

LECTURE SIX on The Da Vinci Code: A Look at Leonardo, The Holy Grail, and The Shekinah

Trying to counter all the falsehoods of *The Da Vinci Code* is simply beyond the scope of this work. Even in little matters like portraying the five-linked Olympic rings as a secret tribute to goddess worship, Brown's claims are without basis. In truth, each Olympic game was supposed to add a new ring to the design, but organizers decided to stop this practice after the Fifth Olympiad. Moreover, the ancient Olympic games were held in honor of Zeus, not Aphrodite, as Brown asserts. Brown's suggestion that the architecture of Gothic cathedrals was a secret form of goddess-worship (an idea stolen from Barbara Walker's bizarre book *The Templar Revelation*) is likewise baseless. In the first place, the Templars had nothing to do with the building of Gothic cathedrals. Nor were the Templars' round churches a defiant insult to the Church, or a tribute to the divine feminine: in the building of their own round churches the Templars were trying to honor the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The list of Brown's inaccuracies is virtually endless. I can't help but note one more howler: one of the villains of the book is an albino monk in the service of the conservative Catholic organization Opus Dei. The only problem is, Opus Dei has no monks – and albinos suffer from severe eye problems.

I have tried over the course of the last five lectures systematically to examine Dan Brown's arguments, showing in each instance that his basic assertions are baseless, often egregiously mistaken, historically laughable. In this last lecture I turn attention to three final areas where Brown's argument lacks veracity.

I. A Look at Leonardo Da Vinci

According to Dan Brown, Leonardo Da Vinci (1452- 1519) was a virulent anti-Christian, who hid subversive anti-Christian messages in his art, even though according to the book, Da Vinci received hundreds of lucrative Vatican commissions.

According to Dan Brown, "Da Vinci had always been an awkward subject for historians, especially in the Christian tradition. Despite the visionary's genius, he was a flamboyant homosexual and worshiper of Nature's divine order, both of which placed him in a perpetual state of sin against God. . . . Even Da Vinci's enormous output of breathtaking Christian art only furthered the artist's reputation for spiritual hypocrisy. Accepting hundreds of lucrative Vatican commissions, Da Vinci painted Christian themes not as an expression of his own beliefs, but rather as a commercial venture – as a means of funding a lavish lifestyle." (45)

Da Vinci, according to Brown, actually painted a woman in the Last Supper, Mary Magdalene, to be exact. By slipping Mary Magdalene into the portrait, Da Vinci inserted his favorite theme of the divine goddess into this fundamental Christian scene. Brown claims that the Last Supper is a coded message that reveals the truth about Jesus and the Holy Grail, because the Holy Grail is actually Mary Magdalene, his wife. In fact, Brown's Da Vinci expert, Leigh Teabing, says the clinching fact for this subterfuge on Da Vinci's part is the fact that there is no chalice depicted in Leonardo's depiction of the Last Supper.

New York Times art critic Bruce Boucher asked the question, "How much does this murder mystery have to do with the real Leonardo? The short answer is not much . . ."

Observes Boucher, "Leonardo's composition . . . conforms to traditional Florentine depictions of the Last Supper, stressing the betrayal and sacrifice of Jesus rather than the institution of the Eucharist and the chalice. At the same time, St. John was invariably represented as a beautiful young man whose special affinity with Jesus was expressed by his being seated at Jesus' right. Leonardo's St. John conforms to this type, and parallels for the absence of a chalice appear in earlier Italian examples."

Indeed, lost in Brown's analysis of Leonardo's *Last Supper* is the fact the artist was intending to dramatize that moment in John's Gospel where Jesus warns the disciples, "One of you will betray me." The apostles' subsequent agony over that prediction is what gives the painting its eternal power. However, in John's Gospel, there is no mention made of the Lord's Supper, which is why no chalice is shown. We must remember that Leonardo was painting a religious mural for a group of monks in the dining hall of their monastery. They knew their Bible well, and would quickly have spotted a gaffe on the artist's part -- and the inclusion of a chalice would have been an error.

Leonardo was captivated by the emotional possibilities of depicting the Last Supper as an event of great and sincere spiritual agony, as these preliminary thoughts in his notebook convey:

"One was drinking and has set down his glass and turned his head toward the speaker. Another twisting the fingers of his two hands and with brows knitted, turns to his neighbor; this neighbor spreads his hands and shows their palms, raises his shoulder to his ears, and opens his mouth in amazement. Another whispers into his neighbor's ear; the listener turns toward him to lend an ear, holding a knife in one hand and in the other the bread half cut through; another, who has turned holding a knife in his hand, upsets with his hand a glass on the table. Another rests his hands on the table and watches; another blows out his cheeks; another bends forward to see the speaker, shading his eyes with his hand; another draws back behind the one who leans forward and sees the speaker between the wall and the man who is leaning."

The "woman" whom *The Da Vinci Code* identifies as Mary Magdalene is no woman at all, but St. John, the beloved disciple, who was always depicted in the religious art of that time as an effeminate young man. In fact, noted art historian Antonini Vallentin says that the model for St. John was Leonardo's protégé and model, Salai. One must remember again that this painting would have commanded the monks attention every day during their meal: they would have noticed had Leonardo flaunted convention – and in fact, people, common and important, watched over his shoulder at every stage of his work. Leonardo's depiction of the disciples, including St. John, was in keeping with the traditional religious depictions of his day, though of course, Leonardo's portrayal of each man's response to Christ's prediction was a stunning work of expressive originality that moves viewers to this day. (Incidentally, several traditional depictions of the Last Supper had John sitting in Jesus' lap – what would Brown have made of that!)

Brown's Robert Langdon draws attention to a dagger in *The Last Supper* that according to him is wielded by a "disembodied hand." In truth says art critic Bruce Boucher, "this hand is not disembodied. Both a preliminary drawing by Leonardo and early copies of *The Last Supper* show that the hand and dagger belong to Peter – a reference to a passage in the Gospel of St. John, in which Peter draws a sword in defense of Jesus."

One indicator of how little Brown is to be trusted in his interpretation of Leonardo is his perspective on the Mona Lisa as a cleverly disguised androgynous self-portrait. In truth, the Mona Lisa is usually referred to as "del Giocondo," because the woman painted was the wife of Francesco di Bartolomeo del Giocondo, as is well documented by sources from that era. The name Mona Lisa is definitely not a mocking anagram of two Egyptian fertility deities Aman and L'isa.

Leonardo da Vinci was not a conventional religious thinker, but he was an active participant in his Christian faith. Dan Brown depicts him as a "flamboyant homosexual," but once again he is wrong. Leonardo may well have been homosexual – there was one incident where he was accused of same-sex behavior early in his career – but that could have been a charge leveled against Leonardo by a rival artist. In any event, the concerted opinion of art historians is that we know virtually nothing conclusive about Leonardo's sexuality, one way or the other. As for living lavishly off "hundreds of Vatican commissions," Leonardo only received one commission from the Vatican in his entire career – and he didn't finish his project. Moreover, he was known for generally living a very frugal, even Spartan, existence.

One final little note that suggests Mr. Brown's grasp of Leonardo's work is less than in-depth: in *The Da Vinci Code* Sophie uses one of Leonardo's famous paintings, "The Madonna of the Rocks," as a shield pressing it so close to her body that it bends. That would be rather hard to do, since this painting is more than six feet tall and painted on wood, not canvas!

II. The Holy Grail

Of course, central to Dan Brown's novel is the premise that the "Holy Grail" refers to Mary Magdalene, and to the sacred bloodline of Jesus. Give Brown credit for realizing at least this much: though the "Holy Grail" is known to most contemporary people as the object of a hilarious movie put forth by the British acting troupe Monty Python, in fact, interest in the topic of the Holy Grail has been in the public eye for at least eight hundred years.

The term "Holy Grail" refers to a sacred vessel usually identified as the chalice Jesus used at the Last Supper and also employed by Joseph of Arimathea to catch the blood of the crucified Christ, after the latter was speared by a soldier to confirm his death. In other stories, the Holy Grail refers to the dish in which Jesus served the paschal lamb on Passover. Though the word "Sangreal" – holy blood – (or the catcher of holy blood) would be used to refer to the Grail in the late Middle Ages, the word "Grail" originally came from an old Latin word for a wide, deep dish, *Gradale*, in which choice morsels were served to people of importance.

The Holy Grail is said to have been brought to Britain by either Joseph of Arimathea or by one of his sons. It was believed to be kept in a mysterious castle known as the Castle of Corbenic surrounded by wasteland and guarded by descendants of Joseph of Arimathea, each of whom suffered a wound that would not heal. These guardians of the Holy Grail were known as the Fisher Kings. The healing of the Fisher King and the restoration of the blighted lands around the Castle of Corbenic was said to be related to the successful completion of the quest for the Holy Grail.

Robert Langdon says, "The Grail is symbolic of the lost goddess. When Christianity came along, the old pagan religions did not die easily. Legends of chivalric quests for the lost Grail were in fact stories of forbidden quests to find the lost sacred feminine. Knights who claimed to be 'searching for the chalice' were speaking in code as a way to protect themselves from a Church that had subjugated women, banished the Goddess, burned nonbelievers, and forbidden the pagan reverence for the sacred feminine." (239)

There is a sliver of truth in what Langdon has said, coupled with much that is false. Though there are scholars who will argue that the legend of the Grail came solely from Christian sources, the majority of scholars believe that the original source for the Grail legends came from pagan Celtic folklore. There were stories in Celtic folklore that featured a cup capable of providing endless food and drink for whoever possessed it. Moreover, there were stories in Celtic folklore about the great adventures embarked on by men of daring and skill attempting to possess such a wondrous cup.

However, the medieval world, which came to love stories about searches for the Holy Grail, would have been stunned to know that they were in fact searching for "the lost sacred feminine." One of the elements that made the Grail stories so popular was their overt inclusion of romance. In fact, Marie de Champagne, sister of Richard the Lion-Hearted, was also the daughter of Elenor of Aquitaine, the remarkable woman who started the fashion of courtly love. Marie de Champagne was responsible for bringing to her court Chretien de Troyes, who was the first to publish tales about the legend of King Arthur. His works, which doubtless made use of old tales, were tremendously popular, and included much material that would fall into the contemporary category of romance. Chretien's success naturally inspired imitators. Between 1180 and 1240, a great body of Grail romances developed.

Many of these tales, like the stories offered by Chretien, and German writer Wolfram von Eschenbach, focused on the adventures and exploits of those searching for the Grail. Others, like a poem composed in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century by Robert De Boron focused more on the history of the Grail itself. Some of these tales, particularly those told by the German Wolfram, were quite sensuous; others accentuated the sexual purity of the knights as that virtue which qualified them to go on the Grail quests.

Langdon talks of “forbidden quests to find the lost sacred feminine.” But there was nothing “forbidden” about these quests. They were popular heroic adventures, though many of these tales had abiding spiritual themes. One of the most popular and enduring of the Grail legends is a series of stories entitled, “The Quest for the Holy Grail.” These are a great example of literature that functions on more than one level. On the surface they are tales of romance and daring. Yet, underlying these tales are profound spiritual themes, which is why noted translator Pauline Matarasso refers to this work as a “spiritual fable.”

Far from serving as a secret weapon to subvert the Christian faith, these stories serve as heroic calls to deepen the quality of one’s witness. These stories do include the adulterous affair between Lancelot and King Arthur’s wife, but an air of the tragic hangs over their romance: Lancelot’s illicit behavior will prevent him, for all of his greatness, from being able to succeed in the quest for the Holy Grail. He is allowed a brief glimpse of the Grail, but only after he has confessed his sin with the queen, and only after he has embarked on a long harsh path of penance. Lancelot’s past continues to haunt him, and his spiritual progress toward the Grail is slow, halting and marked with notable failures.

By contrast, the one knight who will win the Grail is Lancelot’s son Galahad, the product of his father’s union with a daughter of one of the Fisher Kings. The purity of Galahad’s quest for God is what allows him to partake of the cup of Christ, an experience that prompts him to desire death as to enjoy the benefits of heavenly fellowship.

Likewise, Galahad’s two heroic companions represent spiritual virtues: Perceval represents child-like simplicity of faith. He is direct in his approach to life and supremely fallible. Early in his trials he is excessively and childishly despairing when things go wrong, and at times his behavior verges on pure stupidity. He is symbolic of one who is spiritually focused but deficient in judgment. Yet his simplicity and trust in God always deliver him from peril, usually in just the nick of time.

His friend and confidante Bors is Perceval’s opposite. He is prudent, discerning, intellectual, and educated. The temptations that nearly waylay him are not sensual in nature but are questions involving reason. He is forced to decide amidst a moral dilemma whether to give attention to the natural claims of his companion and brother or to respond with allegiance to the call of Christ.

In the “Quest for the Holy Grail,” the search for the Grail is meant to demonstrate Christian virtues, and Christian failures. In fact, scholars of the Holy Grail bring up the name of Bernard of Clairvaux (original sponsor of the Templars) whose Cistercian monasteries did much to popularize theological themes that figure prominently in Grail stories. Far from being a search subversive to Christ, the Grail serves as a profound symbol of God’s grace. As translator Matarasso observes, “Now whereas grace is freely given to all men, it is dispensed to each individual soul in the measure in which he is capable of receiving it, and only the wholly dedicated, the pure in heart, can attain to that ecstatic union where they may contemplate in love what ‘the heart of man cannot conceive nor tongue relate.’ Hence there are only three knights who find their way to . . . the heavenly city and there assist at the office of the Holy Grail, while Galahad alone, the perfect knight, is judged worthy to see the mysteries within the holy vessel and look on the ineffable.”

I must note, however, that though these stories highlighting the Grail’s spiritual aspects were indeed quite prominent, scholars have seen the Grail material as fertile ground for promoting a variety of agendas. Some have seen the Grail stories as highlighting the roles of women in the church and subverting certain aspects of

Church doctrine. For example, women (young virgins, of course) are often depicted as the bearers of the Holy Grail, giving readers a glimpse of women holding the cup from the original Eucharist, even though women in the Catholic church weren't allowed to serve communion. (Even in the Quest story referenced above, Galahad succeeds in winning the Grail, only after an act of sacrificial love on the part of his companion Perceval's sister, a young woman as pure of heart as Galahad.) Still others have seen the Grail series, with its tales of Joseph of Arimathea establishing a church in Britain equal with the founding of the church in the West as a way of establishing the legitimacy of the British church, independent of the Roman hierarchy. Certainly it can be said that many of the original Grail stories bear the flavor of Irish and Scottish folklore, places where the Christian heritage was preserved in the seventh and eighth centuries, while the faith was being extinguished in most other places of Europe. But the notion that veneration of the Holy Grail was really a subterfuge for preserving the bloodline of Christ is a notion the medieval world who loved the Grail quest would have found ludicrous.

III. The Shekinah

Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* has this remarkable passage:

“Langdon's Jewish students always looked flabbergasted when he first told them that the early Jewish tradition involved ritualistic sex. *In the Temple no less.* Early Jews believed that the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple housed not only God but also His powerful female equal, Shekinah. Men seeking spiritual wholeness came to the Temple to visit priestesses, or hierodules – with whom they made love and experienced the divine through physical union. The Jewish tetragrammaton YHWH – the sacred name of God – in fact derived from Jehovah, an androgynous physical union between the masculine Jah and the pre-Hebraic name for Eve, Havah.” (309)

Throughout my research on *The Da Vinci Code*, when Brown has made outrageous statements, I have usually been able to pinpoint the provenance of his outrageous statements. Though Brown is usually radically wrong in his statements, one can usually identify whence he plagiarized his goofy theories. In this case, I have no idea from where Brown drew these baseless assertions.

The Shekinah is *not* God's powerful female equal. The word is used to describe the nearness of God to God's people. Even though God dwells in heaven, God chooses to express his presence on earth in certain places and in certain ways. The ark, for example, was a place where God's presence was said to be strongly expressed: the glory of God, or the Shekinah, was said to be present in the Ark, even though God was in heaven.

The word Shekinah can be considered synonymous with the word “Glory.” Shekinah is not a Biblical word, but early Jewish commentaries employed the word often. When Moses wanted to see God, and God placed him in the cleft of a rock to let him see the back side of God's glory, the commentaries refer to that fleeting glory as the “Shekinah.” Other commentaries use the word Shekinah of God when referring to an angel of God.

Here are a few examples of how the Jewish commentaries used the word “Shekinah”: “The windows of the temple were narrow within but wide without to let the light of the Shekinah illumine the world.” “Wherever the righteous go, the Shekinah goes with them.” “Come and see how beloved are the Israelites before God, for whithersoever they journeyed in their captivity, the Shekinah journeyed with them.” If ten assemble for prayer or three to study, or two to sit, or even one, to study the Torah “The Shekinah is in their midst.” These statements make perfect sense when the Shekinah is understood as the glory and presence of God. They would make no sense at all if Shekinah was understood as a female deity, co-equal with God.

In truth, the fertility cult worship that Dan Brown describes *was* practiced by Israel's ancient neighbors, but such fertility practices were expressly condemned by the Hebrew law and prophets. What Brown does not say is that these pagan fertility cults not only practiced ritualistic prostitution in order to propitiate the deities of

nature, but also practiced human sacrifice for much the same reason. The Hebrew faith explicitly, consistently, and vehemently condemned both practices.

Brown's claim that Jewish men would go to the Temple for ritualistic sex reveals a complete lack of understanding or appreciation for the Hebrew faith. In truth, women and men were strictly segregated in the Jewish temple. Moreover, Judaism's stringent monotheistic insistence would be absolutely violated and mocked by the notion of God "sharing" the Holy of Holies with some female consort.

As to Brown's claim that "the Jewish tetragrammaton YHWH – the sacred name of God – is derived from Jehovah, an androgynous physical union between the masculine Jah and the pre-Hebraic name for Eve, Havah," a first-year student of Hebrew could spot this error. The Jewish tetragrammaton YHWH is based on the Hebrew word "to be." The word "Jehovah" has nothing to do with a union of Jah and Havah. "Jehovah" is in fact a composite mistranslation, a combination of the consonants of the Jewish sacred name for God, YHWH, (with "Y" being transliterated as "J" in German) coupled with the vowels for the Hebrew word for Lord, "Adonai." Because the Jews do not pronounce the sacred name, for the purposes of oral reading in worship, when the reader comes to the word "YHWH," he substitutes the word "Adonai," "Lord," (Your Bible does the same thing: when you read the word "Lord" in the Old Testament, it is a substitution of "Adonai" for YHWH.) So, when one inserts the vowels for "Adonai" into the consonants YHWH, one gets the word "Jehovah." It has nothing to do with the union of the masculine and feminine.

IV. Conclusion:

As we have seen throughout this series, The Da Vinci Code's presentation of Leonardo, the Holy Grail and the sacred feminine in Judaism was consistent with the rest of his novel – laughably off base! But his work, as it has throughout this series, has provided us with an opportunity to explore various aspects of the Christian faith and discover once again how rich and complex is our heritage.

SELECTED AND SEMI-ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

LECTURE ONE

1. In laying out the book's argument I used mostly the novel itself, *The Da Vinci Code*, Doubleday Press, 2003

LECTURES TWO AND THREE: The Templars

1. *Dungeon, Fire and Sword* by John J. Robinson (Evans and Co.: 1991) is a brilliantly readable account of the Templar history. Its accessibility proved wonderfully helpful for me in shaping lectures two and three.

2. See also, Stephen Howarth's *Knights Templar*, (Atheneum, 1982)

3. See also "The Temple," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (Abingdon, Nashville, 1962)

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

1. Books on the Priory of Sion are nonexistent, as best I can tell. However the Internet has a host of articles related to the Priory of Sion. Listed below are two of the articles I found most helpful.
2. "The Priory of Sion Hoax," by Robert Richardson,
www.alpheus.org/html/articles/esoteric_history/richardsonl.html
3. "The Priory of Sion Hoax: an A-Z" by Miriam Ibbotson
www.black-cat.fsbusiness.co.uk/poshome.html
4. Both of the above articles, reference a host of other articles, if one is interested in more research in this area.
5. An easy resource on the formation of the canon is T. C. Smith's *How We Got Our Bible*, Smith and Helwys, 1994.

LECTURE FIVE: THE GNOSTICS, JESUS AND MARY

1. For studying the Gnostics, the most thorough book I studied was *Gnosis*, by Kurt Randolph, Harper and Row, 1977.
2. See also *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels, Random House, 1979.
3. *Gnosis*, by Geddes MacGregor, Theosophical Publishing House, 1979
4. *The Other Gospels*, Cameron, Westminster, 1982.
5. See also "Mary Magdalene," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (Abingdon, Nashville, 1962)

LECTURE SIX: LEONARDO, THE HOLY GRAIL, AND THE SHEKINAH

1. *Leonardo Da Vinci: The Tragic Pursuit of Perfection*, by Antonina Vallentin, New York: Viking Press, 1938
2. *Leonardo Da Vinci*, by Kenneth Clark, Cambridge: University Press, 1932
3. "Did *The Da Vinci Code* Crack Leonardo?" by Bruce Boucher, NY Times, August 3, 2003
4. *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, translated by Pauline Matarasso, Penguin Classics, 1969
5. "The Holy Grail," pp 26-29, New Catholic Encyclopedia, H. C. Gardiner, J. Misrahi
6. "The High History of the Holy Grail," by Vincent Bridges, on the Internet
7. *Origin of the Grail Legend*, by Arthur Brown, NY: Russell & Russell, 1966
8. "Shekinah" *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962)

MISCELLANEOUS

1. Special article, by Sandra Miesel, www.crisismagazine.com/specialreport.htm
2. "Cracking the Code," by Father Gregory Jones, Internet article
3. "Debunking the Code," www.tektonics.org./davincicrude.htm