

## Dealing with the Da Vinci Code – Part 1

In 2006, the Hollywood blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code* was released. The film was based on a mystery novel of the same name by Dan Brown, and explores an alternative religious history. The novel became a worldwide bestseller that sold over 80 million copies and has been translated into at least 44 languages, according to its Wikipedia entry. However, the book and movie was “extensively denounced by many Christian denominations as an attack on the Catholic Church, and also consistently criticized by scholars for its historical and scientific inaccuracies.”

Certainly, since its release, numerous books have been published that discuss or refute the claims made by Dan Brown. So why take the time to examine the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*? After all, it is a work of fiction. Often critics of *The Da Vinci Code* are ridiculed as taking a work of fiction too seriously. But in fact, it is Dan Brown’s own claims that make responding to the book worthwhile.

In an ‘introductory comment’ before the beginning of the story, Brown writes: “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in the novel are accurate.” The documents and rituals to which he refers are at the heart of the plot. They are also the heart of Brown’s proposal about Christianity.

In an interview, Brown told listeners of National Public Radio during a 2003 publicity tour that his characters and action are fictional, but “the ancient history, the secret documents, the rituals, all of this is factual.” Around the same time, he said on CNN that “the background is all true.” In light of this, we must see excuses about *The Da Vinci Code* being fictional as merely a smokescreen. Indeed, it is the book’s nature as a fictional story that actually serves as a pretext to make claims which Dan Brown believes are factual.

In other words, the fictional drama is simply a platform to make some very significant claims about the origin and nature of true Christianity. After all, if everyone was taking their own advice of regarding this work as merely fictional, why all the discussion and controversy surrounding it? The fact is, *The Da Vinci Code* is a book about Christianity, packaged as a mystery thriller. As such, we are not responding to a work of fiction, but to the claims Dan Brown makes about Christianity in that book.

In fact, Brown drew most of the theory of *The Da Vinci Code* from the book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, a non-fictional work which carries similar theories. Such was the similarity between *The Da Vinci Code* and *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* that Baigent and Leigh sued him for plagiarism.

Should Christians know how to refute the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*? Yes, for two reasons. One, because we need to answer false claims about Christ. Two, because it is a great opportunity to share the Gospel with unbelievers who will no doubt ask their Christian family, colleagues and co-workers about the novel or film. For much of the work here, I have relied heavily on Dr Kevin Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

What makes *The Da Vinci Code* controversial are a number of assertions that Dan Brown makes about the history of Christianity. One is that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene (who, according to him, was also an apostle) and that the two of them had children

together. Another is that Christianity is merely the strand of belief among many competing ones that emerged triumphant among the early followers of Jesus. A third is that the early followers of Jesus acknowledged the “sacred feminine” or goddess principle, a belief that they inherited from ancient Judaism.

The real core of *The Da Vinci Code* is the notion that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had children together. According to Brown, this idea is so shocking that Christianity since Constantine has carefully suppressed the evidence that proves it. He seems convinced, as do his supporters, that the whole Christian faith would collapse if Jesus had been married.

This leads us to answer two questions: first, *could* Jesus have married and had children, and second, *did* He? If in fact, we arrive at conclusions different to those of Brown, his entire theory is essentially a dud. If Jesus *could* have married, then Christianity does not depend upon the question of whether He *did*. If Jesus *did not* marry, then Christianity does not rise or fall upon the question of whether or not He *could* marry.

Brown makes an assumption which he never questions. He assumes that the Jesus who is worshipped by the Christian churches could not have married. He apparently thinks that the marriage of Jesus would sink Christianity. He never tests or explains this assumption. Believing it is the deathblow to Christianity, he plunges headlong into providing supposed evidence to prove that Jesus did indeed marry. But what is his evidence?

Brown admits that the New Testament documents never even hint that Jesus was married, but he begins to build his theory by pointing out that they do show that Mary Magdalene travelled with Jesus (Luke 8:1-3). He then begins to argue from culture: he claims it was a cultural necessity for Jewish males during the First Century: for a man to remain unmarried was considered a scandal.

Then Brown turns to the Gnostic documents of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and *The Gospel of Philip*. Here he points to their records that Jesus showed favouritism to Mary and at one point in *the Gospel of Philip*, there is the account of Jesus kissing Mary Magdalene. Also contained in this document is its calling Mary a “companion” to Jesus, and Brown infers that this word in Aramaic was only used for spouses and lovers.

In short, Brown’s entire historical evidence for these very large claims rests almost entirely on four sources: *The Gospel of Luke*, the apocryphal *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, and recorded Jewish social customs of the first century.

Let’s begin with Luke. **Luke 8:1-3** states, “And it came to pass afterward, that He went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve were with Him, and certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, and Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto Him of their substance.”

Dan Brown is correct that, according to this passage, Mary Magdalene did travel with Jesus. So did Joanna. So did Susanna. So did many other women. Nobody argues that Jesus was married to all these women. Since Luke treats them all identically, this passage makes no contribution at all toward discovering whether Jesus was married. What about First Century Jewish social custom? Was it true that a man remaining

unmarried was scandalous in Jewish culture? In fact, it was not. Many men commonly chose to remain single among the Essenes and within the Qumran community. We see the New Testament as depicting John the Baptist as single, as we assume, was Saul of Tarsus. Jesus Himself described men who had made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom's sake. While most Jewish men married, it was not a scandal for a man to be unmarried. This claim is simply false.

The *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* is a Gnostic document written during the second century. We will return to the topic of Gnosticism later in this series, but suffice it to say that the first part of this work has been lost, but what we have begins with Jesus instructing His disciples and then departing. The disciples are then overcome with grief, something which the New Testament has no record of – indeed the pause between the end of the Gospel and the book of Acts suggests an expectant watchfulness, not a despairing grief.

Be that as it may, the book then has Peter asking Mary Magdalene to recite whatever words of Jesus she remembers. Peter significantly says that Jesus loved her more than the rest of women. Mary goes on to recite a vision she claims she had, to which Andrew objects to as being too strange. Peter also agrees that her account is unbelievable, and says that Jesus would not have revealed so much privately to a woman. Mary begins to cry, and Levi steps in to rebuke Peter for being so hot-headed.

The author of the Gnostic document sees Mary as one towards whom Jesus held great affection. Even so, nothing in the text of this Gnostic gospel indicates that Mary was an apostle, as Brown asserts.

Interestingly, here is where Dan Brown's theory shoots itself in the foot. Far from esteeming women and giving them a place of honour, *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* displays the characteristic Gnostic contempt of women. In the book, Peter objects that Mary's femaleness is what makes her an unlikely recipient of special revelation from Jesus.

This is contrary to the New Testament where the book of Acts records Philip the evangelist's daughters as being prophetesses. Levi's response to Peter is not that females are worthy recipients, but that Jesus has *made* Mary worthy *in spite of* the fact that she is a female. In other words, the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* does not have an elevated view of women, but a rather demeaning view.

What about the fact that Peter and Levi agree that Jesus loved Mary more than the apostles? All that does is prove that Jesus had a love for Mary that was like His love for the male apostles. Even if this document were authoritative, all it does is give Mary a place of honour. It certainly does not prove they were married.

We then turn to the fourth piece of evidence that Brown uses to assert that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene – the *Gospel of Philip*. Like the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, it is also a Gnostic document, probably written in Greek during the latter half of the Third Century. It is here that Mary is said to be a companion of Jesus, and Brown suggests that the Aramaic word for 'companion' only applies to spouses and lovers.

Well, this falls flat on its face. To begin with, the *Gospel of Philip* was written in Greek, not in Aramaic. The manuscript we have today is a translation into Coptic. And had it been written in Aramaic, the word for companion in Aramaic meant *companion*!

*The Gospel of Philip* repeats the claim of the Gospel of Mary, that Jesus loved her more than the other disciples. If that is the case, of which the true Gospels of the New Testament never hint towards, then all it means is a greater degree of love, not a different quality – suggesting marriage or romance.

But then, what about the fact that the *Gospel of Philip* records Jesus as kissing Mary? Well, this is no problem either. First Century customs made a kiss a traditional greeting between friends. That's still the case in many parts of the world today, even between heterosexual members of the same sex. No romance or intimacy is implied. Indeed, Paul closes four of his epistles with the phrase: "*Greet one another with a holy kiss*" (**Romans 16:16**).

Dan Brown's evidence for Jesus being married is not even respectable. It would be thrown out of a court of law in a heartbeat. However, it seems the bigger the lie, the more likely people are to believe it. In fact, Adolf Hitler said, "The great masses of people... will more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a small one." He certainly proved that.

It seems a massive fabrication gets more attention than a small one, simply because it is a large claim. But having seen that the evidence for the historicity of Jesus' marriage is practically zero, we must deal with the question, *could* Jesus have married? Even though it is plainly obvious that He didn't, would a married Jesus undermine the Christian faith the way Dan Brown asserts?

To answer that question, we have to delve into some deep theological waters. We have to probe the mystery of Jesus' divine and human natures. If we were to sum it up in simplistic terms, we would say that Jesus was 100% God and 100% man, and yet one person. He was not 50% God and 50% man, nor was he two persons residing in one body. He was completely human and completely divine, yet one person. The Bible clearly teaches both.

1. **As to His humanity:** Jesus was subject to all the limitations of unfallen humanity. He grew up as a human (**Luke 2:52**); He hungered and thirsted (**Matthew 4:2, John 19:28**); He grew weary (**John 4:6**); He could be frustrated (**Mark 7:24**); He was called Son of Man (**Luke 19:10**) and Jesus (**Matthew 1:21**). He was able to die.
2. **As to His deity:** Jesus possessed incommunicable attributes such as omnipotence (**Matthew 28:18**), omniscience (**John 1:48**), omnipresence (**Matthew 18:20**), self-existence (**John 1:4**). He was immortal (**John 10:18**). He also performed on earth, and performs to this day, works that only God can do: He creates (**John 1:3**), sustains (**Colossians 1:17**), forgives sin (**Luke 7:48**), judges sin (**John 5:27**). He accepted worship (**Matthew 14:33**) when angels refused it (**Revelations 19:10**). He is called God (**Hebrews 1:8**), the Son of God (**Matthew 16:16**), the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords (**Revelations 19:16**).

***Jesus was undiminished deity and perfect humanity united in one Person forever.*** Yet the New Testament writers insist that Jesus is one Person. In fact, much of the epistle of 1 John is written to counter the Gnostic view of Christ's nature. The Gnostics saw Christ as a spiritual being who could not have taken a human body. They taught that Jesus projected the illusion of a body, or that the Christ came upon Jesus at His baptism and left him before the crucifixion.

John responds to this Gnostic distinction in his epistles. He insists that Jesus and the Christ are one and the same person. Jesus Christ is come in the flesh; Jesus *is* the Christ, and all

who deny it are in the spirit of antichrist. Now, why is this important to understand? Because it lies at the very heart of Dan Brown's claims. Brown believes that a Jesus who married could not be God, and therefore the Christian faith is a hoax.

At first, the idea of a married Jesus may shock and even offend Christians, but we need to think biblically. Getting married and having children are human activities. If Jesus was truly and fully human, then he was capable of getting married and having children. This seems shocking at first, but it is usually because of a poor understanding of the humanity of Jesus.

Jesus Christ was a helpless baby at one point. Jesus Christ had to eat and drink. Jesus Christ could get tired and have to rest and sleep. While these facts have always amazed Christians, we do not deny them. Likewise, then, the fact that Jesus could have married as an expression of His full humanity might amaze us, but it should not turn into denial, or into a misguided defence of His divinity.

We must remember that God created marriage, sexual relations and having children. All of these, when performed according to God's Word, are good and pure. God says in **Hebrews 13:4** that "*Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled.*" We denigrate the beautiful nature of marriage if we think that somehow Jesus would have been sinning had He married.

What about having children? In the same way that marriage would not contradict His deity, fatherhood would not have either. There is nothing sinful or ungodly in being a father, since procreation and parenthood are commended by God Himself. The fact is, He did not marry according to all evidence. Had He fathered children, they would have been human according to His human nature.

We must be very careful of repeating the ancient heresy of Nestorianism. Nestorianism postulates a divine Christ and a human Jesus joined together like Siamese twins. When we think this way – we will agree that Jesus could have married Mary, but Christ could not have. This is a giant error, and a step backwards. As I said, these are deep theological waters.

Extreme precision is needed when discussing how the two natures of Jesus were yet one Person. But we do no service to the Person of Jesus Christ when we defend the One at the expense of the other. The point is this: as a true human being, Jesus could have married. Christianity does not rise and fall on this point. But the fact is, He did not.

Why not? The answer is the sad fact which *The Da Vinci Code* misses as it talks about church-wide conspiracies and cover-ups. It misses the entire purpose of Jesus' life – a purpose He Himself stated in **Luke 19:10**: "*for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.*"

Jesus Christ came not to simply leave us with the perfect human example. He did not come merely to teach us the things of God. Nor did He come simply to improve the health of people and alleviate suffering. His whole ministry was focused on His main purpose – to die as a sin-bearer for the world.

As God He could be completely sinless and infinitely valuable, so that His life's blood would be valuable enough to cover the debt that man's sin had incurred. As a man, He could substitute for other men, being not more or less human but truly and fully human, so as to be a true substitute for us all. And as a human, He could die, which was the price for sin.

Therefore, only the God-man could accomplish redemption and salvation. That is why Jesus as the God-man came on a mission to die for the sins of the world, not primarily to live a perfect life as an example, or to teach or heal – though He did those things as well. But focusing on those would confuse the purpose for God coming to earth in human form.

*The Da Vinci Code* rises or falls on the supposed premise that Jesus was married, and this has been covered up since the days of Constantine. Supposedly, a cover-up has been necessary since a married Jesus would destroy Christianity. But as we have seen, a married Jesus would not have destroyed Christianity or detracted from His divinity in any way. But more importantly, there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that He did marry, and all the evidence in the world to suggest He would not have married as the God-man coming to die for the sins of mankind.

In short – could Jesus have married? Yes. Did Jesus marry? No. This cuts the legs right off *The Da Vinci Code*. The big, supposed cover-up is really a hoax itself. Next in this mini-series, we will examine the claim that modern Christianity was the version that Constantine forced on the world, eliminating all others.