

## Investigation of Da Vinci's the Last Supper Inspiration Origin on Canonical Gospels

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### Abstract

The Last Supper, as a great work of art in religious scope and in the world, is one of the main scales for most of the artists who worked after Da Vinci; as if many great painters have tried to paint their works with the theme of the last supper based on Da Vinci's work. Here a question raises whether Leonardo Da Vinci was successful in creation of this great painting that is whether he could paint these great event based on Holy Bible successfully. Obviously, this event was described in Bible based on four narratives told by four gospel writers. Accordingly, Da Vinci should paint his Last Supper based on one or a combination of these four narratives. Although Leonardo Da Vinci tried to paint the apostles' total reaction based on the content of Bible in the climax of the story, he painted their facial expressions and details of their reactions based on the totality of their characters depicted throughout Bible. Thus, this part of the painting seems to be based on Vinci's extraordinary imagination. Many of art historians have different opinions about the origin of the Last Supper inspiration. Some of them have not mentioned or referred to its origin while others have investigated the origin of the Last Supper inspiration and told their opinion about it. Some art historians believe that Matthew's narrative was da Vinci's source of inspiration while others believe he combined the four narratives and painted a combination of the narratives on the mural based on his imagination; so that, from each narrative some signs can be found in the mural. In this article, it has been tried to find out whether Leonardo Da Vinci was successful in painting this great event. In so doing, the art work would be analyzed through both its artistic style and scrutinized review of all four narratives of the Holy Bible. First, It would be tried to assess the details of the painting and the da Vinci's style in painting this mural and scrutinize the four narratives. Then the details would be matched with the four narratives to find out based on which narrative the mural was painted or whether it was painted based on a combination of all narratives. According to the analysis, it was found that Gospel of John was da Vinci's source of inspiration in painting the Last Supper. This is based on five reasons: First is in the mural, there is no sign of performing Eucharist by Jesus and this has only been mentioned in John's narrative. Second is the seating arrangement of the Apostles is exactly based on what John narrated in his Gospel. Third is John's head turning to the Saint Peter has only been mentioned in John's narrative. Fourth reason is in the mural, it is clear that Saint Peter is whispering in John's ear and this is also among the points that has only been mentioned in John's narrative and the last one is the details of Jesus and Apostles' reactions have only been mentioned in John's narrative. Based on these reasons it can be concluded that Saint John's narrative was Leonardo Da Vinci's source of inspiration in painting the Last Supper. But Da Vinci's imagination and ingenuity in creating faces and reactions should not be ignored.

### Keyword

Leonardo Da Vinci's Last Supper, John, Luke, Matthew, Mark.

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## Introduction

Since when the stories of the Bible became inexhaustible sources for artists, different images and forms of the characters and stories of Bible have adorned churches, palaces, and even books.

In so doing, several artists have dealt with various subjects at different times from the beginning of the dominance of Christianity to the twenty-first century. But realizations of the event of Christ's (PBUH) Last Supper<sup>1</sup> are the most beautiful works created in the field.

Several versions of this work exist, but the one created by Leonardo da Vinci is certainly considered as a unique work. All art historians have acknowledged the artistic power and glory of da Vinci's work and this has made this work be the summit of the works on the Last Supper.

Since the Bible has been inscribed based on four narratives, realizing which version was da Vinci's criterion and source in creating this work is a matter of dispute among scholars. So, in this article it was tried to find the true origin of the artwork.

To achieve this objective, logical reasoning and artistic analysis would be used. Also, detailed analysis of texts of the Bible and reviewing every four narratives of the Last Supper event would be helpful in proving the proposed claim.

## Methodology and Review of the Related Literature

Discussion on this work of Da Vinci is abundant. In fact, it can be said that anyone involved in art of the world- whether from the geographical aspect, style and school of art aspects, or timeframe or religious art aspects- has surely referred to this work. Though, it has been seen that some scholars have analyzed this work without referring to its source of inspiration (Davis, et al, 2009: 556; Gardner, 2010: 418-419; Canale, 1859; Langley, 2006; Ruckstuhl, 1917).

But many art historians and art theorists have tried to recognize this source of inspiration among which numerous works in art history and religious art can be noted. However, none of them proposed a precise

and clear reasoning for their claim (Gombrich, 2006: 288-291; Hartt, 2003: 671-672; Hartt, 2007: 442-443).

Therefore, this article tried to present a detailed review and analysis of the biblical text and investigate style, artistic details, and form of the mural in order to propose a doctrine and discipline based on reasoning and argumentation through logical reasoning and careful examination of the content of Bible. In this way, after employing library research, the obtained result was assessed through reasoning and analysis of the work itself.

## The Last Supper Mural

In the Last Supper, Leonardo benefited from the visibility technique cleverly which enabled him to draw the perspectives as clear and precise as possible. This is clearly one of the outstanding characteristics of da Vinci's painting style (Langley, 2006: 33).

Leonardo drew this painting in a way that Christ was posited in the focal point of the painting drawing attention of every visitor to the center of the painting. The disciples on either side of Christ were divided into four groups each including three people (Gombrich, 2006: 288).

The first group from the right includes Simon, Thaddeus, and Matthew; the second group includes Philip, James the son of Zebedee, and Doubting Thomas; the third group includes John, Peter, and Judas Iscariot; and the fourth group includes Andrew, James the son of Alphaeus and Nathanael. According to historians, drawing the disciples was the major part of da Vinci's work so that some days he was just staring at the wall for hours without doing anything while doing the painting in his imagination.

Each of the apostles depicted on both sides of Christ has a different reaction, i.e. twelve different mental states along with calm and deep sorrow of Christ form thirteen reactions. Da Vinci tried to draw the figurines and their reactions according to their characters. Peter holds a dirk, John seems immersed in his own thoughts, and Judah hides himself from the Juisis in the shadows.



Fig 1. The disciples from the right: Simon, Thaddeus, Matthew, Philip, James the son of Zebedee, Doubting Thomas, John, Peter, Judas Iscariot, Andrew, James the son of Alphaeus and Nathanael. Source: Gombrich, 2006: 287.

In fact, Leonardo tried to express his view through depicting emotional and mental reactions of the apostles by such precision; the most elevated and difficult goal of the painting was portraying the “intent of the spirit of the men” through the state and movement of their hands and feet (Davis, et al, 2009: 556). Da Vinci’s such precision in portraying the gestures, lighting, arranging people to tell the story, detailed perspective, coordination and numerical balance in the picture, and other most important visual and technical characteristics made this work of da Vinci a scale for measuring other similar works. After careful artistic review of this work while dealing with its narrative in the Bible, we examined every four biblical narratives to find out which one of the four gospels was the criterion of da Vinci’s painting.

### The Bible

In the Gospels, despite the total unitary of the story of the Last Supper, there are some differences among the four versions. Among these, the story that John, who introduces himself as a witness, narrates includes the most differences with other narratives because nothing is mentioned about the issues such as the provision of the disciples Peter and John or argument of the followers on power or priority; but in this version some details has been pointed out as if the author tried to complete the event by some details that has not been mentioned in the other three Gospels (Tenney, 1980: 135-136). However, at the same time it possesses utmost details in narrating and creating the setting. By tracing the narratives of the authors of the four Gospels, one can become aware of the differences between them (Matthew 26: 20-25;

Mark 14: 17-21; Luke 22: 14-23; John 13: 2, 18-30). Although John's story has not mentioned the section about the Eucharist, it has referred to some details that have not been mentioned in the other three stories. Details such as inner feelings of Judas Iscariot and statements with storytelling mode have been expressed by an omniscient narrator for readers' better understanding. Though, a collection of all four stories can also be found in the book entitled *Diatessaron*<sup>2</sup> (Tatian, 1965: 137-139). The point that can be seen in all four versions of this Biblical story is that the other eleven disciples had no doubt in Judas Iscariot; despite the fact that Jesus Christ (PBUH) introduced a treacherous person and despite Judah's departure, still no one doubted him (Halley, 2000: 585). This was due to Judah's affinity and faith that he was known to have miracle like other prophets (Miller, 1934: 320). Therefore, none of the disciples doubted that such a person may betray Jesus and deliver him to Jewish priests and the Romans (Miller, 1934: 326). Although according to the words of Christ saying that the manner of his death was pre-determined by God, this did not decrease the sin of Judah and he was considered as the main culprit in the crucifixion of Christ (Miller, 1934: 320 and 326).

### Analysis of da Vinci's Painting through Narratives of the Four Gospels

The reasons for the author's hypothesis can be divided into two parts including five reasons: Regarding both religious interpretation and the interpretation of the painting itself.

### The First Reason

Luke's narrative has clearly described performing the Mass before the withdrawal of Judas Iscariot. In fact, Judas eats the body and drinks the blood of Christ. This point is in conflict with each of the other three narratives; because regarding the evil intentions of Judah and Christ's knowledge about the traitor, he seems not to deserve to attend the ceremony and receive the blessed bread and wine from the hands of Christ. Furthermore, according to the contradiction of this part of Luke's narrative to other three stories, this part of Luke's narrative cannot be confirmed completely. Thus, it can be said that the presence of Judas in the painting is a sign that the Mass has not been performed yet, hence Luke's narrative was not attended to by Leonardo da Vinci because he depicted the moment that Christ had already introduced his treacherous; and if the Mass was finished, there should be a sign of its execution such as dividing bread and wine among the disciples while there is no such indication in the painting.

Although the dinner table looks somehow as if Jesus and the apostles have eaten their dinners, no sign of the Eucharist can be seen. However, this reason should be considered along with other reasons to determine the criteria for selecting a narrative; relying on this reason alone cannot be the proof of the author's claim.

Looking at the other similar works with the theme of the Last Supper, celebrating the Eucharist can be found as a sign of distinction. For example, it can be referred to two works of Tintoretto<sup>3</sup> (1570 & 1594) with the themes of The Last Supper in which Christ is



Fig. 2. The Last Supper by Tintoretto, 1570. Source: <http://www.wga.hu> (Web Gallery of Art)



Fig 3. The Last Supper by Tintoretto, 1594. Source: <http://www.dia.org> (Detroit Institute of Art)

clearly performing the Eucharist.

Benjamin West<sup>4</sup> has also painted a picture of this event in 1786 depicting the moment of Judah's withdrawal from the House whilst Jesus had just took the bread to begin the Mass. It is an image that is clearly in contrast to Luke's narrative of the story



Fig 4. The Last Supper by Benjamin West, 1786. Source: <http://www.dia.org> (Detroit Institute of Art)

of the Last Supper.

Also, in Nicolas Poussin's<sup>5</sup> (1647) the Last Supper, exactly the moment of Judah's withdrawal concurred with the beginning of the Mass; and in Giotto di Bondone's<sup>6</sup> (1306) the Last Supper the disciples were eating dinner when Christ disclosed the subject

of the treachery of one of the apostles which caused John's deep regret; that is the Eucharist had not even begun yet.

A quick look at most of works similar and simultaneous to da Vinci's work shows that Judah presence in the Mass cannot be an important narrative among most of the artists; however, some works can be found that are in contrast to this view such as Salvador Dali's<sup>7</sup> (1955) The Last Supper in which the bread and wine and all twelve apostles at the table are indications of the presence of Judah in the Mass. But it can definitely be said that the dominant view of most of the artists has focused on the absence of Judah in Holy Communion.

### The Second Reason

Details of the painting, especially the apostles' arrangement at the dinner table, fit the most with John's narrative. There is no mention of the apostles' place in other three gospels, except for the Gospel of John. Although the narrator (John) only determined the place of himself and mentioned that he was sitting right next to Christ that night (John 13: 23), this delicate point has been included in the mural and John has been portrayed beside Christ.



Fig 5. The Last Supper by Nicolas Poussin, 1647. Source: Source: <http://www.nicolaspoussin.org/The-Last-Supper.html>



Fig 6. The Last Supper by Giotto di Bondone, 1306. Source: <http://www.wga.hu> (Web Gallery of Art), <http://www.giottodiBondone.org>

### The Third Reason

The third reason is a reference to other details that are depicted in the painting like John's head that has

turned to Peter listening to what Peter whispered in his ear. Also this has explicitly been mentioned only in John's narrative (John 13: 24). Even though other similar works depicted John beside Jesus, they had no reference to John's narrative and showed John in a state other than in conversation with Peter; as in the works of West and Posen in which John's head has turned to Jesus (PBUH); or in Manoel da Costa's8 (1828) work in which John's head was on his hand turning toward the dinner table.

This implies as if other artists either ignored John's narrative or did not include the nuances of his narrative in their paintings, the nuances that were not hidden from Da Vinci's eyes and were clearly depicted in his Last Supper.

### The Fourth Reason

This reason is in line with the former reason because in the painting Peter was leaning forward and whispering in the ear of John and this has not



Fig. 7. The Last Supper by Salvador Dali, 1955. Source: <http://www.nga.gov> (National Gallery of Art U.S.A.)



Fig 8. The Last Supper by Manoel da Costa, 1828. Source: Thimothéo, 2009: 4240

been mentioned in any of the other three Gospels, it can only be seen in John's narrative. Again, John's narrative should be known as the criterion for da Vinci's painting because, as it was mentioned in the previous lines, lack of rotation of John's head toward Peter in other similar works got this part of the dialogue between John and Peter be absent in the paintings. This is the point that was only present in John's narrative and other narratives did not mention the words exchanged between John and Peter.

### The Fifth Reason

This reason is related to the expression of feelings and reactions of the apostles and even Christ after saying: "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me", which is mentioned with the utmost details in John's narrative. When we stare at Christ's sad face in the painting and observe his heart-rending pain of betrayal of one of his best allies, we remember this verse from John's narrative: "Jesus was deeply grieved and with a broken heart, said: "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me"." This expression can only be seen in John's narrative that described the face of Christ full of lots of grief coming from his knowledge of the truth of what Judas was paid for and wanted it to carry on that night; that was betrayal to Jesus. However none of the other three stories has mentioned the feeling of Christ, even superficially. Moreover, it should be stated that when an artist tries to depict a narrative in his/her work and get his/her narrative from a source, there is no doubt that he/she selects the one with the most narrative and dramatic details in order to demonstrate the event taken from a real story to its best. Among these four narratives, only John's narrative contains the maximum details. After analyzing the above-mentioned reasons and reviewing the gospel written by John, it could well be understood that da Vinci's source of inspiration was John's Gospel. Despite the view of some art historians who claimed that Da Vinci followed the Gospel of Luke (Hartt, 2007: 443), it should be said that they were wrong; because John was the

only person who referred to his conversation with Peter and even mentioned his position near Christ at the dinner table. Other Gospel writers neither paid attention to the details, nor adhered to style of storytelling in their writings; they just described the occurred events; whereas da Vinci painted John next to Jesus and even turned his face toward Peter, a point which has only been mentioned in the Gospel of John.

In addition, it should be noted that since three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are very similar to each other in terms of content and subscription of content and form of description, they are called univocal gospels (Soleimani Ardestani, 2003: 203); and only the Gospel of John has the many differences with other three narratives. So, if Luke's narrative was the source for da Vinci, there would be no reason to draw the tiniest details –which were based on John's narrative- on the painting. Thus Hartt's argument on conformity of da Vinci's painting with Luke's narrative must be rejected.

Perhaps a possibility can be proposed that da Vinci used a combination of all four narratives or John's narrative along with one of the other three Gospels for his painting. But in response, we would say that this possibility has not been proved and cannot even be considered as a possibility because based on what was described about apostles sitting position, there is no doubt the Gospel of John was da Vinci's source of inspiration for illustration. Even if Leonardo was concerned with the other three Gospels, no visible element can be found in the mural to have implications on the claim because they lack any particular and especial narrative point.

In the end, it should be added that although the Gospel of John is Leonardo's guideline to the painting and narrative, "the imagery and narrative of painting is far beyond the biblical story" (Davis, et al, 2009: 556) because the creativity in style of the apostles or their emotional reactions based on each character is an important point that it makes us recognize this work as the finest painting of this great event.



## Discussion

Some art historians and critics believe that the source of inspiration for da Vinci's Last Supper was a narrative other than John's narrative, so that many have considered Luke's narrative as the source of inspiration for Leonardo da Vinci and some have chosen one of the four versions without citing a specific reason. According to what was discussed in this paper, John's narrative can be considered as the one attended by da Vinci because all the elements of the painting such as emotional states of the apostles, their sitting position especially John himself, and the narration fit the most with the narrative of John. It should not be ignored that the theory of "Luke's

narrative" can be rejected by reviewing other similar works. As well, there are religious and logical reasons for the absence of Judas Iscariot in the Mass because according to his evil intentions he could not have the competency to participate in such event and drink the blood and eat the body of Christ. Certainly, imagination and genius of da Vinci cannot be ignored in creating the painting because many elements of painting are merely born of the painter's imagination and skill; elements such as accurate perspective and setting, emotional status of the apostles, outlining the exact moment of revealing betrayal to Jesus, coloring, and position and gestures of the apostles sitting at the dinner table.

## Conclusion

1. Out of the four Gospel narratives, the narrative of John is the source of inspiration for da Vinci in creating The Last Supper mural.
2. Other works similar to the Last Supper painted by other artists did not considered Luke's narrative a striking one for depicting the Eucharist and the absence of Judah.
3. Regarding technical elements such as the position of the apostles at the dinner table, shape and gesture of their bodies (like Peter and John) and John sitting next to Christ, this painting fits the most with John's narrative.
4. The theory which considers a combination of John's narrative with other ones as da Vinci's source of inspiration cannot be proved due to the lack of elements of certainty as well as absence of any narrative element in the other three narratives (Mark, Luke, Matthew).

## Endnote

1. The Last Supper
2. This book, first entitled Diatessaron (one through four), was written by Tatian in 160 AD with the aim of summarizing all four Gospels and it was tried to preserve the axiom of Gospels by removing duplicated issues.
3. Tintoretto
4. Benjamin West
5. Nicolas Poussin
6. Giotto di Bondone
7. Salvador Dali
8. Manoel da Costa

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