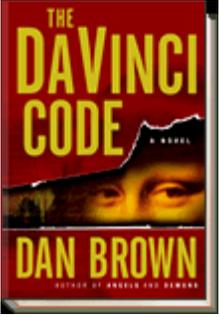


The Da Vinci Code: The Facts Behind The Fiction by Bob Waldrep



The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown is a best seller on the fiction list; however, the author clearly states that the story takes place in the context of factual events, places, organizations and rituals. To enhance the credibility of this claim, Brown includes not only fictional characters in his plot, but real people (both past and present) who will be readily recognized by the book's audience.

On November 3, ABC News devoted an hour of programming in a special *Primetime* with Elizabeth Vargas to investigate the "factual" claims of the book. The conclusion of investigative reporter Vargas, "What we found is that some of the claims the book makes are simply not credible and some of the claims have been made before. But there are some surprising truths behind the story of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Leonardo Da Vinci." (*Primetime*, airdate 11/03/03)

So, should the reader take it as fact or fiction?

It is apparent from the author's viewpoint, he is hopeful it will be taken as mostly fact. This becomes quite clear from the opening segment of the *Primetime* special when the author states: "I began as a skeptic. As I started researching *The Da Vinci Code* I really thought I would disprove a lot of this theory about Mary Magdalene and holy blood and all of that. I became a believer."

What is it he came to believe? Following are some of the claims made (without any rebuttal, I might add) by the characters in his book (bear in mind that the author is, admittedly, a true believer):

"More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion...The Bible as we know it today was collated by the pagan Roman Emperor Constantine the Great." (p.231)

"Nothing in Christianity is original. The pre-Christian God Mithras – called the Son of God and the Light of the World – was born on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days. By the way, December 25 is also the birthday of Osiris, Adonis, and Dionysus. The newborn Krishna was presented with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Even Christianity's holy day was stolen from the pagans." (p.232)

"At this gathering [Council of Nicea in 325 AD] many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon – the date of Easter, the role of the bishops, the administration of sacraments, and, of course, the divinity of Jesus...until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet...Jesus establishment as the 'Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicea...A relatively close vote at that." (p. 233)

"From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history. 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 other gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned." (p.234)

"...almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false. As are the stories about the Holy Grail." (p. 235)

"...legend tells us the Holy Grail is a chalice – a cup. But the Grail's description as a chalice is actually an allegory to protect the true nature of the Holy Grail...The Grail is literally the ancient symbol for womanhood and the Holy Grail represents the sacred feminine and the goddess, which of course has now been lost, virtually eliminated by the Church." (p.238)

"The Church needed to defame Mary Magdalene [making her out to be a prostitute] in order to cover up her dangerous secret – her role as the Holy Grail." (p.244)

"At this point in the gospels, Jesus suspects He will soon be captured and crucified. So he gives Mary Magdalene instructions on how to carry on His Church after He is gone...Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene." (pp 247-248)

"Behold, the greatest cover-up in human history. Not only was Jesus Christ married, but He was a father. My dear, Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel. She was the chalice that bore the royal

bloodline of Jesus Christ. She was the womb that bore the lineage, and the vine from which the sacred fruit sprang forth.” (p 249)

“Mary Magdalene was pregnant at the time of the crucifixion...With the help of Jesus’ trusted uncle, Joseph of Arimathea [she] secretly traveled to France, then known as Gaul. There she found safe refuge in the Jewish community. It was here in France that she gave birth to a daughter. Her name was Sarah.” (p 255)

“The quest for the Holy Grail is literally the quest to kneel before the bones of Mary Magdalene. A journey to pray at the feet of the outcast one, the sacred feminine.” (p.257)

The Grail story is everywhere, but it is hidden. When the Church outlawed speaking of the shunned Mary Magdalene, her story and importance had to be passed on through more discreet channels...channels that supported metaphor and symbolism...The arts...Once you open your eyes to the Holy Grail you see her everywhere. Paintings. Music. Books. Even in cartoons, theme parks, and popular movies.” (p. 261)

These are but a few of the passages that indicate what it is the author purports to have set out to disprove by his research but ended up believing. But how do his “facts” stand up to the historical evidence?

Here is what the *Primetime* report uncovered:

Concerning whether Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, they come to no solid conclusions. Those interviewed who believe as Brown, tried to find Biblical evidence by pointing to the Gospel account of Mary trying to touch Jesus after his resurrection and His telling her to “Stop clinging to me. (John 20:17) Some believe this to be an indication of intimacy indicating the two were married.

According to Dr. Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary this ...”was just her single act of devotion given to him without concern about what people are thinking about what she is doing.”

To this Vargas states: “Most other Biblical scholars we spoke with agree with Darrell Bock’s assessment. But we did find one who thinks the scene in the garden might point to an intimate relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus.”

Note “most” disagree with this position while they found but “one” who agreed with it.

This one was Father Richard McBrien, PhD of the University of Notre Dame who interestingly on several occasions in the interview had stated he did not believe Jesus had been married, even relying upon the Scripture to support his conclusion. On the point in question, however, he concedes that, “*If* (emphasis added) he [Jesus] was married it was obviously to Mary Magdalene.” Not quite the overwhelming evidence that Brown and ABC might have hoped for.

Having failed to find proof from within the Biblical record, Vargas now examines the assertion that the works of Leonardo Da Vinci support this belief. In his book, Brown’s characters put great stock in the works of Da Vinci as evidence that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene who bore his child and was intended to be the foundation of the Church and lead it into goddess worship. Brown is convinced that Da Vinci’s painting of the Last Supper particularly proves this point.

His reasoning, in part, is that Da Vinci includes Mary Magdalene in the portrait at the right hand of Jesus. While art historians have long recognized that individual as the youthful Apostle John, Brown is convinced otherwise. In speaking with Vargas for the *Primetime* interview he reveals he was first exposed to this idea some fifteen years ago while attending a class in which the Professor pointed out that missing from Da Vinci’s painting of the Last Supper was a common cup used for the wine. Brown said he had never noticed this before. Then the professor told them the cup was in the painting but it wasn’t a drinking cup, it was a person. That person he was told was Mary Magdalene who was seated in the painting beside Jesus.

Brown doesn’t stop there. Not only does he believe the painting supports the view that Jesus was married but also that he was a feminist due to the way Da Vinci postures the subjects in the painting forming a “V” between Jesus and the figure to his right (Brown tells us the “V” is an ancient symbol for woman). He believes the painting also gives credence to his belief that Da Vinci was part of a secret society of goddess worshippers, the Priory of Sion, who were tasked with preserving and protecting the Holy Grail.

What seems to have escaped Brown and others who buy into this theory is that Da Vinci was neither present at the Last Supper nor did Jesus and the disciples sit for this painting. Even if he, in fact, intentionally placed Mary Magdalene into his painting that does not make it a historical fact. Nor does it explain why John was left out.

Here is how an eyewitness to the event describes who participated. "Now when evening had come, He was reclining at the table with his twelve disciples." (Matthew 26:20) The author of this Gospel had earlier identified these twelve disciples as: Simon Peter, Andrew, James the son of Zebedee, John, Phillip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. (Matthew 10:3-4) Obviously, were Matthew to have painted this scene it would not have included Mary Magdalene and John would definitely have been part of it.

But what did *Primetime's* investigation turn up on this point? There is a telling scene where Vargas and noted Princeton Professor of Art History, Dr. Jack Wasserman, stand before Da Vinci's painting and the following conversation ensues:

Vargas: *"Isn't it possible that is a woman next to Jesus?"*

Wasserman: *"No, of course not."*

Vargas: *"It looks like a woman."*

Wasserman: *"No it doesn't."*

Vargas: *"Why don't you think so?"*

Wasserman: *"Because it looks like a young male. I see no breasts. The fact that he has long hair, so does Christ have long hair, so does James the figure with his arms stretched out, have long hair, so does that figure second from the left have long hair."*

Vargas: *"But all the other figures, their faces look distinctly masculine, while John's looks quite feminine."*

Wasserman: *"Yes, the matter of the fact in most representations of the Lord's Supper in Florence he looks like a, he's a very, very young man."*

Not being able to get Dr. Wasserman to agree it is a woman, the scene immediately cuts to author, Dan Brown, who declares: "If you look at that painting that is clearly a woman."

Just as Vargas could not find Biblical scholars to support Brown's belief Jesus was married, neither could she find support among art experts that Dr. Wasserman was incorrect, stating: "We were only able to find one prominent art historian who said he'd long believed the figure might be a woman and not a man."

Vargas now turns to what those who embrace this theory believe to be their strongest support - legends, conspiracy theories, and the Gnostic gospels. No historical evidence to support this belief is offered, only theory and conjecture from those who hold to it.

As part of this segment, *Primetime* follows the "story" to France to investigate the legends of the Knights Templars, the Priory of Sion, and other "facts" upon which Brown states his book is based. But when Vargas spoke with scholars who specialize in the study of the Grail and the so-called "Secret Societies" and legends that surround it, she found the same response as she had with Biblical scholars and art historians.

Vargas states: "We interviewed a number of scholars who specialize in medieval history and Grail mythology. The vast majority told us the Knights Templar had no particular connection to Mary Magdalene and there was no proof any Priory of Sion ever existed."

She is told by one of these, Umberto Eco, "The Holy Grail is born as a literary invention. The historical reality of the Holy Grail is the same as the reality of Pinocchio and Little Red Riding Hood."

Vargas' conclusion: "Our attempt to unravel the legends and stories in the south of France have been a strange detour. We found that there was no evidence of a child of Jesus and Mary Magdalene."

Some might think this entire program was a strange detour. However, the detour includes one final segment – a discussion of the Gnostic gospels or the Nag Hammadi texts as they are sometimes referred to after the location in Egypt where they were discovered.

The author of *The Da Vinci Code* tells Vargas these books, “essentially tell an alternative history to the time of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The Church made a very concerted effort to take these documents and destroy them throughout time. The question historians ask themselves is, if the Church is making such a concerted effort to destroy this information you have to assume that it was fairly explosive.”

Why is it so important to Brown, and those who believe like him, that these Gnostic gospels be viewed as credible sources? Because they are the only documents that can be produced that will even remotely support any of the other theories they hold surrounding the Grail and Mary Magdalene. However, before accepting these as a reliable source, one must first completely dismiss or reinterpret the Biblical record.

It is for this reason that Brown uses the characters in *The Da Vinci Code* to alter the facts about how the Bible came into being, asserting it is a fabrication of a male dominated Church that sought to deify the man Jesus rather than follow his intent to place a woman in charge of the Church and worship the goddess.

Are these so-called Gnostic gospels credible? Vargas doesn't bother to address that question, perhaps because at this point they are desperate to find anything that will lend credibility to the author's assertion his book is rooted in exhaustive and painstaking research and will thus justify having allocated an hour of network programming to this venture.

Vargas' opening statement for this segment makes it clear she is working from the framework that these “gospels” are, in fact, valid:

“If you look at the Christian Bible it's clear there are large holes in the stories we have about the life of Jesus. The Church *chose* (her emphasis) the four gospels that tell His story in the New Testament. But, there were other stories written about Jesus – other gospels – so controversial that the Church ordered them destroyed. And they were, except for one set of copies and it remained hidden in Egypt until about fifty years ago.”

It seems she has bought into Brown's version, previously stated, “...if the Church is making such a concerted effort to destroy this information you have to assume that it was fairly explosive.” The inference being that they must be true because the church tried to destroy them. This argument is widely appealed to by those who believe in the veracity of the Nag Hammadi texts.

On this point Christian scholar Douglas Groothuis has accurately noted, “Many sympathetic with Gnosticism make much of the notion that the Gnostic writings were suppressed by the early Christian church. But this assertion does not, in itself, provide support one way or the other for the truth or falsity of Gnostic doctrine. If truth is not a matter of majority vote, neither is it a matter of minority dissent.” (*Christian Research Journal*, Winter 1991)

Though these documents were destroyed, that they existed certainly had not been swept under the rug. Irenaeus, an early Christian theologian and a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote *Against Heresies* to address some of the heresies of these Gnostic teachings.

As Groothuis points out, “Irenaeus went to great lengths to present the theologies of the various Gnostic schools in order to refute them biblically and logically. If suppression had been his concern, the book never would have been written as it was. Further, to argue cogently against the Gnostics, Irenaeus and the other anti-Gnostic apologists would presumably have had to be diligent to correctly represent their foes in order to avoid ridicule for misunderstanding them.” (*Ibid*)

The existence of these documents is not in question. Even Christian scholars readily admit they are real documents that were found in Egypt and date back to the fourth or fifth century. What needs to be addressed is: Were they in circulation shortly after the time of Christ's death? Did those close to Jesus really write them? And most importantly, is the information they contain accurate?

Rather than address these questions, Vargas focuses on whether these Gnostic gospels affirm that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. Again, one must bear in mind that even if they do teach this, the issue of their credibility must be addressed.

However, laying that issue aside and simply addressing their teaching concerning Jesus and Mary Magdalene, here are the statements given Vargas by Dr. Elaine Pagels, Princeton University and Dr. Karen King, Harvard Divinity School, both of whom have written in support of the Gnostic gospels and trust their reliability:

“And *whether* Jesus loves Mary in some kind of sexual way, is a possible implication of the story.” (emphasis added)

King: “There is this, these tantalizing *hints*, but they are *not definitive*.” (emphasis added)

Vargas tells the viewer that Pagels confirms the Gnostic gospels do, “tell us how Mary Magdalene was remembered and regarded by some early Christians.”

Pagels then states on camera: “If I were *guessing*, and we are *guessing*, I would *guess* that there was a special relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. *I would also guess that it did not take a sexual form.*” (emphasis added)

It is “possible”, “hints” at, is “not definitive”, a “guess”. This is hardly the shocking evidence we were led to expect.

Seemingly unable to prove Jesus and Mary were married, Vargas moves on to another point telling the viewer that Pagels thinks, “there is evidence that Mary Magdalene was remembered as a powerful figure in the movement.”

Vargas thinks she is now on to something stating that, “Even outside the Gnostic gospels there is evidence that in the first centuries after Jesus, Mary Magdalene was treated with great respect by several of the early church leaders who were men.”

So after almost an hour of programming and not telling how many man hours of research and production, *Primetime* has concluded that while there may not be evidence that she was married to Jesus there is certainly evidence that she was a powerful or prominent figure in the movement.

This is hardly new and sensational information. In fact, most Christians would agree, it is supported by, both the Biblical record, and the writings of the early Church fathers. As Dr. Jeffrey Bingham of Dallas Theological Seminary states in his interview with Vargas, “You don’t need to go to the Gnostic gospels in order to find a high view of Mary and a praise of her for her faith.”

So what conclusions does Vargas draw after so extensive an investigation?

“We didn’t find any proof that Jesus ever had a wife or that he left behind a child when he died. Nor did we unlock the mysteries behind the Holy Grail. But we did learn a lot more about a man who changed history and the woman who was very important to him. Whether or not they were husband and wife, this is a love story because we discovered that Mary Magdalene was closer to Jesus than we ever imagined.”

Actually, the viewer learned nothing new about Jesus. Other than being exposed to numerous theories and conjectures that were repeatedly admitted as having no basis in fact. Even their proponents failed to come up with any supporting evidence that can be substantiated. Had that not been the case, Vargas’ closing statement would have been much different than the above.

Watching this journalistic effort reminded me of Geraldo Rivera’s television special, *The Mystery of Al Capone’s Vault*, which aired in April of 1986. That show would achieve the highest ratings for a syndicated special in television history as viewers watched with anxious anticipation for Rivera to fulfill his promise that he would open Al Capone’s vault on live television and reveal the treasure that Capone had been secreted there decades before. The show was mostly build up and teasers to fill airtime until the vault was reached.

Finally the cameras approach the vault; the “Grail” you might say has been found. Geraldo pours everything he has into making this a moment of suspense and high energy as he slowly opens the door to reveal...dirt. It was empty. No treasure. No story. Nothing.

That is exactly what one finds when opening the evidentiary vault for factual support of Brown’s claims in *The Da Vinci Code*. Nothing. The search certainly was enough to fill an hour of television programming, but Elizabeth Vargas and *Primetime* failed to make finding this “nothing” nearly as exciting as Rivera did with Capone’s vault.

Are you listening Geraldo? Perhaps it is time for you to do another special and “open” the Da Vinci vault. At least you know how to make “nothing” seem riveting.