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The feminist mystique

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"The Da Vinci Code" by Dan Brown, Doubleday, 2003, 454 pages, \$24.95.

Translated into Hebrew by Nurit Levinson, Modan Publishers, 446 pages, NIS 84.

"The Da Vinci Code" is a thriller that deals with cracking a code. The beginning is promising: A person who is keeping an important secret - the director of the Louvre Museum - discovers that he has only moments

left to live. The secret cannot be revealed to just anyone, and the dying man has to create a code quickly that will be understood only by the person for whom it is intended.

The rest of the book is less successful.

The novel moves rapidly from cliché to cliché, is full of logical and psychological improbabilities and culminates in a saccharine denouement. The business with codes is quite disappointing. The initial message is supposed to be understood only by the murder victim's cryptologist niece. Therefore it includes the following sophisticated elements: The dying man strips and lies down with his arms and legs stretched out inside a circle, like Leonardo Da Vinci's famous "Vitruvian Man" (the clue: Leonardo). He writes down numbers from the Fibonacci series (in which

each number is the sum of the two preceding numbers, a series that even a mathematical ignoramus like me would identify immediately). These numbers will turn out to be the code to a safe in a Swiss bank. There are also two sentences in the message that need to be read with changes in the letters.

When the beautiful, daring niece and her partner, an equally handsome and daring American professor (who is also an expert on religious symbols) solve this difficult riddle, they discover another riddle that is equally difficult: another sentence that needs to be read with changes in the letters! Later on this becomes even more complicated and mysterious. The two, for example, have to decipher something that is written - you aren't going to believe this - in mirror writing! Brilliant. Or at least this is what the characters

think. The remaining mysteries in the book are just as brilliant.

It seems that the reason for the success of this book is neither the sophistication of the riddles in it, nor the very modest quality of the writing. What thrills many of the readers is its pretension to a revealing and daring interpretation of authentic materials from Christian history and the Christian religion. "The Da Vinci Code" purports to reveal a Catholic conspiracy and show us its underpinnings.

The author does not, of course, claim that his book is not a novel, but he does say that the novel is based on genuine materials that at least give rise to questions. According to Brown, in early Christianity there was a continuation of the cult of the Great Mother, a cult of femininity that existed alongside the cult of masculinity. Femininity was

symbolized by Mary Magdalene, Jesus' spouse and the mother of his children. Jesus was a prophet and teacher who, among other things, brought this message of Yin and Yang to his followers.

These facts were repressed and concealed by the church establishment, especially since the days of Constantine. This pagan emperor became a Christian for political reasons, and at the Council of Nicea succeeded in transforming Jesus into a god and concealing Mary Magdalene. Since then femininity has gone underground. Mary Magdalene's remains and the secret documents that tell the real story were found on the Temple Mount when Jerusalem was conquered in the First Crusade.

Coded paintings

In 1099 the Priory of Sion was established and the aim of this order

was to keep the secret. It set up an internal military branch called the Poor Knights of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, or the Templars. The order flourished until 1307, when many of its members were arrested at the initiative of the French king, Phillip the Fair, and Pope Clement V. In 1312 the order was disbanded by the papacy, but the secret treasure was saved. It had been transferred well before then to the members of the Priory of Sion, who kept it underground and acted to plant secret hints in the culture about the concealed truth. Among the heads of the order were Isaac Newton (a Protestant), Sandro Botticelli (a Catholic penitent), Victor Hugo (a republican atheist), Leonardo Da Vinci and Jean Cocteau.

Da Vinci's paintings are sophisticated codes. The "Mona Lisa," for example, is no less than an androgynous self-portrait. More importantly, in the

painting of the Last Supper in Milan, the secret is revealed almost entirely. Even though the ceremony that is depicted is ostensibly the moment of the establishment of the rite of the mass and the consecration of the Grail (which the Catholic tradition identifies as the sacred chalice), there is no special chalice on the table. Next to Christ is a woman - his honorable lady wife Mary Magdalene - whose womb is the sacred goblet that carries within it the living blood of Jesus. The two form the letter M, which indicates matrimonium (marriage) or Mary Magdalene's name. The descendants of our Yin and the Yang end up in France in the Merovingian royal dynasty and they live in wealth and happiness to this very day.

What is correct in this tale? Hardly anything. Brown's main contentions are taken from a series of forgeries that were concocted in France in the

1930s and 1940s by a group of believers in esoteric doctrines, extreme leftists, anti-Semites and supporters of Petain. This nonsense later garnered publicity and was circulated in a number of books, the best-known of which is "Holy Blood, Holy Grail," which was published in the 1980s and was hugely successful. All of these forgeries (about the Priory of Sion and the spurious list of its heads) were exposed long ago, including the dossiers secrets, which Brown mentions as authentic documents from the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. The national library in Paris, like the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem and the Library of Congress, does hold such documents. It is not responsible for their contents or quality.

What are the facts? In the ancient world of Christ's time there was no cult of a primary female deity. There

were various female deities that were popular to one extent or another. Christianity, like Judaism, did choose a male deity, but in fact it did not try to repress the female. In the four Gospels (which are the earliest evidence of the life of Christ and not something that was forced on Christianity by Constantine) there is no central female figure. Mary, mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Martha play marginal though positive roles. In later periods, Gnostic cults tried to give a central role to Mary Magdalene as the spiritual partner of Christ - the idea that Jesus would have sexual relations would shock any cult member more than it would shock a Catholic Christian.

The Great Mother cult

The church did indeed reject these ideas, but it never tried to repress femininity. On the contrary. Instead

of a penitent spouse, the woman chosen was the virgin mother, "she who was born without sin," the great "intermediary," the "Queen of Heaven," the "mother of God." Mary mother of God attracted such an intensive cult that sometimes she even overshadowed her divine son. Most cathedrals (built by the bishops of cities and not by the Templars) are dedicated to her, as are hymns of praise, prayers and visions.

Catholic theology went very far, and very daringly, in the direction of the cult of the Great Mother, the mother of God. The church was not free of prejudices that were common in that period. Women were sinners and foolish, but on the spiritual plane, the church behaved very respectfully toward women. There were and there are many female saints and mystics who garnered and are still garnering respect and worship. The church authorities have never said

that Mary Magdalene was a whore (this is a popular conception, in fact). She continues to be considered a key and important saint who politely gave center stage to a figure more important than she.

During Constantine's time, Christianity was not a religion on the rise, but a persecuted cult whose very existence was in danger. At the Council of Nicea it was not decided that Jesus was divine - this is already hinted at in the New Testament and has been accepted by most Christians since the beginnings of Christianity. It was decided at the Council to reject the Arian position, according to which the Father preceded the Son. The results of the vote were not balanced, as Brown says, but were determined by a vast majority against the Arians.

There was never a secret order called the Priory of Sion. The Templar order

was established in 1119 in Jerusalem; it was a military order that had no esoteric or special spiritual pretension, and with the conquest of the Holy Land by the Muslims it devoted itself to money matters. What aroused the envy of the French was not any secret doctrine but rather the order's enormous wealth. The confessions that were extorted from the Templars in the first show trial in history (mainly a French rather than a papal production) were wicked: acts of sodomy, conversion to Islam, sorcery and Satan-worship. There was nothing said about any mother cult, great or small.

There is no evidence that the order continued to exist in any way. This legend cropped up in the 19th century, when the Freemasons were enchanted by the order's connection to Solomon's Temple, a connection that the Freemasons also claimed.

The "Mona Lisa" is not a self-portrait. She is a real woman, the wife of Francesco da Giocondo. The painting of the Last Supper (which incidentally is not a fresco, but rather a tempera painting on stone) does not depict the moment of the blessing of the wine, but the moment when Jesus announces that one of his disciples will betray him. This is the reason the painting does not stress the goblet. This is not unusual in paintings of the period. The figure to Christ's right is his beloved disciple John. He is always depicted as a handsome youth with long hair. He is not a woman, and it is difficult to believe that the Dominican friars for whom the picture was painted and the thousands of clerics who looked at it would have accepted such a scandalous departure from the norm.

The claim that the descendents of Jesus married into the Merovingian

royal dynasty is based on a figure called Giselle de Razes who married King Dagobert II in the 7th century. Giselle de Razes never existed, but was invented in the 20th century.

What more can be said? That this is only a sample of the nonsense that appears in the book. All this does not stop "The Da Vinci Code" from being a huge best-seller in the United States. Why? God (or the Goddess) knows.

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