

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological
Seminary of
Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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The Da Vinci Code

Part Two

“The Gospel of the Goddess”

Kevin T. Bauder

In *The Da Vinci Code*, author Dan Brown advances a theory that subverts Christianity by making three distinct claims. The first claim is that Jesus was married to and had children with Mary Magdalene, who was also an apostle. The second claim is that Christian orthodoxy was only one of several competing faiths among the early followers of Jesus. The third is that the earliest followers of Jesus acknowledged a “sacred feminine” or goddess principle that corresponded to the ancient beliefs of both paganism and Judaism.

According to Brown, acknowledgement of a goddess or feminine deity was common among the world's ancient religions. These religions paid homage to the sacred feminine in order to ensure fertility and wholeness. As Brown tells it, goddess worship dignified women and fostered peaceful, humane attitudes wherever it flourished.

In Brown's opinion, one aspect of goddess worship involved using sexual relations as a mode of worship. Intercourse was thought to bring people into contact with the sacred feminine. In other words, sex functioned as a way of communing with the transcendent.

The protagonists of *The Da Vinci Code* argue that Jesus acknowledged this goddess principle. In fact, he is supposed to have learned it from ancient Judaism, in which Yahweh (the male god) and Shekinah (the goddess) were thought to cohabit in the temple. Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene also reflected their celebration of the sacred feminine. So important was Mary Magdalene to the true followers of Jesus that they have continued to reverence her: she is the so-called Holy Grail.

According to the fictional characters who speak for Brown, Constantine was responsible for inventing a new form of Christianity that rejected the sacred feminine. Seeking to unite his empire, Constantine used his influence to create and enforce a Christian orthodoxy that denied the goddess principle, deified Jesus, and sought to expunge all record of the marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Having oppressed the feminine as a sacred principle, Christianity after Constantine became a malignant and violent religion that repressed women and vilified human sexuality.

How much of Brown's presentation is accurate? Was the sacred feminine actually a characteristic of ancient religions? Is its presence really the key to wholeness, peace, and the dignity of women?

Brown is correct that many ancient religions recognized male and female deities, and that these deities sometimes consorted with each other. This was true of Egyptian religion, with which early Israel was well acquainted. In Phoenician or Canaanite religion, the coupling of the storm god Baal and the fertility goddess Asherah were thought to bring prosperity to the land. Later on, the Greeks and Romans worshipped Aphrodite or Venus as the goddess of fertility, and her temple in Corinth was a center of sacred prostitution. During the First Century, the city of Ephesus was devoted to worshipping a goddess who combined the name and powers of the Greco-Roman Diana or Artemis with the fertility of the Middle-Eastern Astarte. No one doubts that the worship of goddesses was widespread in the ancient world.

Was goddess worship universal, however? The collection of Hebrew and Aramaic documents known as the Tanakh indicates that it was not. This fact is important, because the Tanakh had been collected and widely recognized by the people of Israel for centuries before Jesus was born. The Tanakh was the authoritative religious text among the Jews of Jesus' day, and its documents were later accepted by Christians as their Old Testament.

The Tanakh presents an alternative to the goddess worship of the Egyptians and Canaanites. It depicts a single God, Yahweh, who is neither male nor female. Indeed, according to the Tanakh both men and women are made in the image of this God. As the only true God, Yahweh demands absolute loyalty from the people whom He chooses, namely, Israel.

The documents of the Tanakh record that the people of Israel sometimes worshipped foreign gods and goddesses. This polytheistic worship, however, is depicted as an aberration and a betrayal of Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh. The prophets of Israel repeatedly denounced the worship of all gods and goddesses other than Yahweh. The worship of other gods was finally and completely abandoned by Israel after that nation was defeated and carried captive by the Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, during the Sixth Century BCE. The Tanakh and other historical documents make it clear that, by the time of Jesus, Israel had been intensely committed to monotheism for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Brown suggests that ancient Israel acknowledged the divine feminine, worshipping a goddess named Shekinah (sometimes spelled “Shekhina”) who consorted with Yahweh in the temple. Not a shred of legitimate, historical evidence exists to support this assertion. In the Tanakh, the “shekinah” is the glory or radiance that surrounds Yahweh. It is sometimes described as blazing light, sometimes as thick cloud or smoke. Never is it depicted as a deity separate from Yahweh, especially not as a goddess with whom Yahweh has relations.

Brown has accepted a fabrication regarding Yahweh and Shekinah. What about his views on the effects of the divine feminine? Did goddess worship really dignify women, produce wholeness, and lead to peaceful attitudes?

The answers to these questions are decidedly negative. The ancient civilizations that employed the goddess principle were uniformly warlike and demeaning to women. Egypt, Canaanite Phoenicia, Greece, and Rome were all imperial nations that viewed women primarily as possessions. Women were treated as beasts of burden and as tools for the gratification of male sexual desire and for the production of children. The first religion to dignify women was the monotheistic worship of Yahweh. The worshippers of Yahweh saw the image of God reflected in all human beings, both male and female.

The goddess worshippers not only oppressed women, they also stooped to other forms of savagery. Those who worshipped Asherah and Baal, for example, butchered human babies as sacrifices. During its periods of goddess worship, Israel pursued this practice in sacred groves dedicated to the purpose. The documents in the Tanakh detail the perversion of Israel during those times. The prophets of Israel railed against this injustice.

As a Jew, Jesus knew all of this very well. He was reared in a culture that viewed goddess worship with horror. According to the historical documents, He taught that monotheism—the worship of Yahweh alone—was the center of true religion. Contrary to Brown, not a shred of valid, historical evidence indicates that Jesus ever worshipped a goddess or acknowledged the “sacred feminine.”

Brown wants his readers to believe that Jesus followed ancient Israel in affirming the goddess principle. This is pure fabrication. He wants his readers to believe that goddess worship results in wholeness, peace, and the dignity of women. This, too, is pure fabrication. He also wants his readers to believe that the early followers of Jesus believed in the divine feminine until the time of Constantine, who reinvented Christianity to suit his own purposes. That is the claim that we will explore in the next article. ✖

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Absent from Flesh! O Blissful Thought!

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Absent from flesh! O blissful thought!
What unknown joys this moment brings!
Freed from the mischiefs sin has brought,
From pains, and fears, and all their springs.

Absent from flesh! illustrious day!
Surprising scene! triumphant stroke
That rends the prison of my clay;
And I can feel my fetters broke.

Absent from flesh! then rise, my soul,
Where feet nor wings could never climb,
Beyond the heav'ns, where planets roll,
Measuring the cares and joys of time.

I go where God and glory shine,
His presence makes eternal day:
My all that's mortal I resign,
For angels wait and point my way. ✕

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