



## Good BOOKS

*The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci.*

By Ben Witherington III.

Downers Grove: IVP, 2004. 208 pp.

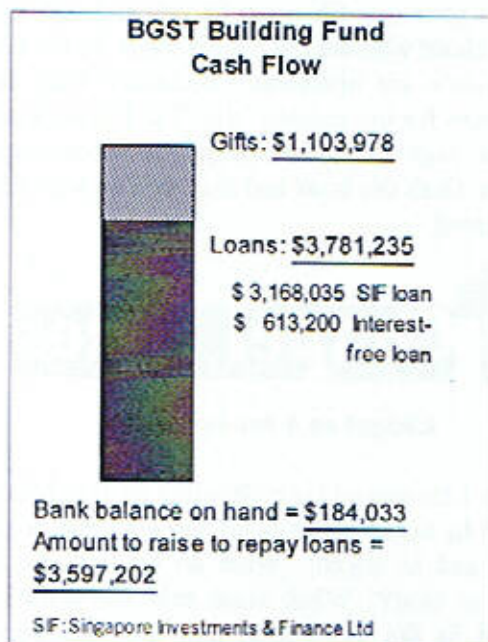
Review by Dr Aquila Lee

“While in Paris on business, Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon receives an urgent late-night phone call: the elderly curator of the Louvre has been murdered inside the museum. Near the body, police have found a baffling cipher. Solving the enigmatic riddle, Langdon is stunned to discover it leads to a trail of clues hidden in the works of Da Vinci – clues visible for all to see, and yet ingeniously disguised by the painter. Langdon joins forces with a gifted French cryptologist, Sophie Neveu, and learns the late curator was involved in the Priory of Sion – an actual secret society. In a breathless race through Paris, London and beyond, Langdon and Neveu match wits with a faceless powerbroker who appears to work for Opus Dei – a clandestine, Vatican-sanctioned Catholic organization believed to have long plotted to seize the Priory’s secret. Unless Langdon and Neveu can decipher the labyrinthine puzzle in time, the Priory’s secret – and a stunning historical truth – will be lost forever.” (by IMDb.com)

This is the plot of Dan Brown’s international bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* and the coming blockbuster of the same title, to be released worldwide in May this year. What an exciting and intriguing plot for all those who love thrillers! The movie still in production is directed by Ron Howard (the Oscar-winning director of ‘A Beautiful Mind’) and two-time Academy Award winner Tom Hanks is cast for the role of Robert Langdon. With the popularity of the novel plus the ‘names’ alone it promises a huge success, but as it has been with the novel, the movie will raise many questions in the minds of viewers, both Christians and non-Christians alike.

The *Da Vinci Code* is in fact a popular version of more serious books that have appeared in the market with controversial claims and contentions about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the canonical Gospels and the Gnostic Gospels. There appeared many reviews of the book from different angles, but I’ve chosen for this week’s Good Book an excellent critique of Dan Brown’s novel (and its Hollywood version). It is written by a New Testament scholar who knows how to communicate both at the scholarly and at the popular levels.

The book is divided into ten short chapters with a postscript. In his introductory chapter the first thing Witherington wishes to pinpoint is the fictional character of the novel, however closely the story is linked with history. Despite the disclaimer in the very first page that “this is fiction,” the author gives the readers the wrong impression that the novel is firmly grounded in history. He then lists “the seven deadly historical errors” made by Brown (pp.21-27) before discussing each topic in detail in subsequent chapters: (1) The canonical Gospels are not the earliest Gospels; rather the earliest are the suppressed Gnostic Gospels (such as the Gospel of Philip or the Gospel of Mary); (2) Jesus is a great man or prophet in the earliest historical sources but was later proclaimed divine at the Council of Nicaea;



(3) Emperor Constantine suppressed the "earlier" Gnostic Gospels and imposed the canonical Gospels and the doctrine of the divinity of Christ on the church; (4) Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene; (5) Jesus must have been married since he was an early Jew; (6) The Dead Sea Scrolls along with the Nag Hammadi documents are the earliest Christian records; and (7) The false assumption that if Jesus had sexual relationships with a wife and sired offspring it would be defiling, or that Jesus couldn't be fully human.

Underlying these false claims is the contention of certain scholars that the Gnostic Gospels represent the true Christian faith and they now reveal secrets about Jesus, secrets long suppressed by the early Church and other religious institutions. As a New Testament scholar Witherington succeeds in exposing several of the misuses of sources presented by Dan Brown. For example, he demonstrates that the Gnostic Gospels cannot be dated earlier than the canonical Gospels, a view held by the great majority in New Testament scholarship. He also convincingly exposes other historical errors made by the novel. As a response to the error no. 3 Witherington, in discussing the historical development of theological view of Christ and the canonization of the New Testament, clearly shows that "the canonizing process came to a conclusion before the theological issues about Christ were all sorted out" (p.62). Then as you go through *The Gospel Code* you will find Dan Brown's historical claims less and less convincing and see for yourself how a historical reconstruction without a solid foundation can fall. Now the question is: Are you ready to answer those questions your non-Christian friends and colleagues will ask about whether the claims made by the novel or the movie are historically accurate? Why don't you prepare for the coming 'trial'? If Brown's novel was a real page turner, *The Gospel Code* comes quite near to it. Grab the book and read it. You will not be disappointed.

## Chapel Notes

Chapel on 4 January 2006

Peter Lim shared his reflections on Isaiah 61:1-3 and he noted that it is quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:16-20 and he asked: "What do we look for in a servant of God?" When Jesus told the worshipers gathered in the synagogue that this prophecy is

fulfilled in Him, they were amazed. He was too ordinary to be real! Are we humble enough to learn from the grass roots level?

Peter then went on to share his reflections on the work of the messiah and asked: "What makes the Christian Faith unique?" In his opinion, the healing ministry of the church refers to an inner healing of the soul rather than a physical one. Yes, of course, God in His grace may allow physical healing, but our emphasis should be the former.

He concluded his sharing by testifying to God's goodness towards his family in his more than two and a half years studies in BGST. During this whole period God had provided for him much more than he needed and this to Him is a comforting assurance from God that He will take care of them in the days and years ahead.

Chapel speaker on 18 January will be Dr Douglas Milne.

## NEWS BITS

1. Teaching the Westminster Confession of Faith (TS216) by Dr Douglas Milne started on 11 January at Bishan campus with a class of 23. Subsequent sessions will now start from 7.30-10.30pm instead of 7.15-10.15pm.
2. A prayer bulletin for Dr Quek Swee Hwa has been put up at our website. The link is <http://bgst.edu.sg/quek/latest.htm>. Your prayers for a successful hip replacement operation for Dr Quek are much appreciated.

## A Blessed Birthday to ...



Mr Jeremy Bung	16/1
Mr Kum Han Wen	16/1
Dr Lee Shu Woan	17/1
Ms Ruth Lim	17/1
Mr Gribson Chan	17/1
Ms Eileen Tan	18/1
Ms Sally Tee	19/1
Mr Lawrence Ong	20/1
Mr Peh Kok Hwa	21/1
Mr Toh Kai Hua	21/1
Mr Samuel Lee	21/1
Mr Alan Chia	21/1
Ms Pearl Chee	21/1
Ms Cheryl Chan	21/1
Mr Lam Wai Kay	22/1
Mrs SM Peck	22/1
Mr Joshua Goh	22/1
Ms Elsa Chew	22/1