



INVESTIGATING THE ISSUES RAISED BY THE BOOK & MOVIE

EXPLORING THE  
**DAVINCI**  
**CODE**

LEE STROBEL      GARRY POOLE

ZONDERVAN

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*Exploring the Da Vinci Code*

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

ISBN-10: 0-310-27372-2

ISBN-13: 978-0-310-27372-1

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*Interior design by Beth Shagene*

*Printed in the United States of America*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## **Lee Strobel**

Atheist-turned-Christian Lee Strobel is the bestselling author of nearly twenty books, including the award-winners *The Case for Christ*, *The Case for Faith*, and *The Case for a Creator*. With a Master of Studies in Law degree from Yale Law School, he was a journalist at the *Chicago Tribune* and elsewhere, winning Illinois' top honors for investigative reporting (shared with a team he led) and public service journalism from United Press International. He and his wife live in California.

## **Garry Poole**

Garry Poole, director of spiritual discovery at Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, is a leading innovator of small groups designed to help spiritual seekers investigate Christianity. His award-winning book *Seeker Small Groups* provides a blueprint for implementing this highly successful ministry. Garry also authored *The Complete Book of Questions* and the bestselling Tough Questions series. He and Lee Strobel wrote *Experiencing the Passion of Jesus*, named the 2005 Christian Book of the Year. Garry lives outside Chicago.

# INTRODUCTION

*Actual conversation on an airplane over Iowa:*

Passenger 1: You're a Christian too? So am I. That's great.

Passenger 2: Yeah, that's great.

(pause)

Passenger 1: I just read *The Da Vinci Code*. Have you read it?

Passenger 2: Sure did.

Passenger 1: What percentage do you think is true?

(pause)

Passenger 2: Oh, about 80 percent.

Dan Brown's red-hot page-turner *The Da Vinci Code* has become a runaway bestseller and now a major motion picture directed by Ron Howard. What's most intriguing, though, is not merely the astronomical sales figures—it's the effect the story is having on popular culture. By cleverly mixing fact with fiction, Brown has created a raging controversy over how many of the novel's claims are rooted in reality.

*USA Today* said the book consists of "historical fact with a contemporary storyline." Said Charles Taylor of the popular website *salon.com*: "The most amazing thing about this novel is that it's based on fact." Brown even begins his book under the heading "FACT," telling his readers: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."

If true, the book's assertions are nothing less than breathtaking: Jesus never claimed to be the Son of God but was actually deified nearly three hundred years later by Emperor Constantine for his own nefarious purposes; Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, who bore his child; Jesus wanted Mary Magdalene to lead his church, but she was forced out by power-hungry men and demonized as a prostitute; and the four Gospels in the Bible are essentially fabrications designed to seal this masculine power-grab for the rest of history.

Are readers being convinced? A survey by Decima Research, Inc. showed that one out of three Canadians who have read the book now believes there are descendants of Jesus walking among us today. And according to pollster George Barna, 53 percent of Americans who've read the book said it had been helpful in their "personal spiritual growth and understanding." But are *The Da Vinci Code's* stunning allegations actually supported by the historical evidence? Or are they as fanciful as the novel's colorful characters?

To get answers, my colleague Garry Poole and I traveled to France to visit the Musée du Louvre, between the Seine River and the Rue de Rivoli, in the heart of Paris. This magnificent museum, once the luxurious Renaissance palace of Louis XIV, houses thousands of paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens, Poussin, and others, as well as such sculptures as the Winged Victory of Samothrace and the Venus de Milo.

*The Da Vinci Code* begins with the murder of the Louvre's fictional curator, Jacques Saunière, whose body is found thirty yards from Leonardo Da Vinci's painting, *Mona Lisa*. Clever codes and clues lead Harvard professor

Robert Langdon (played by Academy Award winner Tom Hanks in the movie) and the curator's granddaughter, Sophie Neveu (played by Audrey Tautou), on a whirlwind adventure of discovery.

As part of our investigation, Garry and I examined architect I. M. Pei's impressive glass pyramid that was added to the Louvre in 1989—under which, according to the closing pages of *The Da Vinci Code*, are buried the bones of Mary Magdalene and a cache of ancient documents about her true identity. Through the centuries, the church has allegedly done everything in its power to cover up the explosive truth about her and suppress the female role in Christianity.

We also went to England to explore other key sites from *The Da Vinci Code*, such as the Temple Church in London. This striking medieval edifice, with eerie stone effigies of nine knights embedded in its circular foyer, was built by the Knights Templar, the part-military, part-religious organization that Brown claims was the protector of the secrets about Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Before virtually all of the Knights Templar were slain centuries ago, their task of passing down these secrets was entrusted, Brown claims, to the Priory of Sion, a clandestine organization supposedly founded by a descendant of Jesus in 1099. Among the Priory's purported Grand Masters: Sir Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo—and Leonardo Da Vinci, who allegedly left clues in some of his most famous artwork.

Frankly, Garry and I found the process of examining the claims of *The Da Vinci Code* every bit as fascinating as the murder mystery itself. And we're glad that you too want to get to the bottom of the important issues raised by Brown, especially these four fundamental questions:

- What can history really tell us?
- Can we trust the four Gospels?
- What's the role of women in Christianity?
- Is Jesus the Son of God?

In this book, you'll read the interviews we conducted with four recognized scholars who are experts in ancient history, the Gospels, women in Christianity, and the deity of Jesus. We've also included provocative quotes and sidebars on related issues, as well as a series of questions that we hope will stimulate your thinking or provide fodder for your conversations with friends. (We've created a separate DVD-driven resource called *Discussing the Da Vinci Code* if you'd like to get together with a few others to talk about the book and movie.) At the conclusion of each chapter, I'll offer my own perspective.

When I was an atheist and began my probe into the case for Christianity, I promised myself that I would maintain an open mind and follow the facts wherever they lead—and I hope you'll make that same resolution as you begin your journey into exploring this controversial book and film. In the end, I trust you'll come to your own well-reasoned conclusions about the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*.

The truth is, there is a lot at stake: can Jesus really be trusted as God incarnate, or was he merely a human pawn in the greatest scam in history? So engage, analyze, study, deliberate, grow—and then decide for yourself.

Have a great time exploring *The Da Vinci Code*!

**Lee Strobel**



## Chapter 1

# WHAT CAN HISTORY REALLY TELL US?

Blinding ignorance does mislead us.  
O! Wretched mortals, open your eyes!  
**Leonardo da Vinci**

Breathtaking Lincoln Cathedral, towering atop Lindum Hill in a quaint community two hours by train north of London, can be seen from twenty miles away. Some say it's among the finest medieval buildings in all of Europe. Its edifice, parts of which date back to 1072, is awash in spotlights at night, creating a spectacular golden glow.

I pulled open the massive black door and walked inside. The cavernous sanctuary, with its arched ceilings and elegant stained glass, still functions as a church today. Exploring a long hallway, our footsteps echoing as we went, Garry and I came upon a small room to the right and opened the door, which creaked eerily on its hinges. Our eyes immediately were captured by an elegant statue along the wall—a finely carved marble image of a winged

and bearded figure bearing a written proclamation. How ancient was it? Fifteenth century? Earlier?

I smiled and picked it up, easily holding it above my head. “Look!” I exclaimed. “Styrofoam!”

Sure enough, the statue was a clever fake. Next to it was a monument that purported to date back centuries—but it was made of plywood. And the stone wall with beautiful frescos painted on it? The whole thing was drawn on heavy canvas—including the stones themselves.

Ron Howard had been here.

As director of *The Da Vinci Code* movie, he had been faced with a challenge. The plot of the book climaxes with a confrontation at London’s Westminster Abbey, but officials there refused to let Howard film his movie inside their historic walls. The reason, they said, is that the novel is filled with “factual errors” and was “theologically unsound.”

So Howard went hunting for another ancient building that could pass for the interior of the 940-year-old Abbey. That brought him to Lincoln Cathedral.

Cathedral officials were critical of Brown’s book too, calling it “speculative and far-fetched,” and even heretical in places, “based on ideas put forward rather late in the church’s history.” Still, they opted to open their doors for the filming of three of the movie’s scenes. “The book claims that the church has suppressed important facts about Jesus,” the Cathedral’s dean said in a statement. “The way to counter this accusation is to be open about the facts as we understand them and welcome vigorous debate.”

Once inside, Hollywood did what it does best: create illusions. Phony paintings, crypts, and statues were skill-

fully designed and constructed. To the casual observer, they appeared every bit as real as the other historic artifacts in the medieval cathedral. On camera, they would undoubtedly fool viewers.

In a way, this harmless Hollywood trickery is a metaphor for the more insidious illusions that, according to Dan Brown, have fooled students of history for generations. His basic charge in *The Da Vinci Code* is that people have been misled and deceived by historical accounts about Jesus that have no basis in reality. History, Brown asserts, is written by the winners, who naturally paint themselves in positive ways while disparaging their defeated foes—and so we're left with a biased and tainted record that only tells one side of the story.

“Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ,” says a character in the novel, “is *false*.”

What *can* we know for sure about history? How can we assess whether an ancient document is trustworthy? Are there legitimate criteria we can use to test historical claims? And what about some of the eye-popping historical allegations that Brown makes, such as his assertion that the Priory of Sion has been protecting the secrets about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and their descendants for centuries? Or that it was Emperor Constantine, an ersatz Christian, who deified Jesus, collated the Bible, and destroyed competing gospels in order to eliminate the real story about Jesus' identity?

I placed a call to Dr. Paul Maier, a well-respected and straight-shooting professor of ancient history, and made an appointment to question him about these issues. It was time to get some answers.

**1.** What was your overall reaction to *The Da Vinci Code*? What are three things you liked most about the book or movie? What did you like least—and why?

**2.** Are there any questions, issues, or concerns about historical Christianity that *The Da Vinci Code* raises in your mind? If so, what are they specifically?

### **Gauging Historical Accuracy**

“Many historians now believe (as do I) that in gauging the historical accuracy of a given concept, we should first ask ourselves a far deeper question: How historically accurate is history itself?”

**Dan Brown**

**3.** Can historical events be verified? Why or why not? What do you think determines whether or not a historical event actually occurred?

Dr. Maier, a wiry and feisty professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, has achieved acclaim as a scholar, teacher, and author of both academic and popular writings. Since earning his doctorate at the University of

Basel in Switzerland in 1957, he has become a recognized expert on ancient Near East history, ancient Greek and Roman history, and Christianity and the Roman Empire. He has written more than 250 articles and reviews for professional journals, including the *Harvard Theological Review*. His teaching awards include Professor of the Year from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education.

Maier has written such books as *In the Fullness of Time*, which examines secular evidence about Jesus and early Christianity; a new translation and commentary on the first-century historian Josephus; and a similar book on Eusebius, the first church historian. He's also the author of historical novels, including *Pontius Pilate* and *The Flames of Rome*. His thriller *A Skeleton in God's Closet* became the top national bestseller in religious fiction and led to a sequel, *More Than a Skeleton*.

Maier has more than just a passing interest in *The Da Vinci Code*. Together with Hank Hanegraaff, host of the popular national radio program *The Bible Answer Man*, he conducted an in-depth analysis of Brown's novel. From that research, he and Hanegraaff wrote *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?*, which provides answers to historical issues raised by the book.

When we rendezvoused in California, sitting across from each other in a borrowed room, I opened my copy of *The Da Vinci Code* and read aloud this quote: "History is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated and the winner writes the history books—books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe."

I looked up at Maier. “Do you agree with that?” I asked. “Is history always written by the winners?”

Maier didn’t hesitate. “No, the whole premise is false,” he declared. “I can give you some interesting instances where history was written by the losers. For example, one of the greatest civil wars in the ancient world was the famous Peloponnesian War. [Its history] was written by Thucydides, who was an Athenian, and the Athenians lost the war. Sparta won. And yet, Thucydides wrote a very objective treatment of what happened in the Peloponnesian War.”

With that quick refutation of one of Brown’s major premises, our conversation continued to unfold:

***Q: What determines whether a historical event actually occurred? How do you know, as a historian, that any event in ancient history really took place?***

**Maier:** There are various methods. First of all, “multiple attestations,” or different authors writing about the same event, is one criteria for authenticity. For example, we have three different versions of the great fire of Rome in 64 AD. Basically, all three of them attest that Rome was totally destroyed, or at least that Rome was only partially destroyed, so this does not deny that the great fire of Rome actually happened. We know it did happen.

***Q: So there might be some differences in secondary details, but the core is trustworthy because you have multiple reports on the same event?***

**Maier:** Exactly. Another interesting criterion is the “criterion of embarrassment.” In other words, very often we can bring more truth out of a hostile source than a friendly one. A friendly source can beef up or exaggerate

its particular role, but when a hostile source concedes something because everybody knows it really occurred, then the ancient historian concludes that's the truth.

There are other methods of determining the truth behind historical events as well. Archaeologists give us hard evidence that sheds light on a particular source, like geographical data and background. If the setting of the event is accurate and one can go see it today, we know it's true. Flavius Josephus, the famous first-century Jewish historian, talks about the siege of Masada. Well, you can go to Masada today and see the very snake path that he talked about two thousand years ago on the east side of that great crag. This confirms that Josephus was not just making this up.

***Q: But as a Christian, doesn't that bias your view of history?***

**Maier:** I try the best I possibly can to be objective in historical research. I think every true historian is digging for the truth. In the case of archaeology or ancient historical research, we look for the truth and let the chips fall where they may. And what is so incredibly interesting about the chips in the case of Christianity is how they fall on the side of supporting the biblical record.

***Q: What about the bias of the person in ancient history who is doing the reporting? You mentioned that Josephus was a Jewish historian of the first century. He certainly had his biases. How do you sort through that as a historian?***

**Maier:** You've got to learn to put on filters. For example, we know that Josephus in the *War of the Jews* was very partisan to the Roman side and he tries to favor his

own benefactors in Rome. So we must neutralize that somewhat in reverse against his admiration for things Roman. Now, later on, he's a little more honest when he does the *Antiquities*. And so, you always try to check out the source's bias, and then put a reverse negative filter on that to get at the truth.

Maier's basic point—that historians use sensible and proven approaches to figure out what really happened in ancient times—did make sense to me. I was particularly fascinated by his comment about how these approaches tend to support the biblical record—but I knew I'd be delving deeper into this topic in future interviews. In the meantime, I turned our conversation to a historical claim by Brown that a clandestine organization called the Priory of Sion has spent centuries guarding the secret about the descendants of Jesus. I was curious about how well this assertion would withstand a historian's scrutiny.

"The book makes the claim that this information about the Priory is contained in secret documents that were discovered in the National French Library," I said. "Would you not concede that those documents do exist?"

Clearly, I had struck a nerve. "The documents exist—but they're all fraudulent!" Maier exclaimed. "On the first page of *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown lists two items as 'FACT': Opus Dei and the Priory of Sion. Now, this is his method. He will offer a little truth—maybe 15 to 20 percent—and the rest is falsehood. But people will think it's all true because they know that part of it is true. The claim in *The Da Vinci Code* is that the Priory of Sion was founded in 1099 AD in Jerusalem. Well, the



fact of the matter is that it was founded in 1956, in Paris, by a crook and forger named Pierre Plantard, who planted secret documents in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.”

Maier was gravely offended by the notion. “The central strand in *The DaVinci Code* is based on fraud,” he said. “This is just incredible!”

Indeed, it *was* amazing! “So the documents are real; the problem is that they’re phony,” I said.

“They’re *totally* phony!” he replied. “Exactly!”

Suddenly, it was as if a crucial thread had been pulled out of *The Da Vinci Code* and its central premise began to unravel. So many of its allegations, including the supposed involvement of Leonardo Da Vinci as a Grand Master of the Priory, can be traced back to counterfeit documents that have absolutely no basis in reality. And with the claims about the Priory being so confidently labeled as “fact” by Brown, what repercussions does this have for the overall credibility of his work?

“When you see this as a historian,” I asked Maier, “what does that do to you?”

“Well, I worry about the truth. I really do,” Maier replied. “What happens if a majority of the readers of this novel will believe all the lies that are included in the second half of the book? Will this become the majority opinion? And will those historians who are really seeking the truth be crowded out in the future?”

“Actually, I am far more furious at *The Da Vinci Code* as a professor of ancient history than I am as a Christian. The church has been attacked for two thousand years now. Well, what’s new? But I cannot stand it when universally accepted facts of the past are falsified. This I cannot take.”

Then he gave the ultimate insult a college professor can offer. “If a student of mine had written something like this,” he declared, “I would flunk him!”

**4.** What’s your reaction to Dr. Maier’s revelation about the Priory of Sion? Do you think he’s being too harsh by saying he would have given Brown an “F” if he had been a student? Why?

**5.** Dan Brown’s statements about the Priory of Sion are listed under the bold headline, “FACT.” What does this suggest about the accuracy of the rest of the book’s claims? Explain.

### **Dan Brown: A Believer**

“I began as a skeptic. As I started researching *Da Vinci Code*, I really thought I would disprove a lot of this theory about Mary Magdalene and holy blood and all of that. I became a believer.”

**Dan Brown to Elizabeth Vargas  
on ABC’s *Primetime Live***

### **Error-Laden?**

“So error-laden is *The Da Vinci Code* that the educated reader actually applauds those rare occasions where Brown stumbles (despite himself) into the truth.”

**Sandra Miesel in *Crisis* magazine**

**6.** Generally speaking, what percentage of Dan Brown's book do you think is fact and what percentage of it is fiction?

### **The Priory of Sion**

"Brown relies on a 1982 publication, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, for his information on the Priory of Sion. The authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* relied on documents provided them by Pierre Plantard, who spent time in jail for fraud in 1953. Plantard and three other men started a small social club in 1956 called the Priory of Sion. . . . Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, Plantard created a series of documents 'proving' the existence of a bloodline descending from Mary Magdalene, through the kings of France, down to the present day to include (surprise!) Pierre Plantard. . . . In 1993 . . . Plantard, under oath, admitted he had made up the whole Priory scheme."

**James Garlow and Peter Jones  
in *Cracking Da Vinci's Code***

**7.** Listed below are some of *The Da Vinci Code's* controversial claims that are disputed by numerous historians and biblical scholars. To what extent do you think people view these controversial theories as factual? Generally speaking, what's your opinion about these theories? Check any that you consider to be accurate.

- The Bible was put together by Constantine, a pagan Roman emperor.
- The Gospels have been edited to support the claims of later Christians.

- Jesus is not the Son of God; he was only a man.
- Jesus was not viewed as God until the fourth century, when he was deified by the Emperor Constantine.
- Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.
- In the original Gospels, Mary Magdalene, not Peter, was directed to establish the church.
- Mary Magdalene was to be worshiped as a goddess.
- There is a secret society known as the Priory of Sion that still worships Mary Magdalene as a goddess and is trying to keep that practice alive.
- Jesus and Mary Magdalene conceived a child and named her Sarah.
- Sarah gave rise to a prominent family line that is still present in Europe today.
- The Catholic Church often has assassinated the descendants of Christ to keep his bloodline from growing.

### **Trustworthy?**

“*The Da Vinci Code* clearly contains many historical errors covering a wide variety of issues: church architecture, religious symbolism, the Roman Empire, ancient Israel, and different spiritual belief systems. If Brown cannot be relied upon to accurately recount the most basic of historical facts, then how can he be trusted to correctly explain more complex subjects?”

**Richard Abanes in  
*The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code***

**8.** Do you think that Christianity, as we know it, is a fabrication, and that the truth has been repressed?

### **History Mixed with Falsehoods**

“This is a good airplane book, a novelistic thriller that presents a rummage sale of accurate historical nuggets alongside falsehoods and misleading statements. The bottom line: The book should come coded for ‘black light,’ like the pen used by the character Saunière to record his dying words so that readers could scan pages to see which ‘facts’ are trustworthy and which patently not.”

**Margaret M. Mitchell, chair of the Department  
of New Testament and Early Christian Literature  
at the University of Chicago**

One of the villains in *The Da Vinci Code* is the Roman emperor, Constantine. Brown called him a pagan who only reluctantly converted to Christianity on his deathbed and who decided which gospels went into the Bible and which were destroyed because they revealed that Jesus was a mere human being. Obviously, these weighty claims are worth investigating, so I continued my interview with Dr. Maier by summarizing Brown’s assertions and then saying, “You’re a historian—is this historically reliable information?”

Again, Maier was incensed at the very suggestion. “I think it’s the greatest character assassination I’ve ever seen—either fact or fiction—in my life,” he insisted. “This flies flat in the face of all the historical evidence we have.

“Constantine was a true convert to Christianity. After the Battle of Milvian Bridge, he announced the Edict of Toleration for the faith. He built cathedrals as though there were no tomorrow. All the main identification spots associated with Jesus in Palestine are Constantinian construction: the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

“He couldn’t do enough for the church. He reimbursed the church for all the damage it had suffered in the persecutions. He invited the clergy regularly for dinner. He called himself a bishop of those outside the church in order to bring them into the church. He felt that God had appointed him to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity. He was active in church affairs. He exempted the clergy from taxation. He called the first great ecumenical council into session—and I could go on. It’s ridiculous to say he was a lifelong pagan. It’s simply a bald lie.”

I thought to myself, *Tell me how you really feel, Dr. Maier. Next time, don’t hold back!* Clearly, as a historian he was angry about what he considers the blatant defamation of Constantine. “But,” I interjected, “is it true that Constantine is the one who collated the Bible, and that he chose what gospels went in and which got eliminated?”

Maier wasn’t buying that either. “Dan Brown almost makes Constantine a universal editor of the earliest Bible, which is just pathetic, because the canon [the standard biblical books] was already known a century and a half to two hundred years before Constantine. Eusebius, the earliest Christian church historian, tells us how the canon came to be and how other books were added later on, but by Constantine’s time, it was already determined. There’s no question about that.

“And the Council of Nicea in 325 did not decide which books should go in the canon or which should not. Nothing of that is true. Not one of the decrees of the Council of Nicea deals with the canon. So, again, you simply have falsehood multiplied here.”

I asked Maier about another *DaVinci Code* claim: that Constantine used the Council of Nicea to deify Jesus in AD 325.

“Well, this is what Dan Brown says,” Maier replied. “But the deity of Jesus was never under discussion at the Council of Nicea. What was under discussion was whether Jesus was coeternal with the Father or not. And this is what was decided.”

Maier anticipated my follow-up question. “By the way,” he concluded, “Dan Brown says it was a very close vote. Well, let me tell you what the close vote was: about 300 to 2. Not too close, as far as I can tell.”

I asked, “If you could sum up in one word how reliable *The Da Vinci Code* is in terms of reporting on what Constantine did, what would that one word be?”

Maier didn’t heed my word limit, but he made his point clear. “I would say 20 percent truth, 80 percent falsehood,” he said. “That’s more than one word, but that sums it up.”

**9.** How convincing was Dr. Maier in rebutting Brown’s allegations about Emperor Constantine? Has he caused you to doubt the veracity of Brown’s claims? Why or why not?

**10.** If there are so many fallacies contained within *The Da Vinci Code*, why do you think so many people accept the book as a story based on facts and actual historical events?

**11.** Do you think Dan Brown had an agenda in writing his book, *The Da Vinci Code*? Why or why not? If so, what do you think it was?

### **It Didn't Happen?**

“Brown claims that Jesus wanted the movement that followed him to be about a greater awareness of the ‘sacred feminine.’ He says that this movement, under the leadership and inspiration of Mary Magdalene, thrived during the first three centuries until it was brutally suppressed by the Emperor Constantine. *There’s no evidence to suggest that this is true. It didn’t happen.*”

**Historian Amy Welborn in *De-Coding Da Vinci***

Since Dr. Maier is not only a historian but also a best-selling novelist, I thought it would be interesting to ask his opinion of how Brown approached the writing of *The Da Vinci Code*. Catholic historian Amy Welborn, in her book *De-Coding Da Vinci*, suggests that writers of historical fiction make an implicit deal with their readers—that while the novel features fictional characters engaged in



imagined activities, the basic historical framework is itself correct. But in *The Da Vinci Code*, she said, fanciful details and false historical assertions are presented as facts and the product of serious historical research. I wanted to know: is that a legitimate way to craft a novel?

“You wrote a wonderful book called *Pontius Pilate*, and you were careful to maintain the accuracy of the background facts and events, but then you felt the freedom to create a story in the forefront,” I said to Maier. “But what Dan Brown seems to have done is not maintain the historic foundation for his book. Is that right?”

“Oh, yes, indeed,” Maier said. “In the case of both my historical works, *Pontius Pilate* and *The Flames of Rome*, I was extremely careful. Every personality in the books really lived, and I used their actual names. Secondly, I never contradict known historical facts. Only where the facts leave off do I then try to provide fictional mortar to hold the story together. And I’ll own up with the reader at the end of the book. This is in total contrast to what Dan Brown did.”

“But that’s just a different approach, isn’t it?” I asked. “Does that mean Brown’s approach is wrong?”

“Well, Brown’s approach is wrong simply because he lies about the facts,” said Maier. “And you dare not lie about known historical facts.”

Still, were we making too much of a book that is quite appropriately shelved under “fiction” at Barnes & Noble? I pointed out to Maier that some people scoff at his concerns, saying, “Come on, Dr. Maier, it’s just a novel. Would you just lighten up? Dan Brown wrote a good story, he had fun with it, and people enjoy reading it. Why do you get so upset about a mere novel?”

“What would you say to that?” I asked.

“I get this a lot—‘Come on! Chill out, Maier! It’s a novel!’ And that’s a valid challenge,” he began. “The answer is simply this: in a novel, you have foreground characters and you have the background setting. Now, the foreground characters—you can do with them as you wish. I would never criticize Dan Brown for whatever he might want to do with his fictional characters. That’s his privilege as a novelist, and I’m not knocking that at all.

“But the setting and the background that are well-known from history should not be tampered with, in the interest of credibility. Have there been any novels written about World War II? Of course there have. Well, in every one of those novels, you have foreground characters who are fictional—they never lived, and so forth—but in the background—surprise! surprise!—the Allies always win and the Nazis always lose, don’t they? Why? Because that’s what happened.

“Now, what Dan Brown has done is to fictionalize his foreground characters. Fine—have at it! But in the process he has also falsified the background, and that is what is absolutely unacceptable. In other words, if Dan Brown were using the same rules that he used for *The Da Vinci Code* to write a novel about World War II, he would have Hitler winning the war and Roosevelt on trial in Washington, D.C., and Churchill on trial in London. That’s how bad it is.

“And people who don’t know history—who aren’t aware of the past—might think, ‘Wow, what do you know? That must have happened. It’s in print!’ That’s the danger.”

Indeed, I thought to myself as I concluded our conversation, the biggest problem with *The Da Vinci Code* is that many of its readers simply aren't sufficiently conversant with ancient history to recognize the blatant inaccuracies that plague the book.

**12.** Some people assert that *The Da Vinci Code* is just a novel with no harm done. Others have a problem with the way the book is portrayed as a fact-based exposé that purports to teach history and reveal truths within the framework of fiction. In your opinion, is *The Da Vinci Code* just a novel with no harm done or is it cause for alarm? Why?

**13.** In the *National Review*, David Klinghoffer wrote, "What's at stake in *The Da Vinci Code* is nothing less than traditional Christianity itself." Do you think that *The Da Vinci Code* poses any real threat to Christianity? Why or why not?

While in England to investigate the sites featured in *The Da Vinci Code*, Garry and I ventured to historic Highgate Cemetery in North London, once a fashionable burial place for members of Victorian society. One of history's greatest scientists, Michael Faraday, is among the 52,000 people buried there.

We walked down the muddy, leaf-strewn pathway during a typical British drizzle, straining to read the inscriptions on the tombstones, until we eventually came upon paved sidewalks in the more modern section of the thirty-seven-acre estate. Suddenly, we encountered the grave of Karl Marx. The stern-looking father of communism is depicted in an impressive, larger-than-life bust atop his monument. As we were getting ready to take some souvenir photos, a cemetery worker quickly cleaned off some mud that had apparently been thrown at the monument by a passing capitalist.

As I read the monument's inscription, I was struck by a particular phrase: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. . . ." Is it really true that history is always based on someone's interpretation—or are there some events that we can know for a fact?

Every trial I've covered as a legal journalist investigated an event of recent history. Did the defendant murder the victim? Did the doctor commit malpractice? To determine the truth, jurors consider eyewitness testimony, study documents, and examine physical evidence—and in the end, they reach a verdict.

In a way, the study of ancient evidence is similar. Do we have records that are rooted in eyewitness accounts and are close to the events themselves? Does archaeology corroborate or contradict the testimony? By carefully examining the evidence and employing the kind of investigative criteria described by Dr. Maier, we can come to a reasonable verdict about whether an event occurred long ago.

When I apply those standards to the historical claims of *The Da Vinci Code*, I walk away totally unconvinced

that they're based on reality. They simply do not hold up to sober scrutiny. The Priory of Sion? Sorry, its thousand-year legacy of passing along the secrets about Jesus and Mary Magdalene is simply mythology created by counterfeit documents. Emperor Constantine? There are just too many historically reliable records that contradict Brown's fanciful reconstruction of history.

But what about the Gospels in the New Testament? Do they only provide a distorted and unreliable record about Jesus, as Brown contends? Or is there solid evidence that they are trustworthy accounts of Christ's birth, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection? That would be my next topic to tackle. It was time to find a Jesus scholar to see if he could back up his claims with facts.