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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.

Additional Keywords

Grail (legend)—Sources

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.¹ 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.

Gornemant, 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 first damsel holding between her two hands a *graal* of gold, studded with precious gems and shedding a brilliant light. A second damsel bore through the hall a silver *tailleur*, or carving platter, and all these mysterious figures passed on to another chamber. Perceval was consumed with curiosity, but, remembering Gornemant's advice, he kept silent.²

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 which was in the Grail. The word for *mass-wafer* is *oiste* for the Latin *hostia*, the host of the Eucharist.³

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 Arimathea. 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.⁴

Robert's sources were undoubtedly certain early Christian apocrypha, the *Vindicta Salvatoria*, the *Evangelium Nicodemi*, and the *Narratio Josephi*, although the Grail is not found in them.⁵ 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;⁶ 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.⁷

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, 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.⁸

The Celticists assert that these differences are evidence of a more primitive form of a full *Perceval* story.⁹ These writings 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,¹⁰ shown by the discrepancies in the continuations. For instance, the Grail becomes a food-producing vessel, a motif out of Celtic folklore.¹¹

Yet, most of these differences reduce the internal unity of the tales.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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-

quel became the *Estoire de Merlin*. The third branch was the *Lancelot*, derived from Chrétien and reworked. Then came the *Queste del Saint Graal*, which drew from the Perceval and several continuations, but clearly Christian in emphasis.¹⁵ Last, was the *Mort Artu*, mainly a reworking of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Wace's and Layamon's *Brut*.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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*.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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 could not originate as a Christian invention.²¹ The latter refers to the carrying of the Grail by a maiden and the seeming departures from Church ritual in the procession at the Grail castle in the *Perceval*.

These are valid points for discussion, but there have been answers suggested. Concerning Christian practice, Bruce verifies that women have borne the Eucharist in history and cites a number of cases in medieval times.²² Another scholar shows how these departures from ritual are exactly what support the case for the Judeo-Christian theory,²³ a variant of the Christian theory, and making some important contributions to the study of other romances as well as those of the Grail. It has also been shown that the various objects in Chrétien's procession are all present in the Byzantine mass, including the lance.²⁴ So the *Perceval* itself does not clearly support either theory of origin.

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 exclaimed, "...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."²⁵



- ¹James Douglas Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: From the Beginnings Down to the Year 1300*, 2 vols, 2nd ed. (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), I, 294.
- ²Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Origin of the Holy Grail Legend," *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 275.
- ³Bruce, I, 265.
- ⁴Bruce, I, 255.
- ⁵Bruce, I, 238.
- ⁶Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963), pp. 114-115.
- ⁷Bruce, I, 243-244.
- ⁸Loomis, "The Origin," p. 274.
- ⁹Albert Wilder Thompson, "Additions to Chrétien's *Perceval*: Prologues and Continuations," *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 206.
- ¹⁰Roger Sherman Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 469.
- ¹¹Bruce, I, 237.
- ¹²Bruce, I, 298.
- ¹³Bruce, I, 347.
- ¹⁴Fanni Bagdanow, *The Romance of the Grail* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 3.
- ¹⁵Bagdanow, pp. 5-6.
- ¹⁶Bruce, I, 439-440.
- ¹⁷Loomis, *The Development*, p. 95.
- ¹⁸Bagdanow, p. 7.
- ¹⁹Edmund Reiss, *Sir Thomas Malory*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 30.
- ²⁰Loomis, *The Development*, p. 106.
- ²¹Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition*, p. 372.
- ²²Bruce, I, 259.
- ²³Urban Tigner Holmes, *Chrétien de Troyes* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970), pp. 163-164.
- ²⁴Bruce, I, 256-258.
- ²⁵Bruce, I, 309.