

The Quest for the Holy Grail and the Modern Knights Templar

by Reverend Sir Knight Frederick A. Shade

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What is the quest for the Holy Grail and how is it related to the modern order of Knights Templar? This is a question which has exercised the minds of several Masonic historians and writers such as A. E. Waite. The story of the Holy Grail is one of the most famous examples of Romance Literature from the Middle Ages. Fact and fable are closely interwoven, history and myth overlap, and the signs and symbols associated with both the Grail Cycle and the Templar Tradition appear to come from a common source. For these reasons, it is almost impossible for us today, in the twenty-first century, to come to a definite conclusion as to whether the alleged link between the Grail legend and the Templars is a valid one. However, I think I can give an answer in the affirmative if one accepts, at least in large measure, what I now present to you.

My case can be put briefly in this way. Although the Grail Cycle, as it is called, is not referred to specifically in our Ritual, nevertheless, a case can be made that there are some memorials of the Grail Tradition which have parallels today in our order, in particular the form of the Hallows or sacred objects of the Grail legend. Also, the modern-day Templar, like the Knight of the Holy Grail, is on a quest and a pilgrimage, one which is outlined in the ceremony of his installation as a Knight of the order and which has strong parallels with the Romance Literature relating to the Grail Knights of the Middle Ages. Our ritual suggests that it is a physical journey that is being undertaken; this is also the case with the Grail story. In fact both the Grail Cycle and the Templar Ritual are allegories of a spiritual journey, and we can learn a great deal more about this journey by comparing them and seeing how these two traditions converge and diverge.

Getting back to the Grail Cycle itself, it is concerned with four things:

- (i) The Institution of the Hallows and more especially that which concerns the origins of the Sacred Vessel.
- (ii) The circumstances under which the Hallows were carried into Britain.
- (iii) The search for the Hallows and the circumstances which led to their removal.
- (iv) The occasion of their final departure from this earthly realm and Britain in particular.

The Cycle is presented in different ways by the medieval writers of the Romance. The Quest for the Holy Grail by Walter Map, for example, is published as a Penguin paperback and is one of the most popular and comprehensive versions

available to us. There is also a German version of the Cycle which has other material added. This latter version introduced a Templar note among other things, and the Parsival (Perceval) development in that Cycle is used by Wagner in his Operas, e.g. Parsival, etc.

What is the Holy Grail itself? The legend as set out in one account, The Quest of the Holy Grail, explains that the Grail is in fact the dish in which Christ ate the paschal lamb with His apostles and which was brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea, the first missionary to the island. The Grail is also associated with other sacred relics; more on this later. Once these precious relics had come to Britain, their custody devolved upon a line of Grail Keepers known as Fisher Kings, descendants of Joseph of Arimathea. The Grail was preserved in their Castle of Corbenic, enveloped in mystery, and hidden from the sight of such adventurous Knights as went in search of it. The several versions of the story tell how Arthur's Knights rode off in quest of the Holy Grail.

That is its supposed historical framework, and within this is weaved many magical and mystical stories, allegories, and things sacred. It is the best and most famous example of the Romance Literature of the Middle Ages, inspired by the strange stories relating to Arthur and his Round Table, the ancient Celtic legends concerning the Cauldron of Plenty, and the deeds of the Knights of the Temple who brought back many sacred relics and strange customs from their crusades in the Holy Land and surrounding countries. In the Grail Legend of the Middle Ages there is also a strong Cistercian influence on the spiritual lessons that are given to the Knights seeking the Grail. This is suggestive of a Templar influence as the ancient story was being developed and re-written during the period of the Crusades. The Cistercians had a very strong hold on the Templars; Bernard of Clairvaux in fact supported their establishment as an order and also wrote their constitution.

For every journey there must be a purpose, a goal, and this is true also of the Grail Quest. But as this venture can take you through many worlds and different levels of experience, what is brought back may not be physical at all. In many ways this is the key to the whole matter of the Holy Grail and its interest to us as Freemasons who research and speculate on such things. It is very important to remember when studying the material on the Grail that, in spite of what one reads, the Grail itself is not really something physical but is a symbol of something less tangible. One can go further and say that the whole saga is in fact a spiritual story dressed up in the guise of history, the Grail itself being a metaphor of God's grace which the Knight receives on his journey.

But physical things are given to represent the Grail in the same way as events that are claimed to have happened are used as allegories. For example, in one place it is described as the dish of the Last Supper. Then it appears as the Vessel that received the effusion of Christ's blood when His side was pierced, and its "secrets" are claimed to be the mystery of the Eucharist. There are other objects which are used as metaphors and as things magical in this strange story and which provide us with further clues.

Another point worth mentioning here is that of all the Knights who went out in search of the Grail, only three are recorded to have arrived at Sarras, the heavenly city, and there assist in the office (service) of the Holy Grail. But Galahad alone, the perfect Knight, is judged to be the one worthy of seeing the mysteries within the holy vessel and of looking on the ineffable. Note how we have a similar theme in our ritual when the candidate arrives at that point in his own pilgrimage when he is permitted to look within the stone and there behold the secret. You will need to read the whole story for yourself to fully appreciate these things to which I am referring.

As with all true spiritual sagas, there are several layers of meaning, the literal or historical, the allegorical explained by the narrator, and the spiritual or ineffable also alluded to by the narrator; but as noted by St. Paul, it is not seemly to describe these ineffable things, and so we receive only a glimpse of them. Our own sacred scriptures follow the same formula as the early Church Father Origen explains to us, i.e. of having three levels or layers of meaning. In the case of scripture, Origen describes these three layers of meaning as body, soul, and spirit. In this context then, it is suggested that, at its deepest level, the quest is really a story of initiation. Certainly the seeker undergoes many adventures in this world before reaching his goal, and they decide both his fate and the waste land through which he travels, but the story is really concerned with the journey of the soul.

Like the allegorical accounts of Christian Rosencreutz, the Grail Legend is archetypal in form and is therefore representative of something that transcends history and the people to whom it refers. In the case of the Grail Quest, the saga includes the ritual question and answer, the Knight finding a way through the forest, the broken sword which must be restored, the cup, the lance which drips blood, and the trance or sleep of the initiate. All these things are familiar to us from other sources such as the ancient Mystery Schools and their latter-day followers in contemporary orders, e.g. Freemasonry and the Rosicrucians.

What I now wish to do is refer very briefly to the main characters in this story, to the places where the main events occur, and then to the sacred relics which are central to the quest itself.

The story of the quest has its heroes; there are five of them - Lancelot, Gawain, Bors, Perceval, and Galahad. Of course, there are other Knights and personnel in the story, and these vary from one writer or chronicler to another. They include Merlin, Arthur, the Grail Hermit, and the Grail Maiden.

There is also the Grail Family, i.e. the Grail Keepers. Again, they are given slightly different names in the several versions of the story. There is Joseph of Arimathea, the first Guardian of the Sacred Vessel. Then we have the second Guardian, his brother-in-law, who is said to have remained alive for centuries, since the Ascension of Christ until he saw his grandson, Perceval. To Perceval is given the secrets of the Hallows, thus completing the trinity of the Grail Guardians, reflecting the Divine Trinity that bears witness in Heaven.

The Landscape of the Grail includes various forests, wastes, and sacred places. They include Sarras, the Heavenly city of the Grail; the Grail Castle, its earthly residence for a time; and other Castles such as the Chessboard Castle and the Castle of the Maidens. There is also the Grail Chapel, Glastonbury, the Waste Land, the Savage Forest, etc. Does this not follow a familiar pattern found in other mythologies and romances? I am again reminded of the Rosicrucian legends. Also, we have in some accounts a pre-Christian version of the Grail Chapel that is called the Chapel in the Green.

All high quests end in the spiritual city, and there one beholds the sacred things that were once seen by a select few and then withdrawn from mortal eyes. And what are these things which are called the grail Hallows?

(1) There is the Grail or Cup or Goblet in which the blood of our Lord was received when he was on the cross.

(2) There is also the lance, said to be the spear which belonged to the Roman Soldier Longinus, and which pierced the side of our Lord when on the cross.

(3) The third Hallow is the sword which is at various times found whole or broken. It is given various origins. First, it is said to have been used to behead John the Baptist. Second, that it was the sword of Solomon. It was placed in a mythical ship that roamed the seas and finally came to the British shores where it was bequeathed to Galahad. The third source is as a token belonging to a legend of vengeance and therefore has no direct relationship with the Quest.

(4) Finally, there is the dish, and this appears at banquets with food aplenty. It obviously comes from pagan folklore and is given a spiritual meaning and a Christian context. Its sacramental analogy is the Paten, a golden dish on which rests the large host on the altar during the celebration of the Eucharist. The dish appears in different guises and is sometimes carried in by maidens or appears on a cloth descending from heaven.

The Hallows are obviously archetypes having universal application and providing man with many lessons regarding his relationship with God, his own nature, and his spiritual destiny. As you can see, they have also been linked with the Passion of our Lord, but it was not always so if we study the Celtic origins of some of these objects. Of course, their possible pre-Christian origins should not invalidate their Christian application anymore than the pre-existent Jewish Passover should invalidate the Eucharist instituted by Christ. Neither should the 25th of December, the Roman festival of Sol Invictus, invalidate the Festival of the Nativity. Festivals and events such as these have been transformed and given an entirely new significance and authority by virtue of the new revelation and dispensation which they convey.

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The Grail Castle, the chalice, the lance, and the sword; herein lies the consecrating motive which moves through the whole Grail Cycle. They are sacramental in character, but they are not the same as those of the Catholic Church, and this is a

distinction that we should bear in mind. They claim another source of consecration and blessing, a different source and authority, one that bypasses the Church and its hierarchy. This is why the Church has never approved of the Grail Cycle in spite of the link made by some of the writers between the hallows of the Grail and those of the Church. It is not really because they may have pagan origins which bothers the Church, but that this tradition claims an authority and source of blessing of their own, one which puts them outside the establishment. This is a most interesting line of enquiry, and A. E. Waite's book *The Hidden Church and the Holy Graal* is the best work on this subject, but it is heavy-going!

It appears that the hallows of the Templar tradition, those objects and symbols to which we give special attention, are likewise of a similar family to those of the Grail Cycle. However, it may be that this similarity is accidental rather than deliberate; the question is still open to debate. Whatever may be the true answer to the possible link between these various traditions - the Hallows of the Church, the Grail Cycle, and the Knights Templar, each of them have their place in the scheme of things as a source of instruction and as instruments of grace. For the Mason who is dedicated to making the spiritual journey such as the one outlined in our Templar ritual, each of these traditions and their hallows provide him with a great deal of information about the quest he is undertaking and also about the deeper aspects of the Christian faith, of revelation and divine grace.

There are also what are called the Lesser Hallows, and these crop up in the different versions of the story of the Grail according to the writer's preference. There are the sacred nails used at the crucifixion and the crown of thorns called the golden circle. There is also the face cloth of Veronica legend with which Christ was laid in the Sepulcher, also the pincers and the shield of Judas Maccabaeus. None of these are essential to the Grail Cycle, and they appear singly or in groups in the different stories of the Holy Grail.

The Five Changes

The Grail is a mystery within a mystery. In fact the Grail, so-called, appears in many forms in the various accounts and is said to pass through five changes. Those who sought the Grail, according to the various texts, did not necessarily have any idea what they were looking for or where they might eventually find it. The accounts of the Grail Knights make this very clear, as they just rushed off in pursuit of their goal without any plan at all. As I have already suggested, the term 'Grail' should be understood as a generic term, and it should not be confined to just the Grail Cup. This is because associated with the Grail are objects called the Grail Hallows, as I have already said, and each is a channel or the means by which divine grace, the gift of healing, and even the gift of immortality, is received. Altogether they include the dish or platter, the spear or lance, a stone or green jewel of heavenly provenance, and the cup or chalice or goblet.

Sometimes it is very difficult to keep track of them, these objects and their many changes, as in the Welsh story of Culhwch and Olwen for instance. This collection

of sacred and magical objects is further expanded to become the Thirteen Treasures of Britain.

I have mentioned four ways in which the Grail appeared in these stories, but there are in fact five. The fifth manifestation is the Child, and this is what Galahad witnessed at the celebration of the Grail ritual in the Grail Chapel - the Divine Other, the living sacrifice which changes into the forms of Bread and Wine.

The actual sequence of the five changes of the Hallows is given in the Grail story as follows:

Spear - Cup - Child - Stone - Dish. The sequence and purpose of these changes have been described in this manner. The Spear and Cup are the signs by which are shown the coming of the Divine Child, who will be sacrificed upon the Cubic Altar of the four elements, and whose body will afterwards be laid within the Dish. His blood flows down the Spear into the Cup and all begins again the endless cycle which is the regeneration of the human soul into a divine being which it must one day become. The story of the third degree has this same theme - human regeneration. Also, much of the symbolism of the five changes is referred to in the Rose Croix Degree.

Five is a significant number, and the symbolism of the Grail is reflected in the rosary (the five decades of beads for each mystery), in the five wounds of Christ, and in the five knights and what they represent - Perceval (Youth), Gawain (Manhood), Bors (Maturity), Lancelot (Worldliness), and Galahad (Spirituality). There are a number of other correspondences, but these I will not detail here except to mention that of the five 'houses' or castles in the Arthurian world: The Castle of Marvels, the Castle of Adventure, the Castle of Camelot, the Castle of Joyous Garde, and the Castle of Corbenic. In each of these rested one of the Hallows, the symbolic references of the Grail but not the Grail itself.

The Knights Templar and the Holy Grail

German writers such as Wolfram identify the Knights of the Holy Grail with the Knights Templar, but this seems to have been something added to the original story. As far as the Knight Templar influence on the romance literature in England is concerned, there appears to be no direct link at all, or at least historians like A. E. Waite have not found one. However, at the time of writing the Grail Cycle which was several centuries after the time of King Arthur and the Round Table to which it refers, the writers obviously had Knights like those of the Order of the Temple as their model.

Since that time these two streams together with their traditions, folklore, magic, and symbolism have become intertwined, so today it is almost impossible to separate them without a lot of research and some guesswork. In fact, many people feel that this attempt to separate the several traditions contained within the Grail Cycle is no longer necessary as one tradition has considerably enhanced the other. Traditions,

such as Freemasonry and even our own religion, develop as a result of experience and enhanced understanding as well as cross-fertilization from other traditions and will also change according to cultural and other factors. No living tradition including Freemasonry is static!

There may or may not be a direct link or relationship between the two traditions; there may or may not be a direct transmission of the Grail Hallows to the modern Knights Templar of Freemasonry or indeed to our medieval predecessors. Personally, I see these many coincidences to be highly suggestive of such a link in ideas if not in an actual physical transmission, but that is just my opinion.

In each Tradition, the Grail and Knight Templar, we have several features and patterns in common. For example, each is an allegory of the soul's journey through life; each has set out certain stages of initiation, moving inexorably towards the goal of heavenly refreshment, and using the same or similar signs and symbols.

Perhaps these suggest a direct link, certainly a common source of inspiration and purpose. It also confirms the proposition that the mystical tradition in religion has no boundaries, that this mystical tradition and teaching is common to all cultures and religious traditions. It is one of the most significant threads of spiritual thought and experience that can easily be identified wherever it may appear. It appears in Freemasonry, and it appears in the Grail Cycle.

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And now, permit me to show the close similarity and possible identity between the Grail and Templar hallows, i.e. those revered objects and signs which they have in common. In the Templar ritual there appears the order's own hallows. They are four in number:

1. There is the cup. It first appears in the Templar ritual as the cup of refreshment and is given to the weary pilgrim on his arrival. It contains water only. Later in the ceremony it becomes the cup of libation and memory, which is partaken of by the novice. On this occasion it contains wine.
2. The dish of bread, which is the food given to the pilgrim on his arrival.
3. The stone, which is written within and without. A new name is given to the novice, after it is consecrated by his blood. It is only then that the secret within the stone is revealed. It contains the name of the Divine Child.
4. The skull of mortality, with which the novice undertakes a year of penance, and with which the Imprecations are made.

There are several other hallows and sacred signs in the Templar tradition. Some of the lesser hallows of the Grail cycle are suggested here, such as the Templar crucifix, with the nails prominently displayed thereon. There is the knight's sword, which is to be wielded in defense of the faith and also his shield, all which are beautifully explained in the quotation from St. Paul. They may not necessarily

come directly from the Grail legend, but they certainly evoke many aspects of that tradition and resonate as hallows in their own right.

I will mention one other which is very important in the Templar tradition. I refer to the sepulcher, which appears as the central item of the Preceptory furnishings. In all my researches, I have been unsuccessful in finding an explanation as to the significance of the sepulcher in the Preceptory. Presumably it is empty, but why do we guard it? Is it the Lord's sepulcher at Golgotha, or is it perhaps our own tomb as some have suggested? No one can tell me, but I do believe it is there for a very important reason, one of which perhaps the modern Order of the Temple is not even aware. The Order of Constantine tells us something of this mystery in its appendant Order of the Holy Sepulcher but only a little. In any case, the sepulcher in the Templar tradition could have an entirely different meaning. Any ideas? This is where the Grail cycle, as well as the hallows of the Christian Church, could help us in answering these questions. The writings of A. E. Waite have helped me in unraveling this particular mystery, but there is a long way to go yet!

The Knights keep watch over an empty sepulcher, and this is suggestive of it having a spiritual significance as well as possible historical context. It is empty some suggest, so that the Spirit might draw all things to it. It is also for a similar reason that the sacred cup of the Grail is exalted and beyond our reach. The cup of the Grail is a temporary physical sign of something spiritual. It is seen only by a few and then briefly. The sepulcher in the Preceptory, likewise, is a temporary physical sign of something spiritual. This is why it is empty. It is, in a sense a sign of resurrection of both body and spirit.

I therefore suggest that the signs and hallows of these traditions, the Church, the Grail, and the Knights Templar, are pointing to the greater mysteries, to things which are not really of this world. This is why we have so much difficulty in understanding what they really mean. We bring them down to our level of comprehension and lose something as a result.

So, each of these traditions offers us a story, a myth-cycle, that is supposedly founded in history (or rather superimposed upon certain events which are claimed to be historical). They also point to a higher teaching of which the custodians and Institutions that perpetuate them know very little.

The Christian Church ignores the Grail tradition at its peril in the same way as Freemasonry ignores its origins in the Ancient Mysteries at its peril. To ignore these things and the other underground streams of tradition and teaching which nourish the tradition will lead to a growing superficiality in both institutions. Unfortunately, that is already happening; our traditions, Christian and Masonic, are being impoverished.

It is generally accepted these days that within modern Freemasonry there exists a hidden stream which has carried the secret tradition down the centuries. It is also claimed that the Templar tradition has left its own mark not only on western

spirituality but also on the development of Freemasonry during its formative years. What is also fascinating is that even the ancient Order of Knight Templary had its own hidden source and tradition. There is, for example a Gnostic thread as well as other non-Christian influences within the Templar tradition, but that is another story! It is important to know these things, as they help us to understand how one tradition has overlapped or influenced another. In this present case, it is likely that the Grail cycle has had some influence on our ritual, if only as a source of archetypal ideas and symbols.

I appreciate that I have been somewhat repetitive in what I have been saying, but I am dealing with rather deep and abstruse material and also ideas and theories which I find rather difficult to unravel. I can, therefore, only suggest these connections.

The Grail and the Sacrament

A few words on the so-called "sacramental" aspects of these several traditions, as this gets to the very heart of the cycle.

A. E. Waite says that "Man may enter into the consciousness of himself as being actually that vessel of reflection which testifies of everything without to the centrum concentratum within." This reminds me of the hermetic maxim, "As above, so it is below." When this comes to pass it can be said of him, as it was said once of Perceval, "And the Most Holy Grail shall appear no more herein; but in a brief space shall you know well the place where it shall be." The sacrament of the Holy Grail, i.e. the receiving of Divine Grace directly and also the vision splendid, is truly a mystical experience, a spiritual marriage, given by God alone and only to the worthy Knight. The story is full of mystery and of mysteries. The inward and spiritual nourishment is the reward for labor. It is a gift of grace. A few, only a few in the Christian Church, like St. Paul, have been carried up to the Third Heaven and there behold the Blessed One. In the Grail tradition the successful Knight was Perceval.

The Grail cycle is certainly intertwined with the Christian faith, as it is written by Christians for Christians and has a Christian message in each of its chapters. In many ways it is written in the style of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. However, as I've said, its background is a mixture of Christian and pre-Christian (pagan) traditions. It is therefore not surprising to see the merging of Grail and Eucharist ceremonies which at the same time have pagan or Celtic overtones. For example, the Grail service or mass, looks very much like the usual Eucharist service of the Christian Church, but they are not the same. It is therefore not surprising that the Catholic Church has never approved of the Grail cycle as it has these heretical overtones.

In the later Lohengrin Romance of the German version of the Grail cycle, we find this Eucharistic motif in a strange guise. In this Swan Story the chain of one of the swans was made into two chalices, and mass being said therein, the bird was restored to proper human form. Again, a symbolic representation of the

transformation of the soul. Notice this recurring theme in these stories and legends - regeneration, transformation, and resurrection. It also appears in Freemasonry in the third degree in particular and is implicit in many other degrees.

Waite says, rather poetically, that the Grail itself is no more meant to be taken literally than any other fable. For this reason it can be described as a divine paradox. Likewise, the quest is not pursued with horses or clothed in outward armor, but in the realm of the spirit. Also it is declared, Christ's blood in the Grail Cup is there and yet it is not there. "It is like the cup of the elixir and the stone of transmutation in Alchemy, yet it seems to be one thing under its various veils, and blessed are those who find it." Do you not see the analogy with the Chymical Marriage of Christian Rosencreutz? Do you not also see how important is the symbolism of the cubic stone and the rose in the Rose Croix Degree in the understanding of the mysteries of the Grail? And so has the crusade of the modern Knights Templar changed from that of his predecessor, for our battle is now a spiritual one, symbolically represented in the ritual and no longer requires metal armor, a horse, and a battlefield in a foreign land.

I wish to conclude my brief survey of this fascinating and somewhat complicated subject by quoting the words on the jacket of the Penguin publication of *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. This work is purported to have been written by the medieval author Walter Map. On the jacket the publisher writes:

"The fusion of fabulous legend and Christian symbolism gives the quest a tragic grandeur and mystical aura. The richly colorful world of the court of King Arthur is the setting for a story that was intended on another level as a guide to the spiritual life, aimed at the court rather than the cloister. Chivalrous adventurers like Gawain, Lancelot, and the saintly Galahad journey across a land strewn with fantastic dangers, temptations, and false promises. Combining Celtic myth and Arthurian romance, the quest is an absorbing and radiant allegory of man's equally perilous search for the grace of God."


All I feel I can do now is to put the question: Isn't this also the quest of the Masonic Knights Templar, the search for the grace of God? And is not the ritual of our order a modern-day version of the Grail cycle of medieval times?

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