

LECTURE FOUR: The Priory of Sion Hoax and the Formation of the Christian Canon

I. The Priory of Sion Fraud

The Da Vinci Code begins with this assertion: “The Priory of Sion – a European secret society founded in 1099 -- is a real organization. In 1975 Paris’s Bibliotheque Nationale discovered parchments known as *Les Dossiers Secrets*, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo and Leonardo da Vinci.”

A. Ferreting Out the Truth

This subject is complex and confusing, but suffice it to say that Dan Brown’s “Fact” is not a fact. The Priory of Sion is an elaborate hoax.

There was actually an Order of Sion. Its true name was the Order of Notre Dame of Sion, which was founded in 1099 by Augustinian monks. It was disbanded and absorbed into the Jesuits in 1617. It was headquartered for many years at the monastery of Our Lady of Mt. Zion, then transferred its headquarters to St. Leonard ‘Acre in Palestine and later to Sicily. It never had any influence over the Templars, nor was it known to have an interest in the occult or esoteric matters.

Tracking the fraudulent “Priory of Sion,” begins in mid-nineteenth century France, where an upsurge of interest in the occult led to the creation of many esoteric groups. Politically, France during this time entered a time of fierce jousting between the royalists, whose number included many members of the Roman Catholic Church, far-right forces, and supporters of the old French royalty, arrayed against the republicans, who included those who sought a completely democratic political system and a large number of Freemasons. The Freemasons and other democrats managed to dominate French government from 1877 to the eve of the Second World War. One of the Freemason leaders, proposed a method that he claimed was used by Templars to influence medieval society, the method of “synarchy,” whereby a small group of people would commit themselves to strict moral values and slowly expand their influence. Many French people feared this policy: a political backlash against Masons and Jews was created. Some groups formed in fact with a quasi-Masonic orientation, but their true purpose was to oppose the Masons.

One of many groups with anti-Masonic and anti-Semitic themes was founded by a young man named Pierre Plantard. His group’s name was known as the Alpha Galates. Their stated purpose was the “renewal of France.” During the second world war the Nazis made it a practice to arrest the leaders of esoteric organizations, put them in concentration camps, and seize their records and membership rolls, which they placed in a central depository. Plantard petitioned Marshal Petain, head of the Nazi-occupation Vichy regime, to investigate a vast Jewish-Masonic plot. He publicly used the name Alpha Galates to promote an anti-Semitic agenda. Plantard hung around the edges of public respectability, hungering for acceptance but never finding it. By the 1950’s, Plantard was promoting himself in Catholic circles as the Merovingian pretender to the throne of France. In 1956, Plantard and others created a group known as the “Priory of Sion.”

In the early 1960’s a French author named Gerard De Sede published a number of popular books about mysterious lost treasure, including one in 1962 called *The Templars Are Among Us* which opined that lost Templar treasure was hidden in a subterranean chapel at Gisors castle. The government investigated his claims shortly thereafter and found no treasure. De Sede also produced a number of parchments related to the Merovingian line and Templar treasure that he assured the public were genuine. After a dispute over book royalties, his colleague Plantard admitted that these parchments were fake. Another indication of Plantard’s falsehoods is the fact that the survival of the Merovingian bloodline as promulgated in the “Priory” documents is based on the alleged marriage of Giselle de Razes to the seventh-century Merovingian King Dagobert II. Giselle de Razes never existed. Plantard fabricated her.

Opportunity for this speculation about the Templars, the Merovingians, lost treasure and a royal blood line was created by a weird controversy centered around a parish at Rennes-le-Chateau, where a parish priest claimed to have found four mysterious parchments in a hollow Visigoth pillar underneath the village church. These parchments were said to have directed his attention to a graveyard, where he found a coded inscription on a tombstone. The priest’s name: Berenger Saunier. Saunier allegedly unearthed documents, including *Les Dossier Secrets*, that eventually found their way into various libraries. The document known as *Les Dossier Secrets* is the one that identifies Geoffrey de Bouillon as the founder of the Priory of Sion. Saunier died in 1917. That is about the only fact surrounding him that can be verified. In truth, Rennes-le-Chateau was the site of two mysteries: the first, involving Berenger Saunier, is said to have sparked a

great search for buried Templar treasure, none of which was found. However, the mystery surrounding Sauniere's claims never completely died, and Plantard's organization took advantage of speculation concerning the first Rennes-le-Chateau affair to splice their own false claims into the mystery: they made Sauniere the one who "discovered" documents about the Priory of Sion, documents they had produced themselves.

A colleague of Plantard, journalist and film maker Phillippe de Cherisey, admitted to having created the parchments allegedly found by Sauniere. (The Visigoth pillar in question was solid and could have yielded no documents.) According to Phillippe de Cherisey's own words:

"When I returned to Rennes-les-Bains in 1961 and learned that, following the death of the Abbe' the library of Renees-le-Chateau had burned down (along with all its archives) I took advantage of the opportunity to invent the story that the Major had had an exact copy made of the Parchments that the Abbe' had discovered. . . . I set myself the task of making a copy employing a code based on some passages from the Gospels, and then decoding what I had just encoded. Finally, by a roundabout route I delivered the fruits of my labours to Gerard de Sede. This document has had a life of its own beyond my wildest dreams."

In an unpublished paper entitled "Stone and Paper," De Cherisey described how the parchments were fabricated and how they could be decoded.

Why would a group go to all this trouble? Because they wanted to create an image of importance in the public's mind. Plantard and colleagues wanted to heighten their profile by claiming that they were a group of great antiquity, descended of royal blood that could trace its lineage all the way back to Christ. Some of their number had access to libraries with an extensive collection of papers on the Masons and other groups. They took advantage of this opportunity to place Priory of Sion documents among these papers, which is how a copy of the Les Dossier Secrets came to be found in a Paris library. Several of the documents which they created and managed to place among various historical papers have been shown to have printed on the same press.

The concept of a phony bloodline for Christ originated in two places:

1) in the 1930's an Italian dabbler in the occult named Julius Evola received prominence among right-wing political circles for publishing a philosophy that sought to revive the "old system of world order" based on the idea of the king as a sacred being. Divine virtues and powers were supposed to be descended on earthly kings and traditional institutions were believed to have a transcendent legitimacy and power. This sacred power, expressed in purity of blood, had been passed on through royal bloodlines. One of Evola's great heroes was Godfrey du Bouillon whom he regarded as the ideal ruler, the "light of monarchs." The restoration of true government would be managed through creating a government of pure-bloods who formed a spiritual elite. Devotees of this group would be "the carriers of some invisible influence," by wearing a belt or cord. Thus, Priory of Sion members in the 1950's required members to wear a cord at initiation. (Nazi leaders like Heinrich Himmler greatly admired Evola's thought.)

2) Evola's ideas were blended with those of a German associate of Rudolf Steiner, Johannes Stein, who created a "genealogical chart" known as the "Grail bloodline." Stein's thesis was that events in the lives of historical characters served as models for events in Grail stories. All of the people put forth in this "bloodline" were people of a highly-developed spiritual nature and also possessed paranormal capacities. Stein's hope was to show that the positive spiritual forces represented by the Holy Grail have been manifested in certain historical lives, and those lives changed society and events. Stein in no way implied that the Holy Grail was or represented a bloodline. He knew that it was not. Nevertheless, his thoughts, combined with Evola's, gave Plantard and associates the intellectual and historical grist needed to create a holy bloodline that went back to Christ and cast their organization at that bloodline's protectors.

B. Conclusion:

Dan Brown's initial "fact" is not a fact. He has either allowed himself to be deceived by a historical hoax, or knew the truth yet willingly chose to portray as legitimate an organization that had clearly been revealed as a fraud. There is no evidence that the Merovingian line survived. There is no evidence of a royal bloodline that began with Christ and has continued to his day. There is no evidence suggesting that a Priory of Sion existed to protect that bloodline. And one telling sign of how unfounded are Brown's assertions is the fact that though this organization was allegedly headed by

some of the most illustrious people in history and has supposedly existed since the 11th century, the Davidson library has not one book on the Priory of Sion! Several key members of the modern Priory of Sion have since admitted that the documents substantiating their organization's historic existence were in fact fabricated.

II. The Formation of the Christian Canon

Dan Brown's argument was the Christian canon was a product of the pagan Roman emperor Constantine. Constantine had gathered Christian leaders at the Council of Nicea where the divinity of Jesus was decided. Up until that time, in the fourth century, Jesus was viewed by his followers merely as a mortal prophet. Jesus' divinity was the result of a relatively close vote by the Christian leaders, but once these leaders transformed Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, stealing Jesus from his original followers and hijacking his human message, they then used the doctrine of Jesus' divinity to solidify their power. And how were they able to do this? Because Constantine and the church leaders outlawed, gathered and burned the thousands of documents that already existed chronicling Jesus' life as a mortal man. Then Constantine financed a new Bible which omitted those gospels that spoke of Jesus' human traits and they embellished those Gospels that made him appear Godlike.

How do we know that there was an alternative view of Jesus? Because, according to Brown's "scholars," alternative gospels survived through the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents, which tell the true Grail story and speak of Christ's ministry in human terms. (234, *Da Vinci Code*)

The above paragraphs alone constitute good reason for dismissing Dan Brown's work as so outrageously erroneous as to be considered farcical.

A. How Our Bible Came to Be Formed

Key Terms:

The word "Bible," comes from the Greek word, "biblia," plural of biblion, meaning books or rolls.

The word "canon" comes from the Greek word kanon meaning reed or measuring rod. It was a tool used by carpenters to determine the right direction of a piece of wood. Canon later came to mean written laws of behavior, the rules of philosophers or grammarians, an ecclesiastical ordinance passed by a council, a list of saints, or a list of books.

Our word "testament," comes from the Greek word "Diatheke," meaning "covenant." The Latin translators were not comfortable with the word "covenant," but seized one of covenant's meanings, last will and testament, to translate the word as testamentum.

The canon of what we call the "Old Testament," was established by a group of rabbis in Jamnia in the year AD 90. (Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes were the last two books accepted.) The Christian church did not accept Jamnia's decisions but Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, excluded the Apocrypha, the Jewish religious works that the rabbis at Jamnia rejected, but his decision was reversed by the Council of Trent in 1546. However, the Reformers affirmed the rabbis' decision and accepted Jamnia's definition of the Hebrew canonical works.

The New Testament's Formation

The letters of Paul would have been written in the decade of the 50's. Mark was probably written shortly before AD 70; Matthew and Luke were written between AD 80-90. John was probably written between AD 90-100, though recent scholarly opinion has placed John's composition much earlier. The notion that not until the fourth century were there Christians and Christian documents proclaiming Jesus as Christ is patently absurd.

Moreover, by early in the second century, Christian communities were already recognizing the four Gospels and Paul's letters as authoritative. While Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis (AD 125-150), said that he valued the oral tradition surrounding Jesus over the written tradition, there is the testimony of Papias's contemporary, Polycarp, who advised the church at Philippi that they could greatly benefit by reading the letters of Paul. Justin Martyr, killed by Marcus Aurelius

in AD 165, quotes often about Jesus from a work he refers to as *Memoirs of the Apostles*. Many of the references coincide with material found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). He also mentioned the book of Revelation. Tatian, a student of Justin's and an active Christian leader around AD 170, revered the letters of Paul and also took the step of creating the Diatessaron, a weaving together of the four canonical Gospels.

By the mid-second century there were a host of other Christian documents around, including several gospels and several books of Acts. There were also a host of other documents: sermons, epistles, apocalypses, prophecies and histories. The oral tradition favored by some was not seen as providing enough definition to a growing church that was experiencing tremendous controversy from a variety of corners. Chief among these controversies was the situation created by Marcion, who was active sometime around AD 150. Marcion saw a great discrepancy between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. Thus, he completely rejected the Old Testament canon, even though the Christian community up to that time had relied heavily on the Old Testament for proof of the foretelling of the coming of Christ. Marcion repudiated Christianity's Judaic heritage. He then introduced what he believed was an acceptable canon of documents. His "Bible" included the Gospel of Luke and ten epistles of Paul. He chose Luke because it was closely associated with Paul. However, he edited Luke, removing the birth narratives because they pertained too much to Judaism. He wanted to establish a Christianity that stressed salvation by faith, not works or knowledge.

Marcion's influence was considerable, and his approach would endure in one form or another until the seventh century. He evoked a strong negative reaction from other church leaders. Polycarp, revered bishop of Smyrna, called Marcion "the first born of Satan." Justin Martyr said of him, "By the help of devils he has caused many of every nation to speak blasphemies and to deny that God is the maker of the universe."

The Gnostics posed an even greater threat to the church in the opinion of most early church leaders who wrote a host of denunciations against them. Since much of Dan Brown's argument against traditional Christianity (whether he knows it or not) comes from ancient Gnostic texts and from modern (particularly feminist) scholars who champion them, I will give some attention to trying to define this group in some detail later. For the present know that the "alternate Gospels" of Nag Hammadi to which Brown refers are Gnostic in character.

A third movement beset the early church, Montanism, though it was orthodox in thought. Montanus, a pagan priest who had converted to Christianity, believed that the Spirit of God had anointed him as a mouthpiece. He believed that the end of the age was near and that Jesus would soon come again and establish a kingdom not in Jerusalem but in Phrygia, his hometown. He taught a strict asceticism and the priesthood of all believers, including females. He rejected human ordination. But what makes him relevant for the canon was that he argued for the continuance of the gift of prophecy, which meant the canon could not be closed, because God was constantly revealing new truths all the time. A continuing revelation negated the closing of the canon. The Montanists distinguished themselves in their purity of conduct, their strict discipline and the joy with which they embraced martyrdom.

Meanwhile, the early church was searching for some tool with which to fight the Marcionites and Gnostics. They began to see that one such tool was the office of the bishop. By the end of the first century AD, Clement, the bishop of Rome, had scolded churches for deposing old clergymen and replacing them with new and untested believers. The older men, he argued, had received their authority from those who had received their authority from the apostles. Ignatius of Antioch, early in the second century said that the local bishop was God's representative on earth. Ignatius said, "We ought to regard the bishop as the Lord himself."

The authority of the bishop proposed by Ignatius and the succession of apostles suggested by Clement were weapons available to Irenaeus and Tertullian in the last quarter of the second century to use in battle against Marcion and the Gnostics. They argued that they were of the apostolic succession and the others were not. Both camps were using the same Scriptures, and Tertullian argued that his opponents had no right to do so:

"Marcion, by what right do you hew my wood? By whose permission, Valentinus, are you diverting the streams of my fountain? By what power, Apelles, are you removing my landmarks? This is my property. I possessed it before you. I hold sure title-deeds from the original owners themselves, to whom the estate belonged. I am the heir of the apostles."

Soon the church was also confronted with the question of who wrote the Gospels. They had the early testimony of Papias that Matthew drew up a collection of the sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew dialect and that Mark was the interpreter of Peter and wrote all that he remembered from Peter's preaching about the sayings and doing of the Lord. Then Tatian took the

four Gospels and composed the Diatessaron, which revealed the life and work of Jesus. Later, Irenaeus undertook a close study of the Gospels and said that Matthew was written first, then Mark. Then he said that Luke, a companion of Paul, recorded Paul's Gospel, and John wrote the fourth Gospel while in Ephesus. He also said that four was the perfect number for the Gospels, no more and no less.

But the early church also had a problem: the letters of Paul. Marcion accepted them, which called them into question, but Paul's letters were apparently already in widespread use, and Marcion's teachings were widely popular. How to legitimize Paul? The answer was Luke's book of Acts, which shows Paul receiving apostolic authority from the Twelve, the original and true Apostles. Of course, Irenaeus and Tertullian had to do a little amending of the text of Galatians so that Paul's statement, "To [the Jerusalem Apostles] we did not yield in submission even for a moment," now read, "For an hour I gave place by subjection." In other words, they removed the "not" from Galatians and made Paul subservient to the apostolic church. Irenaeus did not offer a list of canonical works, but he quoted from most all the New Testament books that we regard as canonical.

Soon thereafter a group of Christians who rejected the Montanists attacked the Gospel of John as a Gnostic work. (Indeed, John's Gospel was a favorite of several Gnostic leaders.) These opponents of John were known as the Alogi. Yet others said that just because the Gnostics used John didn't invalidate its truth.

The Muratorian Canon

In 1740 an Italian archaeologist named Antonio Muratori discovered the fragment of a manuscript that listed the books of the New Testament. The manuscript probably goes back to AD 180. It listed all of the OT books. It also contains this reference to the Shepherd of Hermas: "The Shepherd was written quite recently in our times, while his brother Pius occupied the bishop's chair in the church of the city of Rome." (Pius was bishop of Rome AD 139-154.)

This writer described Luke as Paul's travel companion, who preserved Paul's oral tradition. He also defended the Gospel of John energetically. He noted that John was of a different character than the other Gospels, but that John was a spiritual book while the others were more corporeal in emphasis as related to the nature of Jesus. He includes Acts and 13 books of Paul, some of which were written to individuals but had been hallowed through use in the church. He left out 1 and 2 Peter; James, Hebrews and 3 John. He included the Apocrypha's Wisdom of Solomon, and said the Shepherd of Hermas could be read but was too late to be included as canonical. He also expressly rejects the work of Marcion and several Gnostics. This work reflects what were the generally accepted canonical works in the Christian church by the end of the second century.

The Testimony of Eusebius

Eusebius Pamphilus has been called the father of Church history. Between AD 305-325 he composed his Ecclesiastical History, which contains a large part of our knowledge of the first three centuries of Christianity. In 313 he became the bishop of Caesarea, during the Arian controversy. He took a position between Arius and Athanasius and tried to reconcile the two at the Council of Nicea in 325. His attempt at reconciliation earned him the respect of Constantine who asked Eusebius to make 50 copies of both Testaments in Greek, with Constantine underwriting the cost and providing Eusebius with trained scribes and good parchment.

Eusebius divided the New Testament books into four classifications:

- 1) The acknowledged documents; The Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's epistles, I John, I Peter and Revelation
- 2) The disputed books: James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John
- 3) Doubtful: Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, The Didache, the Gospel of Hebrews – and Revelation (He lists Revelation both in the included and excluded categories)
- 4) Rejected: Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Matthias, Acts of Andrew and Acts of John. These books and other like them he regarded as "not even to be ranged among the spurious books but to be rejected as totally absurd and impious."

Athanasius:

Known as the Father of Orthodoxy, he was an active presence in the Council of Nicaea convened in AD 325. Athanasius disdained Eusebius because of Eusebius's willingness to seek reconciliation with the Arians. The Nicene Creed adopted his view of Christ, but his hostility to Arius and his followers led to his being banned four times by Constantine and his successor Constantinus. As bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius's job was to announce the date for the celebration of Easter. He would write a letter that would be circulated to all the churches of Christendom. In his letter of AD 367 he listed all 27 books that are in our New Testament canon. He omitted Esther and joined a couple of apocryphal works to Jeremiah and Lamentations.

It is quite possible that Athanasius may have used his authority as the proclaimer of Easter to also publicly define the canon, too. It is also possible that he gathered and compared the opinions of the Eastern and Western churches. The Western churches had doubts about Hebrews and James. 2 Peter and 3 John may not have been used in the West. 2 Peter, James and 3 John were known but disputed in the East. Revelation was definitely accepted in the East but disputed in the West.

Jerome & Augustine

In Jerome's Latin translation of the Scriptures from the original languages he accepted Revelation as canonical, which was not accepted in the Eastern churches and Hebrews, which was not accepted in the West. He accepted them both. Augustine followed Jerome and was an influential voice in the Council of Hippo, AD 393, where the canon was established. Some churches continued to use the Shepherd of Hermas and Epistle of Barnabas as if they were canonical.

B. The Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi Documents

The Dead Sea Scrolls:

According to The Da Vinci Code these documents contained secret, alternate Gospels that showed the true human Jesus, whom the church then hijacked under Constantine and turned into a divine person.

The Facts:

The Dead Sea Scrolls, found in the Qumran caves of Judea in 1947, do not contain any versions of the Christian Gospel. Every document found there predates the New Testament documents. Many of the documents are copies of Old Testament books; most of the rest are internal documents for the Qumran community, which was a Jewish sect known as the Essenes. Dan Brown's characters claim that the Vatican tried to suppress the publication of these documents. That is simply not true.

That the Dead Sea Scrolls bear no direct relation to the New Testament is common knowledge among scholars, journalists, theologians and historians. To claim otherwise Brown is either incredibly ignorant or deliberately malicious. The Qumran community was not Christian but Jewish, and none of their documents mention Christianity directly in any way. The Dead Sea Scrolls do have value in that they demonstrate conclusively that the Old Testament preserved by Jews and Christians throughout the centuries accurately parallels what was known to the Jews not long before Jesus' day. Moreover, the community at Qumran depicts a glimpse of what a Jewish community near the time of Christ believed and how they lived.

Nag Hammadi

In December of 1945, an Arab peasant and his brother were out digging in an area of soft soil, collecting a type of fertilizer for their crops. Digging around a massive boulder, they hit a red earthenware jar. The Arab was initially afraid to break the jar, but then, thinking it might contain gold, he did, and discovered thirteen papyrus books bound in leather. He took them home where his mother used some of the papyrus to start her fire with that night.

Shortly thereafter, this peasant, Muhammad Ali, and his brother, killed the man who had killed their father. Fearing that the police would find the books when they investigated his house, Ali asked a local priest to keep some of them for him. A local history teacher saw the books and suspected they might be worth something. He sent one of the books to a friend in Cairo. The government in Cairo realized that these books were invaluable and bought one, then seized ten of the rest. However, a large part of one of the books was smuggled out of Egypt and offered for sale in America. A historian in the Netherlands heard of the offer and persuaded the Jung Foundation in Zurich to buy the book. It was the Gospel of Thomas, one of 52 books and scrolls found at Nag Hammadi. A few scholars would like to think that certain of these books contain material even older than the New Testament books, but the vast majority of the scholarly community dates the Nag Hammadi material as mid-second century or later. It is possible that after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire that the documents were stashed as a way of preserving them.

Conclusions

We have not yet looked at the career of Constantine, but the weight of historical evidence conclusively validates that Jesus was confessed as Lord and Savior both in print and in the lives of a growing community of faith. *The Da Vinci Code's* assertion that followers of Christ simply saw him as divine cannot explain why Christians were persecuted and killed as a threat against Rome. They were persecuted because they wouldn't confess Caesar as *Kyrios*, Lord. The Christians would only confess Jesus as *Kyrios* and were willing to die horrible deaths in behalf of their confession of Christ as the Messiah.

The notion that Constantine ordered the creation of the canonical books is simply bizarre. As can be seen from the historical record above, the four Gospels and the letters of Paul were accepted by the Christian community as normative for faith long before the Gnostic "alternative Gospels" were written. While use of a few of the canonical books, such as Hebrews, Revelation, 2 Peter and 3 John, varied among Christian communities, none of these disputed books would have significantly altered the Christian faith's understanding of Jesus or of any key point in emerging Christian theology.

The Dead Sea Scrolls say nothing about Christianity, much less about the Holy Grail. The Nag Hammadi documents say nothing about the Holy Grail either. Like the statements of Teabing and Langdon concerning the formation of the Christian Scriptures, their assertions in relation to these works are laughably ridiculous.