

deseretnews.com

Religion & ethics

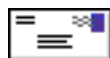
Saturday, February 28, 2004

Decoding 'Da Vinci'

Scholar: Don't read too much into it

By **Carrie A. Moore**

Deseret Morning News

E-mail a copy
of this story

Advertisement

If the throngs that packed a lecture at Brigham Young University on Wednesday night are any indication, Utahns are as taken with a best-selling novel about secret societies, cryptic messages and the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ as the rest of the country. And their interest may have as much to do with knowledge — or lack of — regarding their own faith traditions as it does with the twists and turns of the book's story line.

"The Da Vinci Code," by Dan Brown, has stayed atop the New York Times' best-seller list for months, selling more than 4.5 million copies since its release last March.

More than a simple murder mystery, the book has been touted by some critics — and the masses who have devoured it — as a fascinating blend of fact and fiction, packaged with enough



Dan Brown's best-selling novel "The Da Vinci Code" suggests Leonardo da Vinci left clues about Jesus and Mary Magdalene in "The Last Supper" and the "Mona Lisa."

conspiracy theories that some readers who know tidbits about Christian history wonder if Brown has uncovered long-hidden truths.

The book has become so popular that filmmaker Ron Howard is making a movie of "The Da Vinci Code" for Sony Pictures Entertainment, expected to be released in 2005.

In an attempt to help local readers ferret out Brown's intermingling of historical figures and facts as the foundation for the book's fictional details and subplots, the BYU Museum of Art is hosting a series of four lectures titled "The Da Vinci Code: Mystery, Metaphor and Meaning, LDS Perspectives on The Da Vinci Code."

The first, given Wednesday by Eric Huntsman, an assistant professor of ancient scripture at BYU, drew such a large crowd that organizers had to close the doors to the museum 10 minutes before the lecture began, leaving hundreds of people outside. All 700-plus seats were filled.

Cheryl May, the lecture series organizer, said it had not been organized to promote the book but rather to build interest in an art exhibit to open at the museum in April. Museum officials have fielded numerous inquiries about questions raised in the book, whose premise is that Leonardo da Vinci left clues to the secrets surrounding the Holy Grail — which Brown identifies as Mary Magdalene — in some of his most famous paintings, including the "Mona Lisa" and "The Last Supper."



Employees of the Louvre hold the "Mona Lisa" in the museum.

P Ballif, Associated Press

Several renowned scholars across the country have spent months quelling some of the conspiracy theories outlined in the book, and Huntsman's lecture addressed Mary Magdalene's

relationship to Jesus Christ. The notion that the two were

married or had an intimate relationship was debated for centuries and had been debunked among the majority of Christian historians.

But ancient texts discovered and translated within the past century — including the "Gnostic gospels" named after Christ's disciples including Thomas, Philip and Mary — have rekindled debate not only about Mary's relationship with Christ and her life after his death, but whether he told her information before his Crucifixion that had been withheld from his apostles. Much of the book's conjecture about Mary comes from such noncanonical texts, including the "Gospel of Mary."

Current liberal scholarly discussion about such questions is presented in "The Da Vinci Code" as factual information, shared during the quest by the book's protagonists to find Magdalene's remains and the documents that accompany them. Those documents — which Brown tells readers were retrieved from the Holy of Holies in ruins of the ancient Jewish temple by a real secret society known as the Knights Templar — purportedly show how the early Christian church subverted the role of women.

He makes sweeping statements about an early Christian conspiracy to burn 5 million women as witches throughout Europe and another to cast Mary as a prostitute. There is some truth in both characterizations, but scholars dispute the details.

Huntsman, whose scholarly background is in classical Greek and Latin, is writing a book about the Gospel of John. In the Greek text of John's gospel, Huntsman said Jesus calls Mary "the apostle to the apostles," a reference that also appears in Brown's book in a discussion about how the early apostles were jealous of her unique relationship with Jesus.

Huntsman said he was contacted by several people before the lecture, concerned about what he would or wouldn't say regarding questions the book raises with relationship to LDS theology.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may be particularly intrigued with the book for a variety of reasons, including their belief that men and women can only be "exalted" with God in the afterlife if they are married "for eternity" in the faith's temples. The church has no formal doctrinal position on Mary Magdalene or her relationship to Jesus, but the concept of a "mother in heaven"

as a partner to God the Father has been discussed intermittently by top church leaders.

Latter-day Saints are also unique among Christians in their acceptance of scripture beyond the Bible, some of it translated by church founder Joseph Smith from ancient papyri he obtained in the 19th century. They believe in the Bible "as far as it is translated correctly," and also that "many ancient scriptures have been lost. Some contents of these sacred records are known, but much remains obscure. Latter-day Saints look forward to a time when all things revealed from God will be restored and made known again," according to the Encyclopedia of Mormonism.

Other points of LDS interest include the role of women in the early church vs. their role today. They believe Joseph Smith "restored" Christ's original church to Earth, rather than simply "reforming" a corrupted Christian church as early Protestant leaders had done. Women do not hold the faith's priesthood, which is reserved only for worthy men.

Huntsman opened his lecture by reaffirming LDS belief in the New Testament gospels, and prefaced the rest of his remarks with the admonition that readers of "The Da Vinci Code" must keep in mind the difference between the historical figures who actually lived and the literary figures, which Mary Magdalene in particular has become in Brown's book.

He noted there is no solid historical basis for the assertion that Mary was anything other than a close friend and disciple of Christ. While Latter-day Saints and most Christians consider the New Testament a reliable historical and spiritual document, the same can't be said for the Gnostic texts, Huntsman said, which were written after the first century B.C. and are not generally believed to have been authored by the disciples whose names they bear.

That's where much of the fact/fiction arises for readers.

In a foreword to the book, Brown claims that "all descriptions of documents and secret rituals are accurate," and he lists reference works of renowned religion scholars, including Elaine Pagels, a professor of religious studies at Princeton. Pagels visited BYU and presented a forum lecture a few years ago on the "Gnostic Gospels." She authored a book by the same name.

Pagels and another renowned religion scholar, Karen King of Harvard Divinity School, have both written and lectured extensively on the extrabiblical texts and their implications

for wider understanding of the role that Mary and other women may have played in the early Christian church. King released a book last year titled "The Gospel of Mary of Magdala." The role of the "sacred feminine" and its subjugation throughout Christian history has emerged as a growing area of scholarship, in part through their efforts. Such theories form a major plot within "The Da Vinci Code."

Interpretations of early documents on Christianity are always subject to the "biases and agendas and objectives" of those who are writing about them, Huntsman said. Ultraconservative Bible scholars would consider them "heresy" or ideas "the early church fathers just made up." Moderates examine the traditions reflected in such works, including that which mirrors what is found in the New Testament, noting that some "plain and precious things have (had) a tendency to slip out" of sacred texts over time.

Liberal scholars often view them as "reliable facts suppressed by orthodox Christians," and "The Da Vinci Code" adopts that position, he said. "Just as we need to understand the provenance of scholarly texts, we need to understand the spin of the author."

The lecture series at BYU is just one of the latest attempts to explain that spin, and its larger historical and cultural implications, to readers.

Several Catholic and Evangelical theologians have challenged much of the extrabiblical interpretation put forth in the book, with at least two of them penning books of their own as a rebuttal.

Darrell Bock, a research professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, was featured in an ABC-TV special last November exploring the debates surrounding Mary Magdalene that have been fanned as a result of "The Da Vinci Code."

"Dan Brown's book isn't an innocent novel," he said in a statement from his publicist. "There is something else going on here." He believes the book "at its very core is an attempt to reshape our culture and Christian beliefs." Bock, who with other evangelical colleagues has posted a detailed response to Brown's book on the seminary's Web site —

www.dts.edu/dialogue — will release his own book, "Breaking the Da Vinci Code," in April.

He said the book will "expose the failings of Dan Brown's research and indicate where his claims are coming from."

There is an important issue of cultural and religious identity that the novel carelessly plays with — and he is not alone in this effort." Bock's book is currently the subject of a legal challenge.

Ben Witherington III, professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky., told the Deseret Morning News that Brown's best-selling novel is "bad history, bad analysis of early Christianity, and it misrepresents the Bible and the theology of God that's in the Bible. It's shoddy historiography and bad art history as well."

Brown brought a cascade of criticism on himself, Witherington said, when he claimed the rituals and documents he used to construct the book were true. "It's closer to pure fiction than historical fiction."

Despite its popularity with readers, Witherington said even the Gnostic gospels themselves don't claim that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. "The Gnostics are aesthetic, they avoid sexuality. Brown is so poorly informed he doesn't even understand he's jumbling gnosticism with paganism."

Witherington's new book, "The Bible Code," will be released this summer, with the first three chapters dealing specifically with "The Da Vinci Code." While he is aware of the scholarly work by Pagels and King on the "sacred feminine" in relationship to Gnostic texts, Witherington said he thinks such notions "are nonsense. . . . Jesus and the earliest Christians were very progressive about the role of women for the context of their time. Jesus Christ was the first early Jew I know of with women disciples.

"The big conspiracy theory idea that (early Christian leaders) were busy suppressing goddess worship is not historically verifiable. It's true in the Middle Ages there was a repression of women's roles, but I'm not talking about that. During the time the New Testament documents were written, women were there in abundance and doing a lot of things."

General public knowledge about Christian history is slim, he said, making Brown's book seem scholarly when it's merely clever fiction sprinkled with fact.

"We live in a Jesus-haunted culture that's biblically illiterate. Anything can look like it's possible."

E-mail: carrie@desnews.com