

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*The  
Grail Bearer*



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## THE GRAIL BEARER

It was Magdalene who became this Grail Bearer [Repanse de Schoye]. She is Grail Bearer to this day. One must seek her with a pure heart and not be led astray by false accounts that depict her in so many false guises.

—Estelle Isaacson: *The Grail Bearer: tellings from the ever-primal story through the eyes of Repanse de Schoye*

### The transformed alabaster jar



In 1874 Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted *Damsel of the Sanct Grael*. This nineteenth century work follows the medieval tradition that the Holy Grail is always carried by a woman.

I'm sure Rosetti is giving us an image of Mary Magdalene as the Grail bearer and as a Grail messenger (her traditional red hair is a giveaway). The alabaster jar she traditionally carries has become the Holy Grail as a chalice. She points to the feminine spirit of Sophia-Wisdom hovering behind her head.

### **When legends touch the soul**

In the twelfth century Robert de Boron wrote *Joseph d'Armathe*, depicting the Holy Grail as the cup in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of Christ as he died on the cross. Joseph, an elusive character in the gospels, with his companions brought the sacred cup from the Holy Land to England. The site was later associated with Glastonbury.

One legend places Mary Magdalene in Joseph's party. In another version Mary carries the blood of Christ to Britain in her alabaster jar which she had used to catch the blood of Christ, so merging her jar of anointing oil with the Holy Grail coming to that land.

We limit the Grail by viewing it only as a physical object. Still, many people believe Mary is buried at Glastonbury. This is one of numerous Magdalene burial sites to rival her remains 'discovered' beneath the church in St. Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume, France.

I once sat in what was left of the crypt in the ruins of Glastonbury abbey before a weathered figure of Christ carved in the stone above the altar. Beside me a girl with lots of piercings and a tattooed shaved head sat still as a statue, eyes closed. We were so different, yet I had an immediate feeling of companionship with her. Above we had the open blue sky for a roof. There was a tangible presence and as I absorbed it, my thoughts turned to the mystical Grail.

I mused on the people of the past who would have experienced the divine at work in the cosmos, influencing every moment of their lives, while a thread of mystery knowledge united cultures from the south and north, east and west. They set up their temples and shrines with an intuitive sense of the spiritual significance of place and form, and so they drew the divine power down into a waiting chalice.

For every ancient sacred place was a map of the human being, the outer body housing the soul, which in turn had to become the dwelling place of the spiritual Self. How far back did the initiates of old know this? Did they recognise that we are each a microcosm of the spiritual cosmos? And were they, in this place too, preparing for the pilgrims of some future time who could truly experience themselves as the temple of the Divine or a potential Grail bearer filled with love?

The girl opened her eyes and started. 'Ooh, I thought I was alone,' she said and then smiled. 'Hey, do you think they did bring the Holy Grail here? They must have, mustn't they, and we can feel it even now.'

'I think so,' I replied. 'Even though it's beyond space and time, a kind of golden thread links us to it here.'

'Yeah. That's why we come to these places, to get hold of it. Love ya; 'bye,' she said and skipped away.

## **The need for a Holy Grail**

In the early centuries of our era (CE) the secretive ancient mysteries were gradually fading to be transformed in pagan and Christian circles into a conscious search for gnosis of the living spirit. But from the fourth century exoteric forms of religion came to the fore through the Romanised church. The old temples were being closed, the last of the mystery sanctuaries abandoned and various gnostic streams were declared heretical.

In Alexandria, home of the famous Library, the philosopher Hypatia led a prestigious Neo-Platonic school. She was wise and tolerant and popular among pagans and Christians alike. But she was caught between two feuding bishops and in 415 she was murdered by a mob of monks. Church and politics were now fully in a grim partnership.

In 529 the Emperor Justinian, ruling from Rome's new capitol Constantinople (modern Istanbul) put out a decree:

We wish to widen the law once made by us and by our father of blessed memory against all remaining heresies (we call heresies those faiths which hold and believe things otherwise than the catholic and apostolic orthodox church).

He achieved his goal by refusing a teaching stipend to any but those of 'the pure and orthodox faith.' The famous philosophical school in Athens had to close. The school founded in the late first century by the apostle Paul and Dionysius the Areopagite disappeared, but re-emerged in works such as *A Mystical Theology* and *The Heavenly Hierarchies* under Dionysius' name. In the following centuries these and many other esoteric works, pagan and Christian, were preserved in the monasteries and convents that began to proliferate. It's thanks to these places of retreat from the constant invasions across Rome's weakening empire that we know about many ancient philosophies. Meanwhile European tribes that were only nominally Christian were in a constant state of war with one another. The Germanic Franks became the most powerful.

## **From the western Isles**

Into this maelstrom came a movement from the far west, from the Hibernian Celts, whose people still experienced the divine in the living world, in the elements and in the heavens above, the sun, moon and stars. The Romans never conquered Ireland and Scotland, and Christianity as it came to expression in those Celtic lands was imbued with a deep love of all nature.

The Irish druids knew the cosmic Christ as the spirit of the sun, and they accepted the Christ impulse now working in the earth's aura. They immediately understood the inner meaning of the bread and wine in the eucharist. The bread is the cosmic Christ, now alive in the earth. And in the wine flows the spiritual blood of Christ that poured into the earth and into the hearts of human beings. Irish Christianity was always a personal path that aimed to discover Christ within the soul.

Saint Brigid was a potent teacher in the fifth century founding centres throughout Ireland, many renowned for their learning, art and music. The Catholic Church claimed Patrick as Ireland's patron saint. But Brigid was the most loved. Through the dedication of both, a uniquely Celtic Christianity would take root in this western isle and beyond.

Brigid is said to have sojourned at Glastonbury. In 2015 evidence of a Celtic Christian community was found dating to St Brigid's time. Bride's Mound, a small hill with a view of the Tor, marks her pilgrimage site. It is where her chapel, originally dedicated to Mary Magdalene, once stood. Thus, from Brigid a mystical thread draws together Celtic Christianity, the Holy Grail and the Magdalene as Grail bearer. The story of this thread continues in Portal Six.

## **The Roman church and counter ideas**

When the first Irish missionaries entered Europe in the late sixth century, they brought with them their freedom-based Christianity. The Roman church fought with all its might against its establishment and impact. By the time the Frankish king Charlemagne (Carolus) was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800, the Roman form had prevailed.

Charlemagne's kingdom covered much of modern France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and northern Italy. He never mastered reading and writing (too busy waging wars) but he encouraged learning and so began what is known as the Carolingian Renaissance. His court at Aachen (in modern Germany) became a melting pot for ideas, including 'lost' knowledge brought through trade with Baghdad the main city of the Islamic Caliphate, and via Moslem Spain.

Debate always took place within the dominant Roman Catholic framework, which meant 'Irish' teachings and other ideas like those of Manicheanism which focused on transforming the darkness of evil rather than fighting it, were cast aside as heretical.

I have crammed a big history of the turbulent so-called 'Dark Ages' into a nutshell. But what was happening in the souls of people?

### **The Grail emerges in human souls**

Where the controlling and externalised Roman church held sway over people's lives, the powerful longing for spiritual bread and wine was not being satisfied. And from around the eighth century images began to appear in visions – images that included the divine feminine. People began to have an inner experience of the Holy Grail.

This could happen because of the strong individualism of the Frankish peoples meeting with the wisdom of the eastern mysteries and the Irish love of the Christ spirit that sets us free – for a deep Celtic undercurrent could not be killed off.

Ideas have a living reality in the invisible cosmos, and a great need was bringing the images of the Grail to human souls. This need was to grow greater as spirituality became more and more the province of church doctrine.

Sometimes when the waxing moon is sickle shaped, 'earthshine' occurs; the sun's light reflects from the earth and faintly lights up the dark part of the moon.



For a people with deep spiritual hunger and a feeling for the heavens full of non-physical powers, this sight in the night sky emerged as an

imaginative picture of the Holy Grail – the Christ spirit as the bread of life, resting in the chalice of Wisdom the pure feminine soul.

## Legendary Grails

By the twelfth century, the longing had come forth in the literature of the Holy Grail. Although coloured by Christian iconography the stories developed outside the establishment church. The Grail always provides continual nourishment to those who honour it, like the Greek cornucopia and the Celtic cauldron of plenty.

In the northern regions of France, the stories met with the Arthurian legends of Britain and would become familiar and influential portraying knights on the quest for the Grail that would heal the wounded Fisher King and restore the 'wasteland' to wholeness. We see this in Chrétien de Troyes' unfinished *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*. His 'grail' is a large dish.

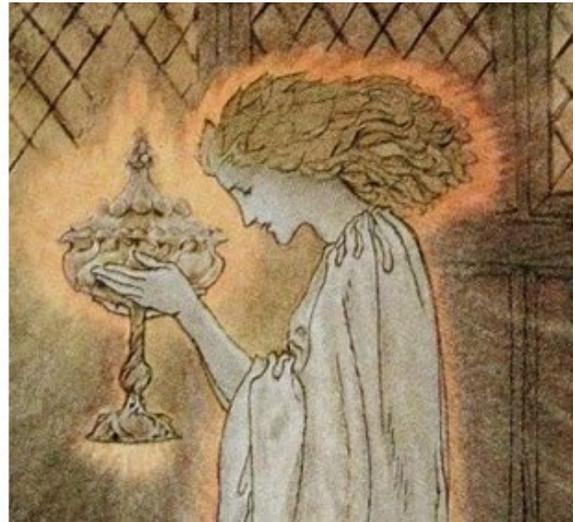
German poet Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* tells an initiatory story that draws together ancient star wisdom from the east with the Christ impulse related to inward transformation and the development of conscience and empathy. His Grail, as a 'stone' from heaven is imbued with astronomical symbolism and the mysteries of alchemy.

The stone in esoteric lore represents the mineral human body, within which the soul dwells and which needs to be a home for spirit. Wolfram pictures this when every Good Friday, a dove flies down from heaven bringing a small white wafer to the stone. Then 'from that stone derives whatever good fragrances of drink and food there are on earth'. Thus 'does the power of the Grail give sustenance.' (Book 9).

## Women in the Grail stories

In the medieval Grail stories, the seekers are knights, men. Women often need to be rescued from captivity. Taken on a symbolic level the female represents the soul 'in captivity'. The word grail itself comes from *gradalis*, gradual, step by step – appropriate for the soul on its journey to freedom and wholeness. Occasionally female characters feature as 'schemers' and this negative female became more prominent over the centuries – thus Morgan le Fay, the name given to the priestess of pre-Christian Avalon, disappears into evil Morgaine/Morgana. Denigration of female value is sadly familiar. As a counter Marion Zimmer Bradley popularised a reversal in her Arthurian retelling *The Mists of Avalon* (1983).

Females in the Grail stories appear most powerfully as guides and Grail messengers or as the Grail bearer. Can Mary Magdalene be seen in these roles?



*Kundry the Grail messenger in Wagner's opera 'Parsifal' & Repanse de Schoye the Grail bearer in Wolfram's long poem 'Parzival'*

## **Mary Magdalene and the Grail**

It has long been a desire to find the elusive Holy Grail as a literal and tangible thing. But the Grail is more than this. And it is more than the conclusions drawn in works such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* that cast Mary Magdalene as the Grail bearer because she carried the seed of the royal bloodline in her womb – her womb itself as the Grail. I think this royal blood idea, although honouring the feminine, guides us away from rather than towards the Magdalene. I would like now to deepen the image of the Holy Grail and of Mary as the Grail bearer *and* its messenger.

Mary Magdalene lived centuries before the Grail stories, yet she can be linked to the Holy Grail beyond the legends. The vessel of spiritual nourishment is timeless. It is forever a chalice of light.

On a macro-cosmic level the Grail is the Christ spirit, now permeating the spiritual atmosphere of the earth. The world soul has become a sacred chalice. The Virgin Mary, holy mother, who carried the baby Jesus in her womb and is an image of divine Sophia, emerged among other things as an archetype and prototype of the bearer of the Holy Grail.

Yet how closely her soul is aligned with Mary Magdalene, initiated by the Christ, and emerging as the first Grail bearer.

In the microcosm the Grail is the Christ spirit settled in the receptive, awakened human soul as the individual I AM. The Grail bearer is the soul inwardly wed to the Christ. So it was for Mary Magdalene.

The Magdalene would have carried abroad the Grail because she brought light into the world. She prefigured the medieval Grail bearer, Repanse de Schoye in *Parzival*, who belongs to the Grail family and whose role is to carry the holy object in procession into the Grail castle, which also represents the world soul. As such I concur with Estelle Isaacson's wonderful words at the start of this essay.

There is more. Grail messenger Condrie/Kundry on the other hand speaks, and in this story even remonstrates with young Parzival for his foolishness. She speaks and teaches the truth, despite her hideous appearance which indirectly references the 'Loathly lady' (a legendary character who presents as a test of love and loyalty for heroes and is transformed if they succeed). In his nineteenth century opera *Parsifal* Richard Wagner adapted the repentant prostitute Mary Magdalene concocted by Pope Gregory 1 to create his Kundry, a fallen magical being who is redeemed when Parsifal becomes the Grail King. Yet she is nevertheless a Grail messenger and a healer who searches widely for medicines that might appease the unhealable wound of King Amfortas 'the Fisher King'.

Grail bearers are pure-hearted and radiant; Grail messengers are challenging and truthful. And Mary Magdalene is both. She appears thus in the gnostic writings, in many of her legends and down the centuries through her ongoing inspiration.

Filled with the Christ spirit Mary would have gone out and preached the Word – or more specifically spread the words of love and truth – even perhaps into the far north – because they lived in her being.

Wisdom is the feminine aspect of the divine and in this sense, Mary was also an expression of the Holy Grail – the gospel of love for all creation and of divinely inspired wisdom. She would have opened hearts by her very presence.

The Grail quest continues. It is very human yet connected with the highest spiritual realms. When we seek the Holy Grail, we are seeking the wisdom that knows the truth to set us free as individuals. In the finality our quest is to discover the Grail, uniting divine Wisdom and the divine Word within our soul so that we can become the bread of life and the wine of the spirit.

The true Holy Grail is realised through our indwelling spiritual 'I'. That's why knowledge of the Grail continues to be relevant. It is important today and for the future.