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JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA AND A CHALICE

by Allen Cabaniss

In 1920 Miss Jessie L. Weston asserted that "there is no Christian legend concerning Joseph of Arimathea and the Grail." She continued: "Neither in *Legendary*, nor in *Art*, is there any trace of the story; it has no existence outside the Grail literature, it is the creation of romance, and no genuine tradition."¹ The foregoing words echo Miss Weston's earlier view expressed in 1913, in which she had pointed out "the absolute dearth of ecclesiastical tradition with regard to the story of Joseph and the Grail."² Only seven years later, in 1927, William A. Nitze, in his edition of Robert de Boron's *Le roman de l'estoire dou Graal*, commented on the "book" referred to in lines 932 ff. of the poem that it was "doubtless some edifying treatise like the *Gemma animae* by Honorius Augustodunensis."³

The passage which Nitze cited may be translated as follows:

While the priest is saying, "Per omnia saecula saeculorum,"⁴ the deacon comes, lifts up the chalice before him, covers part of it with a nap-

¹Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1957; originally published in 1920), p. 2.

²*Ibid.*, p. 70, n. 3.

³Robert de Boron (late 12th century), *Le roman de l'estoire dou Graal*, ed William A. Nitze (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1927), xl, 124. See also Nitze, "Messire Robert de Boron: Enquiry and Summary," *Speculum*, XXVIII, No. 2 (April, 1953), 283 f. In his edition of Boron's *Roman*, Nitze acknowledged that the relationship between Honorius and the Grail legend had already been noted by Adolf Birch-Hirschfeld, *Die Sage vom Gral* (Leipzig, 1877), p. 217.

⁴End of the Canon of the Mass just before the Lord's Prayer.

kin, replaces it on the altar, and covers it with the corporal, representing Joseph of Arimathea who took Christ's body down, covered his face with a napkin, placed it in a tomb, covered it with a stone. Here the sacrifice [*oblata*] and the chalice are covered with the corporal, which signifies the clean shroud in which Joseph wrapped the body of Christ. The chalice signifies the sepulcher; the paten, the stone which closed the sepulcher. . . .⁵

Still later Pierre le Gentil also mentioned Honorius⁶ and so did Miss Helen Adolf.⁷ The latter in her notes made an additional reference to Hildebert of Tours.⁸ Research since Miss Weston's book has therefore refuted her emphatic and positive words quoted above. There is a "trace of the story" of Joseph and a chalice apart from Grail literature; it is not "the creation of romance." It remains now to demonstrate that there was a "genuine tradition" associating Joseph of Arimathea with a chalice, not indeed as early as Glastonbury fans might desire, nor even geographically close to Glastonbury, but early enough and close enough.

Those writers who have referred to Honorius might have inquired into his sources, for we may assume that he was not original. In fact some of his contemporaries made assertions quite similar to his. Rupert of Deutz, for example, has the following:

Then the deacon approaches and for a moment lifts the sacrifice reverently from the altar; then just like the priest himself puts it down again, because Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, too, came with the centurion and, begging the body of Jesus from Pilate, took it down and buried it. They buried it, I say, a fact sig-

⁵Honorius Augustodunensis (mid-12th century), *Gemma animae*, I, 47, in Migne, *Patrologia latina*, CLXXII, 558BC. On Honorius, see Max Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters*, III (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1931), 364-376.

⁶Pierre le Gentil, "The Work of Robert de Boron and the *Didot Perceval*," in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 254.

⁷Helen Adolf, *Visio Pacis: Holy City and Grail* (State College, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1960), p. 13.

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⁸*Ibid.*, p. 180.

nified to us when the chalice is again covered with the corporal.⁹

Obviously we are entitled to ask about the origin of this exegesis. Fortunately the answer does not lie far afield. The fountainhead of all such allegorical interpretation of the Liturgy was Amalarius of Metz (d. ca 850).¹⁰ Here I take the liberty of citing a lengthy passage from his very influential work:

While they were thus looking on, there came "a man named Joseph who was a councillor, a good and upright man. He had not agreed to their plan or deeds. From Arimathea, a city of Judea, he too was looking for the kingdom of God. This one approached Pilate and requested the body of Jesus. When it was taken down he wrapped it in a shroud and placed it in a rock-hewn tomb in which no one had yet been placed."¹¹

Although he had been one of the secret disciples, he publicly surpassed them all, both disciples and apostles. For while the disciples were only standing a long way off and looking on, while the apostles were even hiding away in secret places, Joseph purchased the shroud to wrap the dead body of Jesus. Of what great importance this Joseph was is mentioned in Bede's commentary on Luke: "Joseph was indeed of high dignity in the eyes of the world, but he is honored as having been of greater favor in the eyes of God. For through the uprightness of his merits he was deemed worthy to bury the Lord's body and through the eminence of his political power he was able to secure possession of it. An unknown person could not have gone to a

⁹Rupertus Tuitiensis (early 12th century), *De divinis officiis*, II, 15 (PL, CLXX, 45BC). On Rupert, see Manitius, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-135; or more briefly, George E. McCracken and Allen Cabaniss, *Early Medieval Theology* (Library of Christian Classics, IX; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), pp. 249-256.

¹⁰Allen Cabaniss, *Amalarius of Metz* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1954), *passim*.

¹¹Luke 23:50-53.

presiding official and demanded the body of a crucified man."¹²

The archdeacon who lifts the chalice along with the priest holds eminence among other deacons, so also this Joseph who was counted worthy to take the Lord's body down from the cross and bury it in his own tomb held eminence among the other disciples. Formerly the same man was reckoned to stand with the apostles, since he had once hidden for fear of the Jews.

The priest who elevates the sacrifice [*oblata*] represents Nicodemus, of whom John relates: "Moreover Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night, also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. They therefore took the body of Jesus and wrapped it in linen cloths with spices, as it is the custom of the Jews to bury."¹³ With the sacrifice the priest makes two crosses near the chalice, to teach that he who was crucified for the two people has been taken down from the cross. The elevation by both priest and deacon signifies Christ's deposition from the cross.

A napkin is known to have been over the head of Jesus, for John observes that Peter saw "the linens placed and the napkin which had been over the head" of Jesus.¹⁴ The sacrifice and chalice signify the Lord's body. When Christ said, "This is the chalice of my blood,"¹⁵ he signified his own blood. As the wine is inside the chalice, so was this blood inside the body.¹⁶

¹²Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio*, VI, 23 (PL, XCII, 621A); also in J. A. Giles, *Venerabilis Bedae opera quae supersunt omnia*, XI (London: Whittaker and Co., 1844), 371.

¹³John 19:39 f.

¹⁴John 20:6 f.; cited inaccurately in J. M. Hanssens, *Amalarii episcopi opera liturgica omnia*, II (*Studi e Testi*, 139; Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1948), p. 347.

¹⁵A quotation from the Canon, not from Scripture.

¹⁶Amalarius, *Liber officialis*, III, 26, 7-9 (Hanssens, *op. cit.*, 345 f.). Interestingly enough the name of Joseph of Arimathea is not listed in the Index of this fine modern edition.

We may safely state that all later liturgiologists were employing not only the method but also the material of Amalarius whether they acknowledged indebtedness or not. And well they might have hesitated to mention his name, for his writing had, in part at least, been condemned as heretical. We must now, however, go a step further and ask about the source from which Amalarius derived his theories.

Although it is known to us that Amalarius had two predecessors who treated the Liturgy allegorically, one a Latin writer, the other a Greek, he was apparently not aware of them.¹⁷ The practice of treating Scripture and the theology as allegory is, of course, very old, reaching back into the Bible itself, receiving a tremendous impetus at the hands of Origen, and having a continuous history throughout the Middle Ages. This method Amalarius probably learned from the Venerable Bede by way of Alcuin.¹⁸ But his application of it to the Liturgy was certainly his own. Indeed he claimed the immediate inspiration of God for his interpretation, particularly in reference to the Joseph-chalice complex. In what was perhaps the latest revision of his great masterpiece, he wrote:

Quite recently it was revealed to me (I believe by the one who opens and no one closes) what could be reasonably said about the Lord's body placed on the altar and about the chalice beside it, without violating the teaching of those who seek to explain to me in other and better ways how and why the bread is differently placed on the altar and the chalice near it.

From that place in the Canon where it is written, "Unde et memores sumus,"¹⁹ the altar is Christ's cross, down to the point at which the chalice is wrapped in the napkin of the deacon, in the place of Joseph who wrapped the Lord's body in a shroud and napkin. . . .²⁰

¹⁷Cabaniss, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Seventh paragraph of the Canon.

²⁰Amalarius, *op. cit.*, IV, 47, 1 f. (Hanssens, *op. cit.*, 542).

It may eventually be possible to go back of Amalarius, but not at the present stage of investigation. Amalarius was the first writer, so far as we now know, to present Joseph of Arimathea with a chalice in his hand. And it was from him that authors like Honorius of Autun and Rupert of Deutz learned, as (according to Nitze and others) it was from them that Robert de Boron adapted. From Amalarius of Metz, who died more than three hundred years before Robert, there is a direct line through the liturgical scholars of the Middle Ages to Honorius and even later ones.²¹ If Nitze's note

²¹One may cite, for instance, the late 13th century work of William Durand, bishop of Mende, *Rationale divinorum officiorum*, ed. Joseph Dura (Naples: J. Dura, 1859), IV, 22, 23 (*ed. cit.*, 287 f.):

Thereupon the deacon approaches and for a moment lifts the sacrifice (the chalice with the corporal) from the altar; then just like the priest himself puts it down, because (as it is reported in John 20) Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus came and begging the body of Jesus from Pilate took it down and buried it. The priest therefore as he elevates represents Nicodemus; the elevation itself indicates Christ's deposition from the cross; the replacing [on the altar] indicates the placing in the sepulcher. . . .

It is fitting therefore while these words [*Præceptis salutaribus moniti*] are being said that the body and blood should be lifted up and put down, representing the lifting of Christ's body from the earth and its being placed in the sepulcher, because Joseph (who took it down from the cross, lifted it up from the earth, and placed it in the sepulcher) had been "admonished" and taught by Christ's "salutary commands," as his faithful disciples had been. It is therefore said of him in Mark [15-43]: "He too was looking for the kingdom of God." The consecrated body and blood are lifted up at the same time, because Joseph himself (as certain ones say) placed the body with the blood together in the sepulcher. . . .

The deacon therefore puts the corporal over the mouth of the chalice when he sets it down, because when the Lord had been buried Nicodemus "rolled a great stone at the door of the tomb" [Matt. 27:60]. The deacon also wrapping the chalice with the corporal represents Joseph, who "wrapped" the Lord's body "in a clean shroud" [Matt. 27:59].

The significant words are the parenthetic ones, "as certain ones say" (*ut quidam ferunt*). They suggest that, by the time of William Durand, the Grail literature was in its turn affecting the interpretation of the Liturgy. The name of Joseph of Arimathea does not appear in the Index of this edition of the *Rationale*.

Since reference is often made to Helinand (early 13th century), *Chronicon*, XLV, anno 718 (PL, CCXII, 814D-815A), it is here included although it adds nothing for our particular purpose:

A marvelous vision was revealed at that time to a certain hermit in Britain. It was about St. Joseph the councillor who took the Lord's body down from the cross and about that bowl or dish in which the Lord ate with his disciples. A story entitled, "Concerning the Grail," was related about it by the same hermit. *Gradalis*, or in French *gradale*, is said to be a dish broad and somewhat deep, in which costly delicacies in their proper succession are usually served step by step [*gradatim*] by rich people, one morsel after another in different orders. In the vernacular language it is called *gratz* because it is pleasing [*grata*] and delightful to the one eating from it. This may be either because of the container, since it was perhaps of silver or some other precious metal; or because of its contents, that is,

alluding to Honorius is correct—and it is obviously accepted by other scholars—a “genuine tradition” which is not “the creation of romance” did exist; a “Christian legend” concerning Joseph of Arimathea and a chalice did exist “outside the Grail literature.” If moreover Amalarius’s claim to originality and direct inspiration is true—and there is at present no documentary evidence to contradict it—the rapprochement of Joseph and the chalice is a result of the intuitive and creative imagination of Amalarius himself, a feat of which, in view of its consequences, he could well be inordinately proud.²²

the manifold order of costly delicacies. I have not been able to find this story written in Latin. It is held by certain noblemen to be written only in French, but (as they say) it cannot be easily found in its entirety. I have not yet been able to secure this from anyone to read it carefully. But as soon as I can, I will translate the more truthful and useful parts succinctly into Latin.

The words translated above as “bowl” (*catinus*) and “dish” (*paropsis*) are the words employed respectively in the Vulgate Mark 14:20 and Matt. 26:23 to render the Greek *trublion*. Reference is obviously to the Passover dish of charoseth (crushed fruits and bitter herbs), as appears by the mention of “delicacies” in it, not to the dish containing the matzoth or the one with the Paschal lamb.

²²See Cabaniss, *op. cit.*, 44, 53, 64, etc., for other imaginative and original elements in the thought of Amalarius. I should perhaps add that while I agree in general with Urban T. Holmes and Amelia Klenke, *Chrétien, Troyes, and the Grail* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), their book does not assist my argument.