

# Da Vinci's Mystery Study Guide

## FOR THE LEADER

Thank you for agreeing to facilitate this video series, *Da Vinci's Mystery*. Whether you are sharing leadership in this study, or it is the responsibility of one person, you are participating in something important and meaningful. Thankfully, the discussion belongs to the whole group, and does not rest solely upon your shoulders. Your job is simply to initiate conversation, inviting others fully into the discussion. Keep in mind that people participate in groups in different ways. Some may be more quiet, while others like to speak up. Help facilitate as you see best, welcoming each person to the group, and their contributions. You may need to keep in mind time considerations, helping to keep the group focused and on-track.

You will be in charge of making sure there are all the appropriate materials that the group will need for that session, including photocopies of the study guide sheets and some bibles, if desired. Occasionally, a chalkboard, whiteboard or large easel might be helpful in recording the group's responses, but a piece of paper and a person to record will do.

You might want to give some attention to the place where you will be meeting, setting up the DVD player and monitor ahead of time, along with arranging chairs and any tables. Begin and end each session with prayer. This helps center and focus the group. After watching the DVD, there may be questions or issues that your group wants to discuss that evolve naturally. Go with these if they seem appropriate! Otherwise, follow-up questions are provided to help facilitate discussion.

Because this particular popular culture phenomenon has already caused a great deal of anxiety for many Christians, it is important to engage in a meaningful conversation and allow difficult questions to be asked. You may find that the closing prayer is particularly important, as people try to reconcile their faith with the assertions made in the book. If possible, end the session in a spirit of hope. Christians can be confident in the promises of God. This book can enliven faith by making us ask questions and look to God, the Bible and our traditions for answers.

## What you need

- TV, monitor or video projector
- DVD player
- Bibles, if desired
- Paper and pencil/pen for jotting notes
- Participants should feel free to bring their own copies of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, if desired

## Photocopying

Feel free to photocopy the following pages (2-5) of this study guide to use as a handout.

# *Da Vinci's Mystery: Study Guide*

## DA VINCI'S MYSTERY

This DVD contains a discussion of *The Da Vinci Code* book and movie featuring Luther Seminary teachers Sarah Henrich and Matt Skinner, both Professors of New Testament, led by David Lose, Professor of Homiletics and Academic Dean at Luther Seminary.

Themes of the discussion:

- Why the book and movie have captured so much attention
- Problems with the history presented by author Dan Brown
- The role of women in the early church
- The Gnostic heresies
- Jesus' divinity
- Perceived threat to faith

This DVD also contains two bonus segments (see "Bonus Features" on DVD):

1. "Origins of the New Testament" - more background on the formation of the New Testament
2. "The Gospel of Judas" - background on the recently discovered text, as well as other Gnostic gospels

## PLOT SYNOPSIS

Sophie Neveu, a young code breaker working for the French Judicial Police, and Robert Langdon, a Harvard symbologist, are implicated in the murder of a prominent curator of the Louvre Museum in Paris. Before he dies, he writes a coded message on the floor with an invisible ink marker, takes off his clothing, and puts his body in the position of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. The plot moves quickly as Sophie and Langdon outwit the police, an Opus Dei hit man, and a mysterious character known as "The Teacher," in a race to unravel the code left behind by the curator.

The curator's secrets are revealed to Sophie that a central feature of Christian history—the marriage and bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene—was kept secret by the church. In addition to claiming that Jesus fathered a family with Mary Magdalene, Sophie learns that the church conspired to portray Mary as a prostitute to cover up the relationship.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think that this story has captured so much attention? What has Dan Brown tapped into?
2. Matt Skinner and Sarah Henrich believe that there is a culture of suspicion to which this story plays, and that a conspiracy about a large institution is a believable premise. Do you think that's true? How do you see it?
3. One of the key lines in the story is Teabing supposedly quoting Napoleon. "The winners in history are usually the ones who write the history we read." Is that true, and how does it generate suspicion about history in general and church history in particular?

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4. There are many gaps in early Christian history. The novel and film fill many of these gaps with Brown's own version of history. How plausible are his explanations? Are they based on fact or is it merely a device of fiction? Do his initial statements of fact regarding Opus Dei and the Priory of Sion give his novel's plot more credibility?
5. The novel and film claim the formation of the New Testament was done largely in secret and that Constantine dictated the outcome. This was a plot to assert the divinity of Jesus and to hide the leadership roles of women, particularly Mary Magdalene." What do you know of the process of forming the New Testament? Do you believe that it was a secretive process controlled by powerful men to lock women out of Christian history and perpetuate a theology that political powers could manipulate? *For more background on the formation of the New Testament, see the DVD "Bonus Features" menu for bonus segment "Origins of the New Testament".*
6. Brown places authority in some of the second-century "Gnostic gospels" to provide evidence that Mary Magdalene was a prominent leader. What do you know about Gnostic streams of thought and the Gnostic gospels? *For more background on Gnostic gospels and the recently publicized Gospel of Judas, see the DVD "Bonus Features" menu for bonus segment "The Gospel of Judas".*
7. *The Da Vinci Code* is based on achieving a spiritual peace through discovering secret knowledge. This reflects ideas (which are often characterized as "Gnostic," after the Greek word for "knowledge," gnosis) that the early church deemed heretical. Is the Christian faith truly based on factual knowledge, as the book and movie assert?
8. One of the characteristics of Gnostic thought is a strong philosophical separation between the spirit and the body. The Gospel of Judas, for example, depicts Judas as helping Jesus escape the earthly prison of his flawed human form. *The Da Vinci Code* features two people with physical abnormalities—Silas the self-injuring albino, and the polio-stricken Teabing—pursuing opposite purposes regarding the secret knowledge of Jesus' human story. Silas' body is the source of all his troubles and the vehicle for his evil deeds, so he punishes it. Teabing is a knight on crutches; he retreats to his mind, and becomes a reknowned Grail scholar, in search of knowledge. Do you think this spirit-flesh distinction was intentional on Dan Brown's part? What would a Gnostic approach to physical and developmental disabilities look like? How would that differ from the message of the Biblical witness that is taught and preached today?
9. The book and movie also assert that if Jesus was married and had children, his divinity would be in question. Does Christ's divinity preclude the possibility of typical human relationships like marriage? Would Jesus as husband and father be threatening to you? Would it be inspiring?
10. *The Da Vinci Code* has challenged readers to know more about the history of the church. Some things can't be known. Early church history is messy and filled with human judgment and error. Does this reality shake your faith in the church, the Bible or God? Does the gap between firm historical evidence and faith present problems for you?
11. How does the understanding that *The Da Vinci Code* presents false or misleading historical information affect your assessment of the book or movie? Can a story like *The Da Vinci Code* still be enjoyed as a thrilling adventure novel, even if its plot devices are factually inaccurate? Can it be enjoyed even if its assertions seem to refute the Christian witness? Can Christians remain confident in the promises of God?

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## OTHER RESOURCES

### **From Luther Productions**

*Decoding The Da Vinci Code* audio program from Luther Productions, \$14.95. Featuring professors from Luther Seminary examining the themes and assertions of the Dan Brown novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. Available from [lutherproductions.com](http://lutherproductions.com) or 651.646.5526.

### **Internet-Based Resources Available at No Charge**

From the “Speaking of Faith” program of American Public Media. Audio files available through this site include discussions about the formation of the Christian canon, ancient gnostic writings, and other movements in early Christianity:

[http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2004/01/29\\_davinci/](http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2004/01/29_davinci/)

Interesting reactions to The Da Vinci Code and the Gospel of Judas, written by Bible scholars and theologians. Margaret M. Mitchell on The Da Vinci Code:

[http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive\\_2003/0924.shtml](http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2003/0924.shtml)

Margaret M. Mitchell on the Gospel of Judas and other aspects of Christian origins:

[http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive\\_2006/0413.shtml](http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2006/0413.shtml)

Tom Wright on The Da Vinci Code (article begins on page 22 of the magazine):

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/StJohnsCollege/borderlands/Borderlands05.pdf>

Martha Ellen Stortz on The Da Vinci Code:

<http://www.plts.edu/articles/stortz/davincicode.htm>

Interview with Bart D. Ehrman on The Da Vinci Code:

[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/167/story\\_16783\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/167/story_16783_1.html)

A review of books related to the Gospel of Judas from The New Yorker (by Adam Gopnik):

[http://www.newyorker.com/critics/books/articles/060417crbo\\_books](http://www.newyorker.com/critics/books/articles/060417crbo_books)

From the “Frontline” program of the Public Broadcasting Service called “From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians.” Short articles available through this site include discussions about Gnostic thought and the roles of women in the early Christian churches:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/heretics.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/thomas.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/pagels.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/roles.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/women.html>

# *Da Vinci's Mystery: Study Guide*

English translations of many ancient nonbiblical documents (written during the first through fourth centuries). Note that, because of copyright restrictions, this site must make use of older translations, usually in antiquated English.

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/>

## **Internet-Based Resources for Congregational or Individual Study (Available for Purchase)**

Study guides to help Christians explore claims from The Da Vinci Code that pertain to the early history of Christianity and the New Testament. These two guides (one from Westminster John Knox Press's "The Thoughtful Christian" website, and one from Augsburg Fortress Press's "Up for Discussion" series) were written by Matthew L. Skinner and are similar to each other in terms of their scope and content:

<https://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com/main/ProductDetails.asp?txtProductID=91>

<http://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/item.asp?clsid=176393&isbn=6000211473>

## **Books on the Formation of the New Testament Canon**

Barton, John. *How the Bible Came to Be*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

Gamble, Harry Y. *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.