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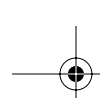
A NOVEL IDEA?

On the surface of things, all seems well. You pick up a copy of Dan Brown's bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*. What could be more fun than reading a real page turner? This book captures your attention and holds it as well as any John Grisham novel.

Yet for those who have been reading sensational claims about early Christianity over the years, there is something strangely familiar about this book. Wasn't there a book very much like this one published some twenty years ago? Below is the editorial review from Amazon.com of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which came out in 1982:

Michael Baigent, Henry Lincoln, and Richard Leigh, authors of *The Messianic Legacy*, spent over 10 years on their own kind of quest for the Holy Grail, into the secretive history of early France. What they found, researched with the tenacity and attention to detail that befits any great quest, is a tangled and intricate story of politics and faith that reads like a mystery novel. It is the story of the Knights Templar, and a behind-the-scenes society called the Priure de Sion, and its involvement in reinstating descendants of the Merovingian bloodline into political power. Why? The authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* assert that their explorations into early history ultimately reveal that Jesus may not have died on the cross, but lived to marry and father children whose bloodline continues today. The authors' point here is not to compromise or to demean Jesus, but to offer another, more complete perspective of Jesus as God's incarnation in man. The





power of this secret, which has been carefully guarded for hundreds of years, has sparked much controversy. For all the sensationalism and hoopla surrounding *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and the alternate history that it outlines, the authors are careful to keep their perspective and sense of skepticism alive in its pages, explaining carefully and clearly how they came to draw such combustible conclusions. — *Jodie Buller*

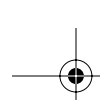
And the inside-flap copy asks:

- Is the traditional, accepted view of the life of Christ in some way incomplete?
- Is it possible Christ did not die on the cross?
- Is it possible Jesus was married, a father, and that his bloodline still exists?
- Is it possible that parchments found in the South of France a century ago reveal one of the best-kept secrets of Christendom?
- Is it possible that these parchments contain the very heart of the mystery of the Holy Grail?

Or consider the 1993 book written by a woman who says that reading *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* changed her life—Margaret Starbird's *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail*. In this book Starbird is reacting to what she sees as the repression and exclusion of women in the Roman Catholic tradition. Unfortunately, what she offers us is a story of Mary Magdalene (who she wrongly identifies with Mary of Bethany, who anointed Jesus). According to Starbird, Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife, and she became the Holy Grail in the sense of bearing Jesus' children and passing along the holy blood. Ultimately Starbird relies more on medieval lore and art, and she fails to take the Bible seriously.

There was a tendency in medieval exegesis, beginning with Gregory the Great, to identify Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman of Luke 7:36-50 and sometimes also with Mary of Bethany. We will deal with the former





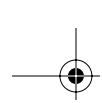
mistake shortly, but here it needs to be noted that a woman who is identified as from Magdala (Mary Magdalene) cannot be identified at the same time and in the same Gospel as from Bethany (see John 12:1-3 and John 19:25). Geographical designations were used in a fixed way to say where a person was from, not where they might be currently living. This was done because it was believed that a person's origin said something definitive about (and sometimes even determined) who that person was or could be, hence Nathaniel's question about whether anything good could come out of Nazareth (John 1:46). In that culture, geography, gender and generation (parentage) were thought to determine identity and personality.

In a culture where there were no last names, a geographical designation was one of the main ways to distinguish people with the same first name, and it appears the geographical designation was regularly used of *those who never married*, especially women who could not use the patronymic ("son of . . .": as in Simon bar-Jonah, which means "Simon, the son of John"). In the Greek New Testament, for example, in Luke 8:1-3 Joanna is identified by the phrase "of Chuza," which surely means "wife of Chuza," but in the same list Mary is said to be "of Magdala." Had Mary of Magdala been married to Jesus, she would have been identified in the same way as Joanna, not with the geographical designation.

Once *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* are examined and we turn to *The Da Vinci Code*, we realize we've been down this road before—*twice!* Only now its being served up in a novel that purports to be based on the facts unearthed by Baigent, Lincoln, Leigh, Starbird and others. Lest we think that Dan Brown intends for his book to be seen as pure fiction, we are told on the very first page of his work titled *FACT* that not only is there a Priory of Sion and a Catholic sect known as Opus Dei, but "all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."

Our concern isn't so much with Brown's ability to describe art or architecture accurately (though we will question his interpretation of da Vinci's famous painting of the Last Supper), but rather with his handling of ancient





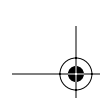
documents and his treatment of early Christian history. In these realms he is not merely out of his depth, he is also a purveyor of errors of both fact and interpretation, including some mistakes that even the most amateur student of religious history should never make.

He can't hide behind the disclaimer that "this is fiction" because his very first page intends to give the impression that it is a novel grounded solidly in history. He presents his work as historical fiction: though the main characters and their drama are fictional, the materials they are seeking and studying are portrayed as facts or at least probably true. There should have been a caveat emptor—"let the buyer beware"—on page one.

When you read a compelling work of fiction and incongruities keep popping up, here a detail doesn't ring true or there a fact seems to be in error, the apparent authenticity of the work is ruined. Brown didn't have much to worry about since his readers are largely unattuned to religious and historical errors. Indeed, many of them apparently take at face value what the main characters in this work—Robert Langdon, the famous professor of religious symbols from Harvard, and Leigh Teabing, the historical expert and longtime quester after the Grail—say about Jesus and the history of early Christianity. It really doesn't matter that because of his greed for the Grail, Teabing turns out to be a rogue and a scoundrel. Neither Langdon nor anyone else repudiates Teabing's historical claims at the end of the novel. Indeed, the novel concludes at the Louvre with "proof" that what the book claims about Mary Magdalene is really true. After all, page one says, "all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." But is there really an artistic shrine or tomb of Mary Magdalene in the Louvre?

There is another factor at play in what appears to be fiction, another central character whose name, not coincidentally, is Sophie Neveu, and who, also not coincidentally, is an expert in cracking codes. Her name gives her identity away to anyone who knows Greek or early Jewish and Christian literature. Her name means "New Wisdom," and as the novel progresses she receives enlightenment through the revelations unfolded by Teabing and





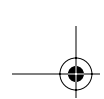
Langdon. Sophie is a symbol for Brown's audience of neophytes, eager to learn the secrets, crack the codes and have their collective religious consciousness raised. She represents the postmodern American public—who is in for the education of a lifetime. In the process she learns her own history and past, and how it fits into the Grail story itself. At the end of the novel we learn that Sophie is a descendent of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, the Holy Grail! The answer to the religious quest lies within herself, within her own bloodline.

Sophie Neveu represents the modern public seeking insider knowledge (*gnosis*) so she can understand the secret of her own identity. And not surprisingly, the quest leads ultimately within rather than outside the seeker. This is a very different vision of salvation than the apostle Paul's, who says, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Brown's novel, salvation is a matter of getting to the bottom of our self to understand our own identity. In other words, the religious quest ultimately leads us back to our own self, an exercise in pure narcissism! The notion of Jesus' being the Savior is repudiated. In the book he is just a great teacher and perhaps a prophet.

But this new insider knowledge, this new wisdom that Sophie embodies in name and nature, has a further dimension: the "sacred feminine." Here Brown revives the old pagan fertility cult and goddess worship. Sophie Neveu is ripe and ready for romance with the dashing and erudite Robert Langdon. The irony is that the ancient Gnostics, whose books were found at Nag Hammadi, would have found this utterly repulsive. Gnosticism is a strongly ascetic religious tradition with a basic belief that spirit is good but matter, including the human body, is evil. The Gnostics of old would have denied the body and its pleasures. Brown's unwitting mixture of Gnosticism and ancient goddess worship is a gumbo that none of the old Gnostics or the old pagan practitioners of fertility religion would have found palatable. Real students of history can only wince.

Ah, but we should suspend our disbelief, shouldn't we? This is, after all, a novel! What's all the fuss about? Unfortunately, just going along for the





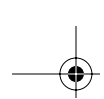
ride could be a dangerous thing, for all too often in a postmodern situation, the public (even the church-going public) is more likely to take a novel as the gospel than the Gospels themselves. Consider for a moment those other religious bestsellers of recent years—the Left Behind series by Timothy La Haye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Indeed they are novels, but they serve up a “novel” view of end times as if it were absolutely true rather than a minority opinion within both the world of biblical scholarship and the church at large. There is much the Left Behind series has left out. Sadly, since ours is primarily an entertainment culture, we must pay close attention to the messages encoded in the entertainment lest we too become beguiled.

THE “BROWNING” OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Our concern is not really with Brown’s mistakes about medieval history but rather the religious foundations on which his Grail theories are based. For the record, however, it is not true that the rose was primarily a symbol of the divine or sacred feminine, or of Mary Magdalene in church history. To the contrary, as the fine scholar and careful novelist Umberto Eco recognized and explored in his novel *The Name of the Rose*, the rose was a symbol of Christ, with the blood-red color symbolizing his shed blood and the thorns on the stem symbolizing his crown of thorns. Robert Langdon, the religious symbologist in *The Da Vinci Code*, should have known better, but alas he does not.

It is also highly unlikely that da Vinci’s famous painting in Milan depicts Mary Magdalene sitting at the Last Supper. There was a long tradition of depicting the Beloved Disciple with fair skin and light or red hair, and it simply is not obvious that the person sitting beside Jesus in this painting is a woman. Besides, if this figure is Mary Magdalene, where is the twelfth apostle? In any case, whatever da Vinci may have had in mind tells us nothing about what actually happened at the Last Supper in A.D. 30. These errors by Brown reveal a pattern of eccentric interpretation of the sources, which carries over into the interpretation of early Christianity and the biblical sources. This should not surprise us since the main protagonist in the book ends up making a dis-





claimer about the pursuit of truth in such matters.

What counts most in a postmodern culture is the power of rhetoric, not the accuracy of reporting or analysis. As Robert Langdon says toward the end of the novel: “It is the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls, not the Grail itself” (p. 444). In other words, we should be content with the thrill of the chase, not the thrill of finding the truth. Langdon’s comment is a strange remark in a book that repeatedly insists the world deserves the *truth* about the church’s “lies” about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the Grail (see pp. 407-8).

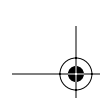
Robert Langdon, the hero of the book, says:

Every faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of faith—acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove. Every religion describes God through metaphor, allegory, and exaggeration. . . . The problems arise when we begin to believe literally in our own metaphors. . . . Those who truly understand their faiths understand the stories are metaphorical. (pp. 341-42)

Philosophical claims like these undergird much of what is found in this novel, and it’s not surprising that this leads to some clear errors of fact and of interpretation of key historical matters. We will deal with this philosophical and religious mishmash in due course, but first a short tour of the seven deadly historical errors of the book

Error 1. *The canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are not the earliest Gospels; rather the earliest are the suppressed Gnostic Gospels (such as the Gospel of Philip or the Gospel of Mary).* This claim is made more than once by the protagonists of the book, Teabing and Langdon. They claim that the four canonical Gospels were chosen from among some eighty Gospels, and the rest were suppressed (see p. 231). In fact, there were less than twenty documents that might be called Gospels (telling the story of Jesus’ life), and of those Brown’s book depends on, the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary*, there is *no* credible evidence that they existed before or during the time that the New Testament Gospels were written. The





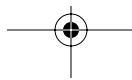
Gnostic Gospels were written late in the second century or even the third century A.D.

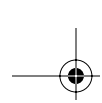
No scholars that I know, whatever their theological persuasion, think that the canonical Gospels are from any later than the last half of the first century A.D. (or possibly in the case of John's Gospel, the first few years of the second century). Since Gnostic thought only came to the fore in the middle and later parts of the second century A.D., it's not surprising that the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary* did not arise earlier.

One of the key indicators that Gnosticism is a later development is its dependence on the canonical Gospels for its substance when it comes to the story of Jesus. Even more tellingly Gnosticism tries to de-Judaize the story. By this I mean Gnosticism reflects a belief about the material world that does not fit well with the Old or the New Testaments, both of which affirm the goodness of God's creation. Gnosticism by contrast sees spirit as good and matter, including the body and sexual activity, as inherently tainted and evil.

Dan Brown seems to be oblivious to this fact when he draws on the Gnostic Gospels. He seems to confuse the Gnostic perspective with the sort of paganism that affirms not merely the goodness but the sacredness of sex as a way to get in touch with the "sacred feminine." This is far from the perspective of the Gnostic Gospels. Nevertheless, his protagonist calls these Gospels "the unaltered gospels" (p. 248). As a rule of thumb, the more esoteric and less Jewish a Gospel, the less likely it reflects the earliest stages of the Gospel tradition. The Gnostic Gospels reflect a nonbiblical theology that devalues the goodness of the material creation.

Error 2. *Jesus is a great man or prophet in the earliest historical sources but was later proclaimed divine at the Council of Nicaea* (pp. 231-34). This is patently false. Jesus is called "God" (*theos*) some seven times in the New Testament, including in the Gospel of John, and he is called "Lord" (*kyrios*) in the divine sense numerous times as well. No historian I know of argues that these New Testament texts postdate the Council of Nicaea. The documents written in the first century about Jesus and his movement suggest he



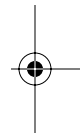


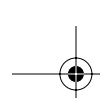
was the divine Son of God. The Council of Nicaea in the fourth century and the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century merely formalized these beliefs in creeds and sought to clarify (1) the relationship of Christ to God the Father and (2) the relationship of Christ's human and divine natures. These were not ideas conjured up by either of these councils.

Error 3. *Emperor Constantine suppressed the "earlier" Gnostic Gospels and imposed the canonical Gospels and the doctrine of the divinity of Christ on the church.* It is simply not true that the Gnostic Gospels were suppressed during the period when they arose. They were never recognized as authoritative in either the Eastern or Western church. Lack of recognition is not the same as suppression. The four biblical Gospels, as well as Paul's letters, were recognized as sacred and authoritative tradition by A.D. 130, long before Constantine was born. Irenaeus reports that these four Gospels were circulating together as authoritative sources in the church as early as the first half of the second century A.D. In addition, we also have the witness of the Muratorian Canon (a list of Christian books from the late second century), which names the four Gospels as authoritative in and for the church.

Constantine did not become sole emperor in the West until 312 and did not convene the Council of Nicaea until 325, shortly after his conquest of the Eastern provinces. Though he presided over the council, there is no reason to believe he shaped its conclusions, which represented the consensus of bishops throughout the entire church. The council's conclusions had nothing to do with the canon but only the divinity of Christ. The full canon as we now know it was recognized by A.D. 367. Constantine certainly did not engineer this canonizing process, though of course his conversion to Christianity helped the new faith to spread.

Error 4. *Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.* Since the New Testament is completely silent on this matter and does not even indirectly support these ideas, the books protagonists turn to other and later sources for information, in particular the *Gospel of Philip*, probably written sometime in the late third century A.D. Unfortunately, the relevant portion of this text has gaps. Thus it





reads: “And the companion of the [. . .] Mary Magdalene. [. . . loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [. . .]” (the bracketed portions reflect gaps in the manuscript). In *The Da Vinci Code* the protagonist Teabing argues that in the *Gospel of Philip* the word *companion* means “spouse.” However, if the text is referring to a relationship Jesus had with Mary Magdalene, it certainly isn’t evident that it was a marital relationship. Indeed the context suggests it was a spiritual relationship.

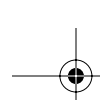
What about the kiss? A parallel passage in the *Gospel of Philip* 58, 30–59, 4 seems to suggest a kiss on the mouth. But, as Karen King says in *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, it most likely was a chaste kiss of fellowship. The so-called holy kiss referred to in Paul’s own letters (see the end of 1 Corinthians 16) is in all likelihood meant here. What makes this especially likely is that this is a Gnostic document, where human sexual expression is seen as defiling. We will examine these issues in more detail in chapter two.

Error 5. *Jesus must have been married since he was an early Jew* (p. 245). This argument overlooks the fact that there were already exceptions to this sort of rule in early Judaism. Ancient Jewish authors attest to the fact that some early Jews were called to celibacy. There is no reason why Jesus could not have been one of them.

In fact, it would appear that Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist set such a precedent for this kin group, and there were earlier prophetic figures (Elijah, perhaps) who may also have remained single. Many scholars, probably rightly, see Matthew 19:10–12 as Jesus’ own justification for remaining single. The kingdom was coming, and it was appropriate for either he or his disciples to remain single in order to focus on their ministry. If this conclusion is correct, then the later medieval conjecture about the marriage of Mary Magdalene and Jesus (and their supposed descendants) is completely discredited.

Error 6. *The Dead Sea Scrolls along with the Nag Hammadi documents are the earliest Christian records* (pp. 234, 245). This is so false it’s what the British would call a howler. The Dead Sea Scrolls are purely Jewish documents; there is nothing Christian about them. There is also no evidence





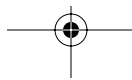
any of the Nag Hammadi documents existed before the late second century A.D., with the possible exception of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

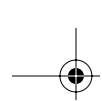
Error 7. Thus far we have examined some historical errors in Dan Brown's book, but we also need to look at some of the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the novel. Whatever he or others may think about the theological beliefs of early Christians, it is wrong to misrepresent that belief system. At one juncture in *The Da Vinci Code*, Teabing argues that the church had to suppress the notion that Jesus was married because "a child of Jesus would undermine the critical notion of Christ's divinity and therefore the Christian Church" (p. 254). What seems to underlie this contention is the false notion that if Jesus had sexual relationships with a wife and sired offspring it would be defiling, or perhaps that as a divine being, Jesus couldn't also be fully human. This of course is not what the creeds suggest. They affirm that Jesus was both fully human as well as fully divine.

Quite simply, there is no reason why Jesus could not have been married. Since Jesus did not teach that sex was defiling (indeed, in Mark 10:1-12, he speaks of it as the means by which two become one flesh as God intended), there is no reason why a married Jesus could not have had sexual relationships and even offspring. Clearly Mark 9-10 reveal that Jesus loved children. Later Christian and Gnostic ascetics had problems with these things, but not Jesus.

At a more philosophical level there are some very significant problems with Brown's book. He apparently fails to grasp that early Christianity, like early Judaism, is not primarily about symbols and metaphors but is deeply rooted in history, including events like the exodus, the reign of King David and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Of course, truth sometimes is expressed through symbol and metaphor, such as in Jesus' parables. But the Gospels themselves are not mere allegories or symbolic myths; they are ancient biographies written according to the historical and literary conventions of the time. They are based, as Luke 1:1-4 says, on the reports of eyewitnesses to these historical events. Christian



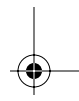
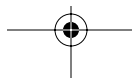


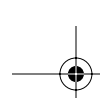
faith, like Jewish faith, is not engendered by cleverly devised fables or wish fulfillment. It would be hard to imagine, for instance, ancient Jews, Jesus' disciples, making up a story about a virginal birth when that wasn't how they understood the prophecy of the coming Messiah (Isaiah 7:14). Indeed, Jesus' unusual birth suggested to the skeptical that Jesus was illegitimate, a notion not congenial to the idea he was the Messiah. No, Christianity is based on certain irreducible and irreplaceable historical events that are the foundation of the faith.

In the end and at the most profound level, Brown misjudges the biblical portrayal of the character of God. He keeps referring to the repression of the "sacred feminine." He contends that this can be found in the Old Testament, suggesting that the Shekinah glory (the physical manifestation of God's presence) originally was seen as a female deity (see p. 309). The problem with this is that God is neither male nor female in the Bible. Rather God, the Creator God, is Spirit (see John 4:24).

The Bible does not attempt to replace ancient female deities with one or more males. People of the Greco-Roman world believed in many gods and goddesses. Jews and later Christians were a tiny minority swimming against the religious current of that world, and they insisted that there is only one God, who is Spirit. This God is not a mere participant in the reproductive cycle of life, like the gods of the crops (Baal) or the fertility goddesses (Magna Mater). On the contrary, he is the One who created all life and indeed the whole material universe. No one can be united with the God of the Bible through sacred sex. Indeed no self-chosen human process could divinize human beings. Eternal life is a gift of God to his people, not an achievement or a self-induced experience. It is no more appropriate to talk about the "sacred feminine" than it is to talk about the "sacred masculine." Human beings are created in the image of God, which means they are created with a unique capacity among creatures for a full, personal relationship with God. In the Bible, being born is seen as very good thing, being born again, even better, but the latter is not achieved by sexual expression.

In Shakespeare's *King Henry IV, Part Two*, the king rebukes Prince Hal,





A Novel Idea?

who is contemplating his father's death and his own assumption of the throne, saying, "Have you a ruffian that will . . . commit the oldest sins the newest kind of ways?" There really is nothing very new about the religious agendas underlying *The Da Vinci Code*. It is simply a bad amalgam of old paganism and, strangely enough, old Gnosticism brought back to life by a masterful storyteller. It can be quite entertaining but also misleading. We need to treat this book as what it really is—not historical fiction but almost entirely fiction, at least when it comes to its assumptions and assertions about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and early Christianity. As beguiling as the thrill of the chase is, it can't hold a candle to the thrill of finding the truth about things that have shaped the very contours of history.

