A Brief Introduction to the History and Origin of the Holy Grail Motif

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Abstract
Alludes briefly to “different theories of the origin of the Holy Grail legend.” Focuses on post-Chrétien material for what it suggests about origins.

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A Brief Introduction to the History and Origin of the Holy Grail Motif

by Stephen Thorson

The earliest extant manuscript containing the Holy Grail motif is Chrétien de Troyes' Conte del Graal (or the Perceval), written between 1174 and 1180, and never finished. Many continuations, retellings, and new Grail legends were written afterward. Interest in the Grail became great, and volume after volume has been written expounding different theories of the origin of the Holy Grail legend.

Two main theories hold the field. According to one, Celtic tradition somehow became connected with the Eucharist by anonymous French poets before Chrétien or by Chrétien himself. Obviously, the Arthurian romances as a whole are of Celtic origin; the controversy is whether or not the Grail motif itself is Celtic. The other theory says it is not, that it is essentially of Christian origin, having been formed in Christian tradition and literature.

The question of origin can be pursued from two different directions. One can search for the sources and origin in the stories and folklore before the time of Chrétien, or one can search the writings after Chrétien for indication of source material. Both directions have been followed. The backward search is far too extensive for the purposes of this paper. Much of it is contradictory and speculative, and in any case is only significant after the forward search.

R. S. Loomis summarizes the Grail incident in the Perceval as follows:

Chornement, teaching Perceval the way of chivalry, warned him not to talk too much. Later, Perceval saw two men fishing and one invited him to his castle.

On his arrival Perceval found his host arrived before him, lying richly clad on a couch. [This is the Fisher King who was wounded through the thighs,...] a squire entered the hall from a chamber, bearing a lance from the tip of which a drop of blood flowed; he was followed by a fair damsel holding between her two hands a grail of gold, studded with precious gems and shedding a brilliant light. A second damsel bore through the hall a silver tailleor, or carving platter, and all these mysterious figures passed on to another chamber. Perceval was consumed with curiosity, but, remembering Chornement's advice, he kept silent.

The next morning Perceval found the castle deserted. He learned later that he should have asked about the Grail, as great good would have followed. So Perceval started his quest to find the Grail. He talked with an old hermit and learned that the Grail was carried to the Fisher King's father, who was sustained in life solely by the holy mass-wafer is oisfe for the Latin hostia, the host of the Eucharist.

Robert de Boron's Joseph, written between 1180 and 1199, was the first Grail story to appear after the Perceval, and tells the history of the Grail from the Last Supper till the death of Joseph of Arimatea. The Grail is definitely a Christian vessel of grace, and is shown to be the vessel at the Last Supper and the vessel into which the blood of Jesus flowed from the cross.

Robert's sources were undoubtedly certain early Christian apocrypha, the Vindicta Salvatoris, the Evangellum Nicodemus, and the Fragment Josephi, although the Grail is not found in them. Even Loomis, a Celticist, agrees that these were the sources of the Joseph, but postulates an earlier author which brought them together, Robert being a redactor of an earlier book; thus both Chrétien and Robert would have drawn from the same lost source. But, there is no need to postulate this, for only the Grail itself and the epithet "the Rich Fisher" are common to both stories. The unfinished Perceval had stimulated much interest, and Robert could have been following the literary urge inspiring many writers at that time—to relate the earlier history of characters and events they found in romances already formed.

If Robert had been the only one to write of the Grail after Chrétien, there would be no real question of origin. The Grail is definitely Christian, and, if it would follow, of Christian origin. But others wrote of the Grail after Robert.

Since the Perceval was unfinished, a number of writers continued the story. Four continuations and several retellings are extant today. These writings often have gross differences among them.

The Celticists assert that these differences are evidence of a more primitive form of a full Perceval story. These writing portray the whole Grail legend as less Christian and more Celtic. Loomis feels the whole Grail legend started with Chrétien's blundering attempts to fit a pagan story into a Christian one, shown by the discrepancies in the continuations. For instance, the Grail becomes a food-producing vessel, a motif out of Celtic folklore.

Yet, most of these differences reduce the internal unity of the tales. If the original version was less Christian, why do the continuations which use Celtic folklore in adding to the tale, disrupt the cogency of the tale? Advocates of a Christian origin assert that Chrétien did not retell a full Perceval story, but combined the Grail motif, which he found in Christian tradition and literature, with other motifs and his Arthurian legendary setting. And, in truth, it cannot be demonstrated from the continuations alone that their authors knew of any other Perceval story than Chrétien's. Thus, for those of this view, the reduction in internal unity is to be expected as the narrative departs from the Christian.

Robert de Boron also wrote the Merlin, designed to bridge the Joseph and the Grail quest itself. His sources were Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, and the Vita Merlini. Only a fragment is preserved today.

The Vulgate cycle of prose romances next incorporated the Grail story into the larger fabric of Arthurian legend. This had five branches. The Estoire del Saint Graal was derived from a prose rendition of Robert's Joseph, with more material added to bring the history to the time of King Pelles. Then part of Robert's Merlin plus a new se-
The biggest change in the story was the replacing of Perceval by Galahad as the quest hero. This was apparently done to provide a connecting link between the worldly Lancelot with the religious Queste by making the sinful hero of the one the father of the spiritual hero of the other. Some critics feel the last three branches of the Vulgate cycle were written as a whole, the first two parts being added to round them off. This, of course, necessitated a few changes in the sources to fit the new hero.

Sir Thomas Malory reworked the Vulgate cycle, and added a much reduced version of the Prose Tristan. He did not include the Estoire, but the Queste was little changed.

The Grail scene had been changed dramatically in the hands that worked with it from Chrétien to Malory. Loomis points out three Christian concepts clearly seen in the Grail scene at the end of the quest. The concept of Divine Liturgy is seen as the angels and Joseph, representing the Church Triumphant, participate. Apostolic Communion is seen, as Christ reenacts the Last Supper with twelve new apostles. The Miracle of Transubstantiation is made visible, as a "fiery-faced" child and later a wounded Christ emerge from the Grail.

There is not much help in the Vulgate cycle or Malory to clear up the question or origins. The hand or hands that worked on the Queste clearly saw the Grail as Christian and enhanced the symbolism in a complex, though unified, medieval imagery.

Proponents of the Celtic theory have turned to the Perceval itself for support. Loomis has become an important advocate. Although he agrees that the Celtic theory often has "...the most incompatible arguments and some of the feeblest evidence...", he stands firm on two points, which are the basis of the Celtic theory: 1) a tradition forming an integral part of the Arthurian romances has a real claim to be Celtic, and 2) a tradition which violates Christian practice and ritual did not originate as a Christian invention.

The forward look can only show a few things about the origin of the Holy Grail legends. The Celticists feel there are indications of a complete Grail story, which was non-Christian and derived from Celtic legends. The Christian theorists feel that the writers exercised their freedom as writers and composed the stories, combining materials from many sources. The importance of the difference is this. If a full Perceval story can be postulated before Chrétien, there is much greater chance that the story was completely pagan, and a backward study of the Celtic folklore should show great similarities between them and the Perceval, as well as its continuations. If a source for only the Grail motif can be postulated, the chances are greater that that motif was formed in Christian tradition. The Celticists hold that Chrétien and the writers who followed him were mainly transcribers of a fully developed story. But Bruce has rightly explained, "...nobody has ever explained why, if the authors of hypothetical sources were so gifted with invention, the authors of the works actually preserved should be so destitute of this faculty."