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*The Film Predecessors of "The Da Vinci Code"*  
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"The Da Vinci Code" film now reveals its true place in American popular culture. Although it amassed its great popularity as a book, the story is in many ways a product of America's film history. Not only is it a fast-paced, action-packed thriller, more akin to a car-chase movie than a detective novel, its central premise derives from a pre-sixties genre of Bible films. In many ways, the premise that Jesus was married would have been the climax of this genre had it not been so radical that not even the anti-establishment films of the post-sixties period would touch it.

The religious films of the 1950s are generally lumped together under the classification of "biblical epics." This treatment confuses several different types of movies. The religious films from this period shown most frequently on late-night TV actually have little to do with the Bible. I refer to films such as "The Robe," "Ben Hur," and "Quo Vadis." These are films that feature the conversion of a Roman, usually a soldier, to Christianity. They have a brief link to the gospel story, but Jesus is not featured on camera. "The Robe" even stages scenes at the foot of the cross, but Jesus himself never appears.

But "The Da Vinci Code" takes its cue from another genre of 1950s religious films, namely, the biblical romances. This genre's films feature a romance between a biblical hero and a woman. They include "Samson and Delilah" and "David and Bathsheba." While the plot of these films generally follows the life of the biblical hero, the hero's development of a relationship with the female lead takes center stage. The films bring into their narrative a whole series of events that makes the love story believable and engaging but which do not appear in the Bible. And it is these scenes, rather than ones based on the biblical text, that dominate each film.

My point is not that these films depart from the biblical text, which they do. The important question is, why? The additions make the hero more human, more like "us." David and Samson, despite their prowess and achievements, are at heart just like other guys. They find particular women attractive, make fools of themselves while courting them, and fall in love with them. They then need to balance their commitments to God with love and honor of the woman to whom they have pledged themselves. These are dilemmas to which everyone can relate.

This film genre of biblical romance develops into the 1960s and the awakening women's movement by featuring biblical heroines rather than heroes, with films like "The Story of Ruth" and "Esther and the King." But when these biblical films move into the New Testament by filming the story of Jesus himself, in "King of Kings" and "The Greatest Story Ever Told," they drop this feature. Jesus is the one biblical hero who never is paired with a lover. Not even the anti-establishment Jesus films of the 1970s, "Jesus Christ, Superstar" and "Godspell," suggest that Jesus has even one romantic interlude, let alone a full-scale commitment to a woman. The genre of biblical romance never reaches the climax that showing a romantic relationship between Jesus, the greatest biblical hero, and a woman would comprise.

It is not until 1988's "The Last Temptation of Christ" that this climax is reached. This film constitutes a meditation on Jesus' fear of his early mission. While hanging on the cross, time stops and Jesus descends. He marries, has children and raises a family. Only in old age is the time-line restored and Jesus, now an older and wiser man, returns to the cross, taking upon himself the sins of the world, and dying. This film again shows Jesus as typically human, this time not just in relationship to a woman, but in the context of a large, loving family. Even more than the 1950s films, "Last Temptation" shows a biblical hero as one of us, as taking on all the common family concerns and anxieties. At his crucifixion, Jesus has greater experience of the travails of humanity than a 33-year-old bachelor.

As a film, "The Da Vinci Code" now takes this cinegraphic idea one step further. Jesus fell in love with a woman, Mary Magdalene, had a family, and now of course, his children have had children. The film's search for the hidden mystery ends with the discovery of Jesus' offspring. This turns the foregoing films on their head. Whereas their goal was to humanize biblical heroes, the goal of the "Code" is to show Jesus, at least, as special. His children may result from his romantic and familial involvement with a woman, but that does not make him or them common like us. Instead, it emphasizes their special character, as the descendants of the Christ, the divine Son of God.