

CRACKING THE DA VINCI CODE
Was Mary Magdalene the Wife of Jesus?
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Was Mary Magdalene the wife of Jesus? . . . No. . . . There you have it—today’s sermon. Ok, I suppose I should say more than simply “No.”

Everyone loves a wedding, and what could be more spectacular than finding an account of Jesus’ Jewish wedding! The 1982 book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* suggests the notion that the wedding feast of Cana, recounted in the second chapter of the Gospel of John, is really the story of Jesus’ own wedding. The story itself never claims this, and the fact is that all of the evidence is against such a suggestion.¹ The most important thing to note about the claim that Jesus was married is that it is almost entirely an argument from silence since *no source of any kind—biblical or non-biblical—*directly says that Jesus was married.

Who was Mary Magdalene? In Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, she is the wife of Jesus and the mother of his children, and that is a secret the church wanted to cover up to protect the divinity of Jesus. Furthermore, the story of the Holy Grail is really the story about the royal bloodline of Jesus and Mary, and its migration to France.

The villain of *The Da Vinci Code* is Leigh Teabing—a British, religious historian

¹First, the account of the wedding in Cana begins by informing us that Jesus’ mother was at the wedding. This is a strange and superfluous way to start the story if this was Jesus’ wedding. Second, we are told that Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding. This makes it crystal clear that this cannot be Jesus’ own wedding. The host of a wedding banquet is not invited to his own wedding feast, and we know that in early Judaism the wedding banquet was held at the home of the bridegroom or his father. Third, we are informed that Mary comes to Jesus and says, “they have no wine.” The *they* must surely be the wedding party, in particular the bride and groom. Jesus’ response to Mary’s implied request is, “What concern is that to you and to me?” This is an unimaginable response if Jesus was in fact obligated as the groom to do something about this problem. Nevertheless, Jesus miraculously provides the wine. Fourth, we are told that the “toastmaster,” not knowing about Jesus’ miracle, called the groom (who is not identified by name) aside and commented that the best wine had been saved until the last. This reveals that the bridegroom is responsible for the management of the feast and that Jesus is not the bridegroom. Fifth, the story comes to a close by reporting that Jesus left the wedding and went off with his mother, brothers, and disciples—but not with his supposed wife!

who will stop at nothing to unlock and unleash the mystery of the Holy Grail. At a climatic point in the plot, Teabing proclaims:

“Behold . . . the greatest cover-up in human history. Not only was Jesus Christ married, but He was a father. . . . Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel. She was the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ. She was the womb that bore the lineage, and the vine from which the sacred fruit sprang forth! . . . The royal bloodline of Jesus Christ is the source of the most enduring legend of all time—the Holy Grail” (p. 249).

According to Teabing, Mary Magdalene was:

“A woman who carried with her a secret so powerful that, if revealed, it threatened to devastate the very foundation of Christianity! . . . A child of Jesus would undermine the critical notion of Christ’s divinity and therefore the Christian Church . . .” (pp. 239, 254).

At the outset, let me say that there is no reason why Jesus could not have been married. Teabing espouses the false notion that if Jesus had a sexual relationship with a wife and sired offspring, it would be defiling, or perhaps as a divine being Jesus could not afford to be fully human. Teabing is wrong. Because Jesus was fully human, marriage would be an expression of his human nature. Since it is not the teaching of Jesus that sex was defiling, indeed he speaks of it as the means by which the two become one flesh with each other as God intended, there is no reason why a married Jesus could not have had a sexual relationship and even offspring. To judge from texts like chapters 9 and 10 of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus loved children. It was later ascetic piety—both Christian and Gnostic—that had problems with these things, not Jesus.

Robert Langdon, the famous professor of religious symbols from Harvard and the hero of *The Da Vinci Code*, explains why an unmarried Jesus would have been unnatural:

“. . . Jesus was a Jew, . . . and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned . . .” (p. 245).

Marriage was certainly the norm and expectation for Jews; however, there were exceptions. It is not a given that Jesus as a Jew would seek to be married. Even more significant, it was not a sign of shame to be single. As unusual as it might have been, it was not unprecedented for a Jewish leader or a particularly devout Jew to abstain from marriage for some religious purpose. Archaeological explorations near the Dead Sea have shown that there were both married and single men and women in the Qumran community. The community there, perhaps due to their belief that the end of days was

near, allowed for a commitment to celibacy among its members. The two most prominent non-Christian Jewish writers from the New Testament era, Josephus and Philo, both refer to celibate Jews during this time. Furthermore, various prophetic figures likely remained single in earlier Jewish time periods.

Although the evidence suggests that Jesus was unmarried, he did not mandate celibacy, as is clear from a comment made by the Apostle Paul:

Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? (1 Cor 9:5).

Here Paul certainly would have mentioned the example of Jesus being married had it been so. Paul assumes his audience knows that neither he nor Jesus were married. In verses 10, 11, and 12 of Matthew chapter 19, Jesus does teach that his disciples can remain single for the sake of the kingdom. This passage is Jesus' rationale for why he chose to remain single. The Kingdom of God was breaking into human history, and Jesus' ministry required his single-minded devotion. Add to this the fact that Jesus, on more than one occasion, realized he was facing a premature funeral, and it is perfectly understandable that Jesus would have chosen to abstain from marriage.

Obviously, if Jesus was not married then Mary Magdalene was not his wife. But let's leave the matter open for a few more moments as we examine the evidence concerning Mary. Since the New Testament is completely silent on the subject of a marriage between Jesus and Mary and does not even indirectly support the idea, the protagonists of Dan Brown's novel turn to other and later sources for information, in particular the *Gospel of Philip*, probably written sometime in the late third century A.D. Unfortunately, the relevant portion of this text has gaps. As I read the text, notice² the bracketed portions which reflect the gaps in the manuscript.

And the companion of the [. . .] Mary Magdalene. [. . . loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [. . .]" (63:33-36).

The brackets indicate broken locations in the manuscript where there is no reading because the manuscript is damaged. Talk about a mystery to solve!

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Leigh Teabing argues that in the *Gospel of Philip* the term "companion" means "spouse" because that is what the Aramaic word means (p. 246).

²PowerPoint was used so the audience could view quoted material.

But this document was not written in Aramaic! Like the other Nag Hammadi documents, it was written in Coptic. It is much more likely that the term “companion” here means “sister” in the spiritual sense; this is how the word is used elsewhere in this sort of literature.

What about the kiss? A parallel passage in the *Gospel of Philip* (58:34-59:4) seems to suggest a kiss on the mouth. However, as Karen King states in *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, it most likely was a chaste kiss of fellowship. The so-called “holy kiss” referred to in the Apostle Paul’s letters (see 1 Cor 16:20 and Rom 16:16) is in all likelihood meant here. What makes it especially probable that what we have here is a non-sexual kiss is the fact that the *Gospel of Philip* is a Gnostic document where human sexual experience is seen as defiling.

Teabing also refers to the *Gospel of Mary*, another Gnostic document that was written at the earliest at the end of the second century A.D. The specific text referred to reads as follows:

But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, “Say what you (wish to) say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas.” Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior: “Did he really speak with a woman without our knowledge and not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?” Then Mary wept and said to Peter, “My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?” Levi answered and said to Peter, “Peter, you have always been hot tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us. Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect man, and separate as he commanded us and preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said” (17:10-18:21).

What we have here is a reflection on and development of ideas found in the Gospel of John, in particular John 20, where Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene and commissions her to tell the good news to the remaining eleven disciples. This special revelation that came to Mary from Jesus set her apart from the male disciples and, according to this story, led to jealousy and rancor. Mary’s word is not believed, primarily because she is a woman, and these disciples cannot understand why Jesus might honor her with a first appearance and revelation rather than them. The context of this story

shows clearly that what is being discussed here is Jesus' love for his disciples, not some male-female intimacy between Jesus and Mary. Given its Gnostic nature, the author of the *Gospel of Mary* would likely be horrified by the suggestion that Jesus had a marital or sexual relationship with Mary.

Dan Brown's fictitious scholars are consistent: not only do they misrepresent the Bible, they misinterpret the Gnostic documents! Both Teabing and Langdon divorce the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary* from their Gnostic and ascetic contexts, thereby forcing these documents to declare what they in fact would deny.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Mary Magdalene is said to be in Leonarda da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper*. The evidence is the V shape to the left side of Jesus as one looks at the painting. It is the symbol of the feminine (p. 238), and the feminine-looking figure on the left side of the V is said to be Mary Magdalene (p. 244). This is highly unlikely. There was a long tradition of depicting John the Beloved Disciple with fair skin and light or red hair.³ Such is the depiction in Fra Angelico's fresco of 1438-1442 and his painting of 1450, both of which hang in Florence. This latter work is a painting da Vinci could have seen. It simply is not obvious that the person sitting beside Jesus is a woman in da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Besides, if this figure is Mary Magdalene, where is the twelfth apostle? In any case, whatever da Vinci may have had in mind tells us nothing about what actually happened at the Last Supper in A.D. 30.

Speaking of A.D. 30, in a culture where there were no last names, a geographical designation was one of the main ways to distinguish people with the same first name, and it seems the geographical designation was regularly used of *those who never married*, especially women who could not use the "name tag"⁴ meaning "son of . . ." (as, for example, in Simon bar-Jonah which means "Simon, the son of John"). In Luke 8:1-3, Joanna is identified by the phrase "of Chuza" which surely means "wife of Chuza," but in

³In the famous El Greco painting of the Last Supper (1570-1575) hanging in Bologna, the Beloved Disciple has fair skin and long, red hair. Interestingly, there is another tradition that depicts Judas as having red hair and fair skin, an attribute sometimes seen as devilish; for example, Hans Holbein's painting of the Last Supper (1520-1524) hanging in Basel. There are then two artistic traditions of explanation for the fair-skinned, redheaded figure in the Last Supper paintings of the period of da Vinci, and neither one of them suggest a reference to Mary Magdalene. See the marvelous collection of Last Supper paintings simply titled *Last Supper* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000).

⁴The technical term is "patronymic."

the same list Mary is said to be “of Magdala.” Had Mary Magdalene been married to Jesus, she would have been identified in the same way as Joanna, not with the geographical designation.

Finally, what about the accusation that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute? Teabing answers with this reply:

“Magdalene was no such thing. That unfortunate misconception is the legacy of a smear campaign launched by the early Church. The Church needed to defame Mary Magdalene in order to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail” (p. 244).

Although wrong in his explanation, Teabing is right in his declaration: “[Mary] Magdalene was no such thing.” First advocated in a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591, the medieval tradition that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute is false, which ironically is one of the few things *The Da Vinci Code* is right about. In an age before there were chapters and verses in the New Testament Gospels, it is easy to see how the story of a prostitute in Luke 7:36-50 might be confused with the immediately following story about Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:1-3. It is incorrect to associate the two stories as if they are talking about the same woman.

Next Sunday, Lord willing, we will continue our study of Mary Magdalene. In particular, we will examine the claim that the early church defamed Mary in order to limit the influence of women and to deny women the leadership role in the church Jesus had given them.

Jesus: he was fully human and fully divine. He was God in the flesh. He was God who became one of us. He became like us so that we may become like him.

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