book claims was

a central feature of genuine, early Christianity. Yet, over the years, the secrets have not died. They have been guarded by a group known as “The Priory of Sion” — whose members have included such historical figures as Isaac Newton and Leonardo da Vinci (who supposedly hid clues about all of this in his artwork — hence, the title *The Da Vinci Code*). Over time, some conservative Catholics worry that the Priory of Sion might soon reveal the “truth” about the Grail to the world — which is why the four people were killed at the beginning of the novel. The four murder victims were the only members of the Priory of Sion who knew the location and the “truth” about the Grail and the alleged bloodline of Jesus. Ultimately, the killer is found, Sophie and Robert solve the clues left for them — and Sophie learns that she is a direct descendant of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

So, in a book that the author says is based largely on historically verifiable facts, it is claimed that Jesus married Mary Magdalene; that He had children with her; that their bloodline continued through history; that Jesus was not considered to be God until the Roman Catholic Church fabricated this lie about 300 years after His death; that early Christians practiced “goddess worship”; that the Church has murdered millions over the years to suppress the worship of the “sacred feminine”; and that, despite the Church’s often-murderous determination to hide these secrets from the world, the “truth” has been passed down over the centuries through a small group of people that has included some of the greatest minds in history.

If all of this sounds so outrageous that nobody could possibly believe it is based on historically accurate claims, consider the following:

- The claims this book makes about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Christian Church are based largely on the book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, published in 1982, which claimed to be *non-fiction*.
- In the introduction to *The Da Vinci Code*, author Dan Brown states that “all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” This can be taken to suggest that the book’s claims about the Bible (which is presented as a mostly fictitious invention of the Church) and about Leonardo da Vinci’s works of art (which are said to include hidden clues to the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene and to the importance of “the sacred feminine”) are “accurate.”
- The claims made about Jesus and Christianity in this book are usually spoken by the most intellectual characters in the book — Robert Langdon, a prestigious professor at Harvard, and his colleague Leigh Teabing, described as a graduate of Oxford University and “a former British Royal Historian.” The false claims they make are often mixed in with true historical facts, which makes them sound more believable, and several times the characters specifically claim that their most outrageous claims have actually been thoroughly documented by historians.
- The author, Dan Brown, has stated in televised interviews that he believes the “theory” about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and their bloodline presented in the book, and he even says that if he were to write a non-fiction book on this topic it would not be significantly different from what is claimed in *The Da Vinci Code*. (For his exact words on this, see page 71 in the book *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction* by Hank Hanegraaff and Paul L. Maier.)

Thus, millions of people are reading this book and being given the impression that its attacks on Christianity are “historically accurate.”

What false claims about Christ and Christianity are made in *The Da Vinci Code*?

The following are just a few of the many false claims made about our Lord and His Church (including the page numbers in *The Da Vinci Code* where these claims are made):

The Da Vinci Code says ... that Jesus was not believed by His followers to be the Son of God until it was “officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea” in 325 A.D., where Jesus’ divinity was the result of “a relatively close vote.” (pg. 233)

But the truth is ... that Jesus was clearly declared to be God in the books of the New Testament, written in the first century A.D. For example, Jesus is specifically identified as God in John 1:1-18, John 20:28, Acts 20:28, Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, and 2 Peter 1:1. For numerous other ways that the New Testament teaches that Jesus is true God, see the questions and answers about the second article of the Apostles’ Creed in your copy of *Luther’s Small Catechism*.

The divinity of Christ was also clearly proclaimed in early Christian writings outside the Bible, long before the Council of Nicaea. For example, Ignatius of Antioch, who was born around the time of Christ’s death and resurrection and was martyred around 110 A.D, made it very clear in his writings that Jesus was both true God and true man. Going back even further, the true humanity and divinity of Christ is also reflected in the first-century writings of Clement of Rome.

Contrary to what *The Da Vinci Code* claims, the Council of Nicaea in 325 did *not* vote to begin treating Jesus as divine. Rather, in response to a false teacher named Arius — who taught that Jesus was not eternal but had been created by God and was the greatest of all created beings — the Council voted to affirm the traditional apostolic teaching that Jesus was eternal and was of the same divine nature as the Father (“being of one substance with the Father,” as we say in the Nicene Creed, which was approved at this Council). The vote taken at the Council — which *The Da Vinci Code* describes as “relatively close” — was actually 300 to 2 in favor of affirming the theology expressed in the Nicene Creed, which did not introduce any new teachings but simply summarized and affirmed the already long-accepted beliefs of the Church.

The Da Vinci Code says ... that, in the fourth century A.D., the emperor Constantine “commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits and embellished those Gospels that made Him godlike.” The book claims that “more than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament,” that “any gospels that described earthly aspects of Jesus’ life had to be omitted from the Bible,” and that some of the “forbidden” gospels survived and were found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and at Nag Hammadi. (pgs. 231, 234, 244)

But the truth is ... that no gospel other than the four in our Bible — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — was ever regarded as authoritative by any significant part of the Christian Church. John, the last of the four Gospels, was written toward the end of the first century (around 95 A.D.), and already in the second century the four gospels were all regarded as authoritative. For example, the important early church writer Irenaeus — a student of Polycarp, who in turn was a student of the apostle John — clearly attests the “fourfold Gospel” of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John more than a hundred years before the Council of Nicaea.

As for the book’s claims about “other gospels”: The suggestion that the Dead Sea Scrolls included gospels that gave alternative portrayals of Jesus is extremely peculiar, because the Dead Sea Scrolls were Jewish (not Christian) and contain absolutely no references to Jesus whatsoever. It is true that some “alternative gospels” were found at Nag Hammadi. However, they were written later than the Biblical gospels and were never considered authoritative in the Church. In

addition, they generally do *not* emphasize Christ's humanity as *The Da Vinci Code* claims they do — rather, the Biblical gospels emphasize Jesus' true humanity much more than the non-Biblical "gospels" do. In fact, the way these writings portray Jesus is not even remotely similar to the way He is portrayed in *The Da Vinci Code*. In addition, the number of so-called "gospels" other than those in the Bible was not the "more than eighty" that the book claims, but rather about a dozen or so. All of them came later than the Biblical gospels, none of them had the apostolic authority of the Biblical gospels, and none of them gained widespread acceptance at any time in the history of the Christian Church.

The Da Vinci Code says ... that Jesus married Mary Magdalene (pg. 244), they had a daughter (Sarah) (pg. 255), and their royal bloodline continued on through the generations (pg. 257)— and even continues today. The book also claims that Jesus intended for the Christian Church to be led by Mary Magdalene (pg. 248). However, the book claims, the Roman Catholic Church suppressed these "facts" in order to "defend itself against Magdalene's power" and out of fear that if the truth were revealed it would "undermine the ... notion of Christ's divinity and therefore the Christian Church" (pg. 254). So, according to the book, the Church demonized Mary Magdalene by describing her as a prostitute (pg. 244), and even "outlawed speaking of and shunned Mary Magdalene" (pg. 261).

The Da Vinci Code repeatedly indicates that all of this is historically documented — as indicated in the following statements made by the characters in the book who are portrayed as respected historians: "the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is part of the historical record" (pg. 245); "I shan't bore you with the countless references to Jesus and Magdalene's union. That had been explored ad nauseam by modern historians" (p. 247); "The royal bloodline of Jesus Christ has been chronicled in exhaustive detail by scores of historians" (pg. 253); "the historical evidence supporting this is substantial" (pg. 254); "Countless scholars of that era chronicled Mary Magdalene's days in France, including the birth of Sarah and the subsequent family tree" (pg. 255).

The Da Vinci Code also claims that the remains of Mary Magdalene, together with documentation of the royal family line of Jesus and Mary, is the Holy Grail. According to *The Da Vinci Code*, this Grail was discovered during the Crusades and has long been protected by a group known as "The Priory of Sion." According to the book, the Priory of Sion has included among its members such notable intellectual leaders as Isaac Newton and Leonardo da Vinci (pg. 113). The book also says that the Prior of Sion "to this day, still worships Mary Magdalene as the Goddess." (pgs. 158-160, 255)

But the truth is ... that none of these claims are true. The total number of historical manuscripts that refer to Jesus and Mary Magdalene being married is ... zero. In fact, there is no evidence that such a thought ever even occurred to anyone prior to the twentieth century. Conservative and liberal New Testament scholars — even including scholars who do not believe in the divinity of Jesus — can practically all agree on one thing: Jesus was not married.

The claim that the Christian Church has demonized and shunned Mary Magdalene is also completely untrue. It is true that many people have assumed Mary was a former prostitute even though the Bible doesn't ever say she was (because they assume, probably mistakenly, that Mary Magdalene is the "sinner" who anointed Jesus' feet in Luke 7:36-50, and also assume that the "sin" of this woman was prostitution). However, the Church's emphasis has never been on that supposed past. Rather, the church has celebrated her role as one of a group of women who traveled with the disciples, and as one of the first witnesses of the risen Christ — and, in fact, as the one who ran and told the disciples the good news of the resurrection.

It also should be mentioned that the book's claims about the Priory of Sion are based on documents that were shown years ago to be twentieth-century forgeries, and which the forger of those documents has admitted are purely fictional.

The book includes many other false claims about Christianity — as well as false claims about Judaism, Leonardo da Vinci, and a host of other topics — that can't all be covered in this brief overview.

Where can we learn more about this?

In May 2004, *The Lutheran Witness* published a helpful article entitled "The Truth About *The Da Vinci Code*" by Brent McGuire, which is available online at:

<https://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/Lutheran%20Witness/May04.pdf>

Links to several other helpful resources can be found at:

<http://www.leaderu.com/focus/davincicode.html>

In addition, several books have been written in response to *The Da Vinci Code*. I recommend the following:

- *De-coding Da Vinci*, by Amy Welborn. If you are going to purchase one book responding to *The Da Vinci Code*, this is the one I recommend.
- *The Truth Behind The Da Vinci Code*, by Richard Abanes. This is a good, easy-to-read book, and covers some topics not addressed in Welborn's book. Between Welborn and Abanes, just about all the most important topics are covered.
- *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?* by Hank Hanegraaff and Paul L. Maier. In this book, Paul Maier gives a good overview of the historical problems in *The Da Vinci Code*, and Hank Hanegraaff provides additional information to show some of the historical evidence for the truth of Christianity. Paul Maier is the Second Vice President of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.
- *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, by Darrell L. Bock. This book, written by a prominent New Testament scholar, is written from a more academic perspective. It doesn't address as wide a range of topics as the others I've listed, but it has much more detailed information about some of the key topics, focusing especially on claims *The Da Vinci Code* makes about: (1) the alleged marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and (2) the alleged unreliability of the Bible and reliability of certain non-Biblical documents.

If you have a friend or relative who has read *The Da Vinci Code*, I encourage you to consider sharing one or more of the above books with them. Attacks on Christianity should not be met with silence from Christians.