

HOLY BLOOD- HOLY GRAIL?

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As many of you will know, there was recently a court case in which the authors of the book *the Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* charged that Dan Brown is guilty of plagiarism in that he had taken the plot of the Da Vinci Code from their book. Fortunately they lost, otherwise the whole genre of the historical novel would have been destroyed. But it is certainly true that their book is the one which Dan Brown used as the core material for the Da Vinci code. And unlike the Da Vinci Code, which is a novel, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln claim theirs is a work of history. So because it is a best seller and because we should always be open to new truth, let's see what we can make of it.

The basic plot can be simply stated. In medieval literature the Holy Grail is the cup used by Christ at the last supper. In fact the Grail was Mary Magdalene. Jesus did not die on the cross but married Mary and they had at least one child. So she's not the cup carried the 'blood of Christ'. In fact she was the true leader of the early church later deposed by the male apostles and then smeared by representations of her that cast her as a whore and ignored her true role. Meanwhile the blood line of Christ went on and his descendents ended up as the royal line of the Merovingian kings in France. Various groups like the Cathars and the Knights Templar knew of the truth and were persecuted by the church which has striven to hide the truth from the public about the true 'blood of Christ.' Over the centuries the truth has been kept alive by an organisation called the Priory of Sion, the existence of which is asserted to be a fact based on documents in the Paris Library.

That is a very simple version of the outline of the argument. The first question I find myself asking is, is this a serious piece of history or is it a piece of sensational journalism? So what I started doing was looking seriously at the bits I know most about – that's the biblical section.

Holy Blood/ Holy Grail starts by asserting that that the New Testament is only a selection of the books out of the many that were around in the Early Church. That as we saw last week is true. He says "certainly works were assembled to form the New Testament" and others were "cavalierly ignored". That is a strange way of putting it. The judgement was made on criteria like what the doctrine of the books, how old they were and how valued they were by churches. There was absolutely nothing "cavalier" about the process at all.

But none the less he's quite right that it was a selection of books. What's more he goes on to say the books have been tampered with, edited and revised. Now this is a major claim. He's claiming that the text of the New Testament has been doctored – if this is true it would call the whole faith into question. What's the evidence?

Well, he says in 1958 Professor Morton Smith discovered in a monastery in Jerusalem a letter from Bishop Clement of Alexandria, in which he reveals the existence of a secret version of Mark's Gospel. He urges the person to whom he's writing to do all he can to keep the existence a secret and to lie about it if challenged. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* says if Mark's gospel was doctored to hide the truth we can assume that all the other gospels were as well.

This is very startling. I had to confess until I read "Holy Blood, Holy Grail" I've never heard of this letter of Clement. So I looked it up. It is true that in 1958 Morton Smith claimed to have found this letter. Unfortunately, although he took photographs of the letter it apparently then got lost. So it not been available for anyone else to see. No-one has been able to carbon-date it. So there are all sorts of questions. Was a forgery and if so when was it done? In the total absence of the manuscript the history of this document looks in the gravest doubt. And looking at the quotations in the letter from the supposed Secret Gospel of Mark they look to be more likely to be a Gnostic forgery than an authentic gospel.

None of this background is given by Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln. Why not since it is clearly very relevant? There are two possibilities. Firstly they don't know it. They simply have done such a slipshod piece of work, they haven't checked it out. I find that difficult to believe. It took me five minutes to check this out. But that is, I suppose, possible. The other is that they did know it and simply didn't let on because it spoilt their case. In other words they are concerned to sell an argument and are not going to mention evidence that points the other way.

Either way - whether they didn't know or simply didn't let on - what it means is you can't trust them. What it means is that when you come across a statement in this book you should never assume it is true unless you have checked it. In my opinion the authors are either very slipshod or card-sharps - you can choose which you prefer.

With that in mind lets move on to some of the main points in the argument:

- 1) Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. The simple fact is we don't know if Jesus was ever married. The Gospels never say that Jesus was married or that he wasn't. We hardly know anything about the first 30 years of Jesus' life. He might have married in Nazareth and his wife died young. There are those who have speculated that he was married to Mary. For me the key point is this. There is a vast literature about Jesus in the Early Church. Not a single text describes Jesus as married. We hear about Jesus mother, his father, his brothers, his sisters, his disciples, the wives of some of his followers. We hear about the wives of the apostles and Jesus' brother. If Jesus was married why is there not a single reference to it?

With Mary Magdalene the phrase Magdalene is used to differentiate her from the other Mary in the New Testament, Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary of Bethany. She is identified by her place of origin - Magdala a fishing village on the Lake. Surely if she

was married to Jesus it wouldn't be Mary of Magdala it would be Mary the wife of Jesus?

- 2) Jesus and Mary had a child. There is not the slightest evidence for this whatsoever. If it was true surely we would have heard?
- 3) Jesus didn't die on the cross. He begins this section with the statement "there is a consensus among modern scholars that only the 4th Gospel rests on an eyewitness account of the crucifixion". I need hardly tell you this is not the case. It is the consensus of scholars that John is the latest of the gospels and best place to start is with the earliest – which is Mark. I didn't have to look that up. Anyone who's done theology knows it.

His thesis is that the crucifixion and resurrection are a plot. He describes it as a charade. By prior arrangement with the Romans Jesus is taken down from the cross alive. The probability is that Pilate was bribed. Three days after Jesus is feeling well enough to limp around giving some resurrection appearances – but then slipping away before they realised this was the undead.

I find this extraordinary. The whole New Testament resonates with the shock and horror of the death of Christ. It was the last thing they expected of the Messiah. Read the gospel accounts. Does it look like a charade?

What evidence do they give? They note Jesus died quite quickly. That is true. But of course if you'd already been flogged you might be weak even before the crucifixion began. And the Romans knew a dead body when they saw one. What he has to prove is the Romans were involved in faking the death.

So they say, look at when Joseph of Aramathea retrieves the body from Pilate. When Jesus asks for the body he uses the Greek word *soma* – which can only refer to a living person. Pilate uses another word which means corpse. So Joseph says "Can I have the living body of Jesus" – rather inadvisably you might think if this is a plot. And Pilate says "I've got the corpse for you- he's definitely dead".

Proof positive yes? Whatever is Mark doing giving away the secret way like this? Except the word *soma* does not always mean a living body. In Homer *soma* always means "dead body" and that is actually what the word continues to mean in the non-Pauline New Testament and the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. What is more, it isn't Pilate who uses the word "corpse", it's Mark. What he is clearly doing is emphasising in the most emphatic way he can imagine that Jesus really did die.

In any case this theory is about as unlikely as any theory could possibly be.

- 1) It assumes an amazing acting ability on Jesus' part. Perhaps on the occasion "the sweat fell from him like great clods of blood" we can put this down to first night nerves. But

what of “Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me” – what a brilliant line from a man who has it all fixed in advance.

- 2) It assumes Jesus to be man without integrity who would centre his ministry on a deceit. Of course there will be those who read the New Testament and conclude Jesus was mistaken. But can anyone read it and think that Jesus was a rogue, a liar and scoundrel?
- 3) It leaves the question of what happened to Jesus. Holy Blood says that probably he did not go to Marseille with his wife and children (I note in the plural where did that come – I suppose there’s as much evidence for 2 as there is for one – so why not?). No, he thought it better to remain in the Holy Land “to review his objectives”. Presumably he kept out of sight in case anyone saw him, in which case the whole game would be up. Incidentally the link between Mary Magdalene and Provence is not made until the 9th Century.

Remember what I said, don’t believe unless there is at scintilla of evidence to support it.

- 4) Mary is the Holy Grail. Obviously if there were no children this idea is a non-starter.
- 5) The Priory of Zion preserved the truth about Mary. The “Priory of Sion” never existed. Far from having a “history (that) spanned more than a millennium,” the Priory was a hoax created by an anti-Semitic French pretender to France’s throne, Pierre Plantard, a convicted con-man, in 1956. As part of his hoax, Plantard planted forged mediaeval documents in the French National Library. Also in the 1960s, Plantard began writing a manuscript and had a series of "medieval parchments" forged which contained encrypted messages that referred to the Priory of Sion.

One of the documents quoted from a Latin translation of the Bible in published 1889 - problematic considering that the book was trying to make a case that these documents were centuries old. Letters came to light from those involved indicating the conspiracy and under oath, Plantard had to admit that he had fabricated everything. This included the list of grand masters which under questioning by the police he admitted he had made up. As ever not a word about this in “Holy Blood, Holy Grail”. Why should they? Does a second-hand car salesman point out the defects of the model he is trying to sell?

No scholarship is unbiased and we all make mistakes. I could point you to biblical scholarship that I think is evasive and determines questions without reference to the evidence.

But when we write about serious matters we should try and do at least three things:

- 1) We should try to keep our prejudices in check as far as we can. We should try and sit honestly before the evidence.
- 2) We should attempt to check our sources.

3) Our work should be scrupulous, careful and self-critical.

Holy Blood/Holy Grail fails on all these criteria.

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