

Dealing with the Da Vinci Code – Part 3

We come to the third and final part of our mini-series looking at Dan Brown's bestselling book *The Da Vinci Code*. We've looked previously at the question of Jesus being married, and then considered whether orthodox Christianity was in fact, as Brown suggests, a sect that was given muscle by Constantine, while the original Christianity was suppressed. We've learnt in Parts 1 and 2 why Brown's claims on these two assertions are false.

We now turn our attention to the third main assertion made in the book. Brown says that the early followers of Jesus acknowledged the 'sacred feminine' or 'goddess principle,' a belief that they inherited from ancient Judaism, and that Mary Magdalene was one of the apostles.

Brown says in *The Da Vinci Code* that the world's ancient religions commonly acknowledged a feminine deity or goddess. This was often done to ensure fertility and wholeness among the population. In Brown's opinion, goddess worship dignified women and fostered peaceful, humane attitudes wherever it flourished. Brown describes ancient pagan religions which included goddess worship as healthy, egalitarian and liberating for women.

Brown goes further though, and claims that Jesus Himself acknowledged and believed in this goddess principle. This, he says, Jesus learned from ancient Judaism, which supposedly had this same concept. *The Da Vinci Code* says that in ancient Judaism, Yahweh (the male god) and Shekinah (the goddess) were believed to cohabit in the temple.

The Da Vinci Code asserts that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, showing their support of the sacred feminine. So important was Mary Magdalene to the true followers of Jesus that they have continued to reverence her: she is the so-called Holy Grail. *The Da Vinci Code* goes on to say that Constantine was responsible for inventing a new form of Christianity that rejected the sacred feminine.

Seeking to unite his empire, Constantine used his influence to create and enforce a Christian orthodoxy that denied the goddess principle, deified Jesus, and sought to erase all record of the marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Having oppressed the feminine as a sacred principle, Christianity after Constantine became a malignant and violent religion that repressed women and vilified human sexuality. Now, how much of this is true?

As before, we have seen the Dan Brown takes a grain of truth, surrounds it with a ton of fiction. He is right that ancient pagan religions worshipped male and female deities who often married or consorted with each other. In the Phoenician or Canaanite religion, the coupling of the storm god Baal and the fertility goddess Asherah were thought to bring prosperity to the land. This is why Israel was later caught up in some of these abominable practises to Baal and Asherah, when they disobeyed and embraced much of this religion.

Paul writes to the Corinthians where the temple to Aphrodite (also known as Venus in the Roman tradition) was the centre of rampant prostitution in honour of this goddess of love, beauty and fertility. Likewise, Paul wrote to Ephesus, where the worship of Artemis (Roman name Diana) was well-known, and of course Paul's preaching against it brought a near riot.

It is a plain fact that goddess worship was widespread. But is that the same as saying that it was universal? That is a leap of logic, because the Old Testament, also known as the Tanakh,

clearly shows that it was not.

The word Tanakh is still the term which modern Jews use to refer to the book which Christians call the Old Testament. The word Tanakh is actually an acronym, made up of the first letters of three words. Torah, Neviim and Ketuvim.

The Torah are the first five books of Moses, the Neviim (which means 'the prophets') include all the historical books of the Old Testament, as well as the major and minor prophets. Ketuvim means 'the writings' and it includes all the works of poetry, as well as Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles. In short, the Tanakh is the same Old Testament we have today, simply in a different order than in our Christian Bibles.

This collection of Hebrew and Aramaic writings, compiled and widely recognised as inspired centuries before Jesus was born, makes it clear that there was at least one religion on earth which *did not* embrace this teaching. If anyone dates the accuracy of these documents, the Dead Sea scrolls show that the Tanakh as it was in 250 BC is the same Tanakh we have today. It was the authority among Jews in Jesus' day, and it remains authoritative today among Christians as our Old Testament.

In this collection of ancient writings, we find something very different to the goddess worship which Dan Brown says was universal. Instead, we find a single God, Yahweh, who is neither male nor female in the human biological sense of the term. Indeed, according to the Tanakh, both men and women are made in the image of this God. If both are made in the image of God, then the distinctions of masculinity and femininity as they apply to the creatures cannot be divided up and one or the other applied to Him.

But, as we pointed out, the Old Testament records that Israel often departed from the worship of the one true God and began to worship foreign gods and goddesses. The prophets of Israel repeatedly denounced the worship of all gods and goddesses other than Yahweh. Entire books are written against this – Isaiah, Jeremiah and many of the other prophets. This polytheism was only finally dealt with after Israel was taken into captivity by the Babylonians during the Sixth Century BC.

In the post-exilic books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi and Zechariah, it is clear that Israel is cured of its adulterous approach to religion, and is now committed to the worship of the one true God. Another error is looming around the corner – that of legalism – but at least they have been cured of religious idolatry.

In spite of this evidence, undisputed by scholars worldwide, Brown introduces an unsubstantiated and apparently novel claim – that Israel did have this idea of a sacred feminine in their worship. A goddess by the name of Shekinah supposedly consorted with Yahweh in the Temple.

Actually, in the Old Testament, the '*shekinah*' simply refers to the glory of God that surrounds Him. It is sometimes seen as smoke, sometimes as light – but it is never personalised with personal pronouns like he or she. In this case, Brown has accepted and taught a pure fabrication.

But what about *The Da Vinci Code's* claim that goddess worship dignified women and lead to peaceful, stable societies? Once again, Brown's claims fly in the face of actual fact. A casual

glance at ancient civilisations that practised goddess worship does nothing to vindicate this idea.

Egypt, Canaanite Phoenicia, Greece, and Rome were all imperial nations that viewed women primarily as possessions. Nothing in their ancient literature supports Brown's idea, but instead suggests the opposite. Women were seen as necessary evils, mere tools to satisfy the sexual desire of men and to provide children.

As much as liberals will cry out in disagreement, the Tanakh is the first example of a religion that actually dignified women, as seen so clearly in the laws in the Torah and in the books of Ruth and 1 Samuel. And to add insult to injury, goddess worship not only demeaned women, it was cruel and savage to all people.

For example, Baal and Asherah worship include the butchering of human babies. Excavated Canaanite houses have found baby skeletons that were placed in clay jars alive, and then put in a wall and bricked up to die there as a sacrifice to the gods to bless and spare their house. You can hear the outrage in God's voice when he speaks to Israelites indulging in the same abominable practises – giving human sacrifices to Molech.

To support his claim, Dan Brown claims that the early Christians did indulge in various sexual rites. He says that this proves the link. But once again, Brown is confusing Gnosticism for Christianity. If you remember our treatment of Gnosticism from Part 2 of this series, you will recall that the Gnostics regarded the spirit as good, and matter as evil. Therefore for them the human soul was good, and the body was evil.

Well, from there, they disagreed as to how to implement this principle. Most of them said that since the material body is evil, it must be disciplined, and its desires denied. Therefore, the majority of Gnostics had a very low view of pleasurable activities such as eating, drinking, and sexual relations.

A small minority of Gnostics, however, gave the opposite answer. They argued that the body is so evil that it is completely irredeemable. Therefore it is irrelevant what you do with your body, and so any and all bodily desires can and should be indulged.

These Gnostic cults involved bizarre sexual rituals. This minority movement among the Gnostic cult is probably the closest group to what Dan Brown is trying to paint as original, orthodox Christianity. Some of these cults did focus on female goddesses such as Sophia. But these were only a splinter group from an already heretical cult. To make out that a tiny warped group from a larger warped group were the true followers of Jesus is an outlandish claim indeed.

Now to say that Jesus – living at the time when the synagogue was now operating as a means of increasing obedience to the Tanakh and delivering Israel from a return to polytheism – was actually involved with goddess worship and approving of it, is to invent a Jesus out of thin air.

Dan Brown has tried to invent a Jesus religion by taking an obscure sect out of an eventually refuted cult, and foisting this on the world as original Christianity. And anyone with a shred of interest in the true history of the situation will quickly see, his claims have no basis in history.

On the heels of this, Dan Brown suggests that Christianity had at least one female apostle: Mary Magdalene. He would also like us to believe that the presence of one or more female apostles is proof that early Christians held a higher view of women than the later, patriarchal revision of Christianity by Constantine. But even here, his attempt to use Gnosticism fails. Not only so, but it is a poor fit.

Gnosticism only partially resembles the early 'Jesus religion' that Dan Brown depicts. For example, most Gnostics condemned marriage and did not engage in sexual activity, let alone sex rites. Gnostics did not hold a high view of women; their views were certainly much lower than the Christianity that is presented in the New Testament. Gnosticism was *not* a liberating religion for women.

For proof of Mary's supposed apostleship, Brown relies on a conversation in the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. We have already looked at this 'gospel' in Part 1 of this series and seen it does nothing to advance Dan Brown's assertions. Brown further cites Hippolytus' commentary on the Old Testament document, the *Song of Solomon*. But in context, Hippolytus (who led a faction of the Christian church in Rome during the late Second and early Third Centuries) is here discussing the role of women as witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

Pastor Kevin Bauder describes the chronology:

- On Easter morning, certain women (including Mary Magdalene) went to the tomb of Jesus and were met by the angel (**Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8**). The angel announced to the women that Jesus had arisen. Then he instructed the women to tell Jesus' disciples that Jesus was going into Galilee and would meet them there. The women, however, were so afraid that they kept this angelic announcement secret.
- Subsequently, a second episode occurred (**Mark 16:9-11; John 20:11-18**). Jesus appeared personally to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb. Following that episode, Mary went and announced to the disciples that she had seen the risen Lord Jesus.
- Luke abbreviates his account of both of these instances (**Luke 24:1-11**), but adds the useful information that at least four women were involved as witnesses of these events.
- When Mary Magdalene and the other women announced that they had seen Jesus, the disciples refused to believe them. Later on, Jesus appeared (unrecognized, at first) to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. These disciples explicitly mentioned the testimony of the women, which they still did not believe (**Luke 24:22-23**). Jesus rebuked these men for their unbelief and then revealed who He was.

Now when Hippolytus comments on these events, he refers to the women, including Mary Magdalene, as female apostles. He says, "Christ Himself came to them so that the women would be apostles of Christ." Later, Hippolytus has Christ rebuking the male apostles for not believing the women by saying, "I wanted to send them to you as apostles."

Now, here is where word meanings become so crucial. You have to remember that the early church often had to take old words and give them new meanings, while sometimes coming up with new words to define new things. For example, the word 'elder' used to mean old man, became the title of a church office, as did the old word for a shepherd. The old word

for a servant also became a title of a church officer – a deacon. Indeed, the word for church was the old word for a general assembly.

Now, sometimes in ancient Christian literature, these words are used in their newer, technical sense. Sometimes, however, they are used in their older, more general sense. You'll find them intermingled in Christian literature. Sometimes this intermingling can create confusion: occasionally a usage is not clear.

One of the words that the early Christians invested with new meaning was the word *apostle*. Originally this word simply referred to a person who was sent as a messenger or envoy. The first Christians used it to denote the leaders whom Jesus had appointed to govern the community of His followers.

But at the same time, they also kept using it in its broader sense of a 'sent one.' There are some examples of this dual use. **Acts 14:14** calls Barnabas an apostle, probably because he had been sent as a messenger from the church at Antioch. Likewise, Paul refers to Epaphroditus as an apostle of the church at Philippi—Epaphroditus had been a 'sent-one' from to Paul in prison (**Philippians 2:25**).

Neither of these references suggests that Barnabas or Epaphroditus were the kind of apostles who had seen Christ themselves or had a special place of authority in the early church. The word deacon is used in the same way. So it's this type of usage that has to be born in mind when Dan Brown makes assertions about Mary Magdalene when quoting from Hippolytus.

Hippolytus was far likelier to be using the word in its general sense of a 'sent-one.' Brown takes a leap from Hippolytus using the word 'apostle' to describe the women who came back from the tomb of Jesus to saying that it was an office in the early church, and that the original followers of Jesus had female apostles.

According to Brown, it was only later, under Constantine, that this dignified role was suppressed, and Christianity was converted in to a patriarchal role. Now while this theory may resonate with radical feminists and with those forever hoping to find a conspiracy theory to prove the Bible wrong or untrustworthy, the bottom line is that it is not true.

As we have seen, no religion honoured women like the monotheistic religion of ancient Judaism, from which Jesus and His disciples came – and Christianity carried that on. Gnostic sects certainly didn't, nor was there a male chauvinistic conspiracy to suppress the supposed sacred feminine. All of this is pure fabrication and fiction.

It is always ironic to me that the opponents of Christianity supposedly take the rational and intellectual higher ground, claiming that Christians use their religion as a crutch when the facts of history, science and archaeology supposedly contradict it. They play faith and fact off against each other, as if it is an either/or choice. You either embrace the facts, which supposedly excludes faith, or you embrace faith and dismiss the facts.

However, in examining *The Da Vinci Code*, we have seen the very opposite. We have seen the facts support our faith. We have seen that the supposed facts which Dan Brown relies on are no facts at all.

Jesus Christ could have married, and it would not have undermined Christianity, but He didn't. Mary was not an apostle in the technical sense of the term. Christianity did not

include a form of goddess worship at its inception, nor did Constantine try to eradicate it for political reasons.

The kind of Christianity Dan Brown describes was not Christianity at all, but a customised imaginary religion made up of the extreme sects of Gnosticism combined with paganism and a few purely novel ideas that Brown introduced. There was also no conspiracy to squash the Gnosticism which Brown describes as Christianity. In fact, it died on its own, in response to the clear apologetic writings of Irenaeus.

A good conspiracy always draws a crowd. Of course, the sad thing about a conspiracy theory is it is rather like a little boy poking you in the stomach with a stick saying, “Do you have a temper?” “No,” you say. Again he pokes you and asks, “Do you have a temper?” “No,” you say, more firmly this time. After about seven provocations you reply with heat, “Stop doing that!” “See,” says the little boy, “You do have a temper!”

The conspiracy theorist pokes the Christian in the ribs by saying, “Do you have anything to hide?” No, we say. But he continues to poke, and each time he jabs with historical inaccuracy, general misinformation and pure fabrications. When finally Christians answer with a resounding refutation of such foolishness, the conspiracy theorist smugly says, “See – you must have something to hide if you are reacting in this way!”

Therefore, if we say nothing, we are supposedly wrong because we have no answer. If we do reply, we are supposedly wrong because we are getting defensive, and it must mean we have something to hide. I’m reminded of Christ’s words to the impossible Pharisees:

“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

Matthew 11:16-19

So to the hardened scoffer, we say, “Mock on.” To the honest seeker, we say, “Come and see. The truth is in Christ.” To the believer in Christ, we say:

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.”

1 Peter 3:15-16