

THE GRAIL IN MYTH AND HISTORY

By Adrian Rogers

What is the Grail? In suggesting a few out of many possible answers I shall speculate on whether it is a chalice, a stone, a bloodline, a code of service, a path to enlightenment, or a combination of some, or all of these things. But this quest cannot be considered in isolation from certain symbols that always seem to accompany grail stories in all traditions, namely a sword, a spear, a location—usually the Grail Castle, hidden treasures, and a symbolic meaning attached to the appearance of the sun and moon in the sky at the same time, referred to in Grail symbolism as ‘the Sun descending into the Moon Chalice.’

To look then for answers as to the nature of the Grail, I propose to begin with the Chalice, assumed—at least in most interpretations of the Arthurian tradition to be the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper for the institution of the Eucharist, and later brought by Joseph of Arimathea to Glastonbury. But first I think we need to remind ourselves that the Grail is not, and never has been orthodox Christianity, Mallory and Tennyson notwithstanding. The Institutional Church has never claimed to possess the Chalice used by Christ at the Last Supper. On the contrary, it has always regarded devotees of the Grail Quest with everything from suspicion to outright hostility and persecution, something I shall refer to again when we come to consider the bloodline aspect of this tradition. In fact the Grail, as a symbol of the quest for enlightenment, inasmuch as it can be considered Christian at all, is Gnostic rather than Orthodox.

Moreover the Grail has illustrious Pagan antecedents, most notably the Cauldron of the Dagda. Dagda was the principal earth god in the ancient Irish/Scottish Gaelic tradition, who was married to the Morrigan, the mother goddess. His magical

cauldron was always filled with food and drink, and whoever partook thereof never went away unsatisfied; it was moreover always mysteriously refilled. Let us hold on to that thought, because the theme of fulfilment and satisfaction for all partakers of the Grail's bounty runs through this tradition like a golden thread, but fulfilment always depends on a full participation in the Grail mystery, rather than mere speculation about it, or the observation of certain rituals. At this point, by way of a diversion I ask myself if the Gundestrop Cauldron, a real rather than a mythical object dug up in Jutland in 1891 is a manifestation of this tradition, although the god portrayed on it is Cernnunos the god of hunting, rather than the Dagda. Be that as it may, it is worth noting that the Brythonic—Welsh/Breton Celts also used this symbolism, though in their stories it is called the Cauldron of Annwn.

Moving into the Christian era I was surprised to find that Maurice Cottrell, in his book 'Jesus, King Arthur, and the Journey of the Grail', suggests that the Ardagh Chalice—at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin, is the actual chalice used by Christ at the Last Supper, which, if he is correct would automatically link it to at least one interpretation of the Grail Quest. He bases his thesis on a detailed examination of the Chalice, its decorations, its inset precious stones, and the different metals used in its construction which is in three main parts, base, stem, and the cup itself. His analysis is extremely detailed and complex and repays study, but there is no time to consider it all here as we have much ground to cover. However, for those interested in gematria and numerology I will give Cottrell's principal measurements for the Chalice, as follows...

There is a gold/plated brass rim around the outside of the cup, giving it an overall diameter of 185mm. The diameter of the Chalice below the rim, measured across the inside is 179.7mm. The height, from the base to the top of the brass rim is 178mm, and from the base to below the rim 176.7mm. Three nails—presumably both

structural and symbolic in purpose are set into the Chalice around the rim of the circle, each one at an angle of 60 degrees to its neighbour, giving the symbolic 666. Although the Chalice fits together in three main parts, 354 actual components were used in its construction. There are 354 days in the Druidic year, and the last time this Druidic 354 day calendar was known to have been used for calculation was in AD 70. Now I, for one don't believe in coincidences.

However those of us brought up on the Arthurian tales can all too easily forget that this tradition does not have a monopoly on the Grail. It has also been described as a stone, in the context of which I quote from the Apocalypse of St. John the Divine, the 2nd Chapter... "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it."

Trevor Ravenscroft, in his book 'The Spear of Destiny' discusses the Grail, using the 'stone' imagery as developed by the mediaeval poet Wolfram Von Eschenbach in his narrative poem Parsifal, on which Wagner based his last great opera. The poet describes a stone called 'Lapsit Exillis', and says of it... "By the power of that Stone the Phoenix burns to ashes, but the ashes give him life again...Such power does the Stone give a man that flesh and bones are at once made young again. That Stone is also called the Grail." What then is the meaning of "a new name written" upon the Stone?

This is the poet's interpretation... "On the Stone, around the edge, appear letters inscribed, giving the name and lineage of each one, maid or boy, who is to make the blessed journey. No one needs to rub out the inscription, for once he has read the name, it fades before his eyes." The 'journey' referred to is the Quest for the Grail. Ravenscroft, himself a pupil of Johannes Walter Stein, who was in turn a disciple of

Rudolf Steiner describes this both as a mystery tradition of enlightenment, and as a reference to the Grail lineage, transmitted in a bloodline, and also—within that, through the medium of reincarnation. Another thought for us to hold, because I shall return to this matter of lineage again, when we consider the ‘bloodline’ aspect of the Grail.

But before leaving The Stone image I will give another take on it, quoted from my latest novel ‘Fire in the Wasteland’ published just before Christmas 2013. In this story four companions are secreted out of the Cathar Castle of Montsegur, the night before its defenders are due to surrender to the Crusader army. They are tasked with hiding the ‘Treasures of Montsegur’ in pre-ordained locations. One of them, known for most of the story as ‘The Fugitive’, having disposed of his ‘treasure’, but being on the verge of starvation and capture is rescued by a mysterious being known only as The Watcher, who takes him both back, and forward in time, then inwards to the world of the Grail. Here, in this alternative world location he will learn his place in the Grail lineage, but first let us see how he perceives The Stone.

“...On the alter... stood what appeared to be a block of white stone, alive, glowing, shimmering, but also solid. He watched, as occasional streaks of white lightning shot from this new manifestation.”

Then the Grail King and his knights enter this cave/temple, and to them the Watcher says

“...This white stone is the true Grail, within which is concealed knowledge of past and future, for this is the Gateway, the Revealer.”

The Watcher then goes on to issue a warning against the misuse of knowledge, as is done in all true initiatic mystery traditions...

“When one of you desires knowledge, let him lay hands upon this stone, emptying his mind of thought. To him then will come knowledge of past lives, and of

what is yet to come, unrolling before his inner sight like a painted scroll; but beware, for knowledge is a power that can destroy whoever seeks it with carnal and unworthy motives! So let it be used only with a pure wisdom.”

I now turn to the ‘bloodline’ aspect of this tradition, dealt with comprehensively by the late Sir Laurence Gardner, in his books *The Genesis of The Grail Kings*, *The Bloodline of the Holy Grail*, and *The Magdalene Legacy*. Gardner was both a genealogist, and official Archivist to the European Council of Princes, in which capacity he had access to old family documents not in the archives of governments or churches. One might suggest that had they been kept in more ‘official’ hands they would never have seen the light of day. What Gardner does is present the evidence for a ‘Grail lineage’ in the form of genealogical tables.

He traces—for want of a better term this ‘Grail lineage’ back to the Anunnaki gods of ancient Sumer and their earthly successors the Sumerian Kings. These kings of what were really the first city states were known as ‘shepherd kings.’ What Gardner is expounding is a style of governance in which a ruler is the guide and leader, i.e. ‘shepherd’ of his people, being chosen from among them. He/she is therefore answerable for their welfare. This kind of kingship is what he refers to as “The Grail code of service.” It is emphatically not a land grab, or an excuse to dominate others.

Gardner, through these tables traces a ‘Grail line’ from Sumer, through Egypt, Israel, Scythia, ancient Ireland, and in our Common Era through the lineage of Christ and his descendants, in due time dispersed through some, but by no means all of the European royal bloodlines. One line for instance is traced from Ireland, through Scotland and into England through the Stuart kings. As an example of Grail style kingship, he points out that there was never such a thing as a king of Scotland. Scottish kings were always known as ‘Kings of Scots’, i.e. leaders of a people, not necessarily definers of

a territory acquired by fair means or, more usually foul. This is what he means by a 'Grail code of service.' I do not of course believe it to be a complete definition. The Grail cannot be just a code of service, any more than it is just a chalice, or a stone, but surely it tells us that those who would fulfil the Quest of the Grail must serve their fellow human beings.

The prior reference to Christ and his descendants will now explain why the official Church persecuted the Grail devotees. The bloodline genealogies listed by Gardner in 'The Magdalene Legacy' present us with a married Messianic Christ, and an authority transmitted by hereditary descent, not through an Apostolic Succession. I now conclude the 'code of service' and 'lineage' aspects of this presentation with another quote from 'Fire in The Wasteland', relating to the time when our Fugitive is learning his place in the Grail lineage; the principal speaker is Gilhabert de Castres, late presiding bishop of the Cathar community, regarding initiated members of the Order...

““To be a Parfait is to work for others.”

“The voice was as clear and precise as it had been in material life, with the same breath and blood resonance. *Yet this man has truly passed on, only to turn back from the very threshold of eternity, for the sake of our people, and for the future?*

So stunned was he that the younger man could only stammer, “so you have returned...for me?”

“Yes my son, for you and for all of us, for the work of the Cathars is not ended. I knew, even before I established our refuge that Montsegur could not stand forever; nonetheless our place in the Grail destiny is assured.”

We come now to the heart of the matter, the Grail as a path to enlightenment, for the Grail—however one interprets its symbolism is no mere relic. We turn again to Ravenscroft's 'Spear of Destiny', quoting firstly the motto of the Grail Knights as he

gives it...“Durch Mitleid Wissen; it is a call from the Immortal Self of Man, resounding in the darkness of doubt and confusion within the human soul; Through Compassion to Self-knowledge.”

Ravenscroft then gives the symbolic steps, grades, or degrees through which one must pass to fulfil the Grail Quest, as follows...

- 1) The Hare – representing both the beginnings of the alchemical process of transformation, and the fleeting thoughts of the uninitiated.
- 2) The Hen on her Nest – warmth and willpower are brought to the development of picture-building sight, so that thoughts become as substantial as external objects.
- 3) The Lion – representing mastery of the lower self.
- 4) The Dragon – the final conquest of all those unleashed instincts, impulses, and desires which must be overcome, like St. George slaying the Dragon.
- 5) A Dustbin containing a discarded Sun and Moon – the soul, still trapped in three-dimensional consciousness must learn to be sense free, before transcendent consciousness can be attained.
- 6) The Wizard's Kitchen – this is an alchemical symbol, wherein spirit, soul, and body are harmonized, allowing mind expansion to take place, thus enabling the Grail Knight to bridge the worlds between earthly and super-sensible realities.

Now I quote Ravenscroft directly, for No. 7... “Above the mountain, the sun and moon are released from their three-dimensional enslavement, the final casting off of the materialistic pollutions of the Dustbin. The Sun and Crescent Moon, rightly orientated in the sky is the sign of the Grail, the Holy Symbol of Transcendent Consciousness.”

We have come a long way from a chalice, a stone, a bloodline, or a code of service. Yet when seen as a path to enlightenment in the Western, rather than the Eastern mystery tradition, I suggest that all these symbols make sense, when each is seen in

the context of the others, when the whole is summed up by the conscious realization of the Grail as a seven step path to enlightenment, in which all the definitions and symbols play their part, “Durch Mitleid Wissen!”

This brings us to those accompanying symbols that seem to be associated with the Grail Quest in all its manifestations, namely The Spear, The Sword, the place of safety, i.e. usually a Grail Castle though sometimes a cave, and the concept of ‘hidden treasures.’ These symbols are associated with guardianship, for in the Grail Quest, as in all traditions the way to the Mysteries is always guarded. And when a candidate is admitted to the Temple, he/she must take sworn obligations of secrecy regarding what is revealed, and also in relation to their moral conduct in the outer world. Consequent upon this are penalties for any breach of ones obligation. In this context I begin with The Spear, perhaps the most disconcerting of all Grail associated symbols.

The Sacred Spear is always carried by the Grail King, symbolizing his authority and custodianship of the Grail Mysteries. However, in all versions of the story the King betrays his trust by a mortal sin—to use a theological term. Wagner portrays this vividly in his opera Parsifal, in which the King, because of his ‘fall from grace’ has been wounded by the very Spear that symbolized his now forfeited authority and trust, as a result of which the Grail Kingdom has become a wasteland, and the guarding knights rendered helpless by the Spear’s subsequent loss. Klingsor, the evil genius responsible for this assault upon the Grail, now holds the stolen Spear.

The sensibilities of our Victorian forebears led them to describe this wound as being in the thigh and, rather unconvincingly incapable of healing. However, the fact that it led to the Kingdom of the Grail becoming a wasteland should tell us what is really meant, namely that the King has been rendered impotent, and that therefore the loss of

his generative power has rendered the land infertile. This image alone should demonstrate how ancient and pre-Christian the Grail story really is.

Here is my take on this from *Fire in The Wasteland*. The Red King referred to in this episode is a version of the Wizard Klingsor...

““Well brother?” The Red King’s voice was hoarse with desire...”The Spear; remember your sworn word, in exchange for...”

Totally mesmerized the Grail King merely nodded, “For a while then.” Eyes still fixed on the woman he gestured to the servant to pass The Spear to the Red King...The Fugitive stared in turn at the weapon; *it’s responding to the nature of those present*. Its long, slender, leaf shaped blade was glinting, silver stained with blood, catching lamp and torchlight. *The flow’s increasing...*

...The Red King’s voice was stone hard, “You heard The King man! Give me The Spear!”

But the servant remained faithful, “No my Lord, I dare not! It would be sacrilege for any un-consecrated hand to touch this thing...” ...Then with a movement too quick for sight the Red King seized The Spear...and drove its bleeding point into the faithful servant’s body below the breastbone.”

The Red King then turns upon his Grail counterpart... “Leaping upon the table in a single bound he drove The Spear point, still stained with his servant’s blood straight into Frederick’s thigh, piercing the groin. Only then did the White King break free from his trance of lust...”

In some Grail traditions the ‘sin’ implied is incest, and the kingdom can only be freed from the results of this ‘fall from grace’, when a pure, unsullied knight can retrieve The Spear because, if he is truly pure The Spear will not be able to harm him. This of course is the role of Parsifal, who conquers Klingsor and recovers the Spear, the culmination of whose mission is so beautifully portrayed by Wagner in the last scene

of his opera, when, in recognition of what Parsifal has achieved after many trials a white dove descends, bearing a white wafer in its beak and, in the presence of all the knights assembled for the Mysteries, Parsifal is recognized as the new Grail King.

I now turn to the 'place of safety' the 'Grail Castle', leaving The Sword until last, for reasons that will become apparent. Wolfram Von Eschenbach in his Parsifal narrative names the castle 'Montsalvaeche'. He also states fairly openly that the Grail was guarded by a company of Knight Templars. Now, as has been shown by Picknett and Prince, in their book 'The Templar Revelation', there were definite, if covert links between the Templars and the Cathars. So, if we compare 'Montsalvaeche' to 'Montsegur', all sorts of interesting possibilities present themselves. Did the Cathars really have custody of The Grail, however it is perceived, at least for a time? Here is another quote from 'Fire in the Wasteland'...

"...Ah Montsegur, what is your true destiny? What does time hold for those grey walls reared to protect and conceal? Are you truly the Montsalvaeche of Grail legend? Have you held within those walls the 'true light descended from heaven?' And when your people left you for the last time on the downward path, seeing those walls rising behind them in the dawn light, were they, the perfected ones truly taking the 'Way of the Stars'?"

Whither now, Montsegur, what have the ages done to you? Your halls are roofless, sentries no longer pace your ramparts, and your walls are falling into ruin. The sun caresses you in summer, the wind sings among deserted battlements, rain and snow flail you in winter, and in spring birds build their nests in worn hollows of stone, returning seasonally to towers sharp and gaunt against centuries of sunsets, yet you are not alone."

Turning finally to The Sword; probably the first association that springs to mind for many of us is King Arthur drawing The Sword from the Stone. And of Excalibur, or Calburn—to give it its Celtic name, the sword that always accompanies and protects the King, with, according to some traditions two gemstones set in its hilt, the red Eye of Fire—a stone of divination, and the healing Greenstone. However, as with The Spear, things can go wrong. Attempts are made to steal The Sword, in one of which, according to one tradition Merlin himself was involved. Personally, I suspect that misusing either The Spear or The Sword symbolizes attempting to steal the secrets of the Grail Mysteries, rather than accepting the harder path of self-mastery and a patient following through of the various levels of initiation.

So I have Merlin steal The Sword in the second book of my ‘Hidden Kingdom Trilogy’, entitled ‘Avalon’. He steals The Sword from the Treasury of Avalon, telling himself that his intention to use it to found a new ‘kingdom of light’ is a worthy one, and that therefore, as we would say today ‘the end justifies the means.’ Of course it doesn’t. He finds out at great cost that the time for what he intended to do is not right. He marries the daughter of a tribal chief, and they have a son, but his intervention in the affairs of another people is no more successful than many more recent ones have been. His adopted people are almost destroyed by war, and in the end he has to part with The Sword because it is not really his, yet in spite of what has happened it still has a role to play in the Mysteries, as does he. But he also has to part with the woman he loves, their Druid Friend Cathbad, and their son Ameris.

Merlin meets her on that night of parting above a gorge with a river flowing fast beneath...

““Take this for him,” he said softly, detaching the scabbarded sword from his belt, and passing it to her.

“Why?” she demanded, handing the child back to Cathbad.

“Because it is The Sword of the Kingdom; because our son will father a line of kings; because he is the founder of an appointed dynasty through which will come the true king, though in the time appointed by Hue of the Heavens, and not in ours...”

“Brave words!” she said bitterly, then more gently added, “Nonetheless I will take it for him.”

...An Awkward silence came between them, but Merlin could not bear to leave so much unsaid.

“Come with me to Avalon, Guenever, you, Ameris, and Cathbad. The Astari will welcome you and give you shelter. Even if you do not desire to live with me as of old, may we not make a new beginning...?”

Guenever shook her head.

“No Merlin,” she said gently, and there were tears in her voice. “It is this land which will be the kingdom, of Ameris and his successors, not Avalon. The Astari may help us, but it is in this mortal land with all its trials and tribulations that the true Kingdom will be born. Therefore here, and not in Avalon must we make our home... I love you, but I cannot go with you. There is no way back into the past for either of us.”

So we come full circle. Chalice, Stone, Bloodline, and Code of Service all play their part in the Mystery of The Grail, whose ‘hidden treasures’ must surely be the knowledge of the Grail Quest, rather than any material objects, none of which could do more than symbolize the greater truths hidden in those same traditions. Above all, perhaps it can all be summed up in the Grail motto, as given by Von Eschenbach... “Durch Mitleid Wissen! Through Compassion to Self-Knowledge.”

Two more points before I conclude; firstly, the Grail, however it is interpreted seems to blur the distinctions between spirit and matter, to merge them, pointing perhaps to a state of being that is permeable rather than solid, a state in which spirit and matter

interact, through which the gods can manifest themselves among us. Is that then pointing to the origin of creation itself? Is it telling us that matter is spirit condensed and made solid, the result of the First Thought uttering Himself as the Logos, thus bringing matter into being on the word of command, by division of the One?

Here is a mystery older than the Age of Pisces we have recently left behind, one that meets us at the midway point between the uttering of the Word of Creation, and the manifestation of the Logos in human form. In the very earliest Mysteries, of Egypt and Sumer, the initiate achieves transformation by journeying beyond the stars in vision, to unite with Ra, to quote Jeremy Naydler in his book 'The Future of the Ancient World' "...on the back of the Universe, beyond the fixed stars." The Grail Mystery however, although hinting at the transmission of spirit from the Source, does not take us quite that far out in symbol, because, by the time it manifests itself Eternity is already descending into time, spirit becoming ever more closely embodied, and therefore expressing itself through matter, as the divine spark within us. So for Grail initiates Illumination is achieved, not "beyond the fixed stars", but when the sun and moon appear in the sky at the same time; when the descent of the sun into the moon chalice is consummated.

My second point concerns the Wasteland that the Grail Kingdom has become. Does not that image symbolize the state of our world? Would it not be appropriate to suggest that the twin worlds, of the Grail and of our everyday existence are inextricably linked? We have all heard the term 'the butterfly effect', a butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazon and produces an effect on the other side of the world. Be that as it may, would it not be true to say that one world cannot be healed without the other, and that the healing of the Wasteland is therefore the responsibility of all humanity?

I shall end on a note of hope, because the Grail shrouded in myth has indeed entered into historical time, through a Quest which may be undertaken by real people today, in this present world. One final quote then from the ending of Fire in The Wasteland, in which The Fugitive shows himself at last, after so many ordeals able to resume the unfinished Grail Quest, and begin again to play his part in the healing of the Wasteland, knowing that he, like us is not alone.

““No more looking back!” he said to himself, “I will go into the lands of the enemy, where they least expect to find me”... Still the lark song floated softly through the bright air. He smiled, his gaze traversing a glowing panorama of green valleys and wooded hills, where the bright flush of spring had almost completely overrun the dark sobriety of winter...

“And where is the Father of Light in all this?” He smiled again, able now to ask the question because it could be answered with hope, and without bitterness,

“The Father is; where there is love.”

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Note:

This essay was first presented as lecture in South Australia.

Bio:

Adrian Rogers was brought up in England, but trained as a music teacher and began his career as such in Ireland. He, along with the family, migrated to Australia in 1985, and he began writing in 1989 during a period of ill health. Since retiring from teaching he has devoted himself to writing, with poetry, short stories, and articles in numerous Australian literary journals and anthologies, including contributions to the Indo-Australian Anthology ‘Vibrant Voices’ published by Authorspress. He has two collections of his poetry in print, along with five fantasy novels, published by Double-Dragon in Canada, and two novels published by Mountain Mist in Australia.