

The Symbolism of the Grail

by

Rene Guenon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, nos. 3 & 4. © World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

In connection with the Knights of the Round Table it is not irrelevant to show the meaning of the “Grail quest”, which, in legends of Celtic origin, is represented as their principal function. Every tradition contains such allusions to something which, at a certain time, became lost or hidden. There is, for example, the Hindu *Soma*—the Persian *Haoma*—the “draught of immortality” which has a most direct relationship with the Grail, for the latter is said to be the sacred vessel that contained the blood of Christ, which is also the “draught of immortality”. In other cases the symbolism is different: thus according to the Jews it is the pronunciation of the great divine Name which is lost; but the fundamental idea always remains the same, and it will shortly appear to what, exactly, it corresponds.

The Holy Grail is said to be the cup used at the Last Supper, wherein Joseph of Arimathea received the blood and water from the wound opened in Christ’s side by the lance of Longinus the Centurion.¹ According to legend, this cup was carried to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea himself along with Nicodemus;² and in this can be seen the indication of a link established between the Celtic tradition and Christianity. In fact, the cup plays a most important part in the majority of ancient traditions, and this, no doubt, applied particularly in the case of the Celts. The cup is also to be observed in frequent association with the lance, the two symbols then becoming in a certain way complementary; but it would take us far from our subject to enter into this.³

Perhaps the clearest expression of the Grail’s essential significance is found in the account of its origin: it tells that this cup had been carved by the angels from an emerald which fell from Lucifer’s forehead at his downfall.⁴ That emerald strikingly recalls the *urnā*, the frontal pearl which, in Hindu (and hence in Buddhist) symbolism, frequently replaced the third eye of Shiva, representing what might be called the “sense of eternity”.⁵ It is then said that the Grail was given into Adam’s keeping in the Earthly Paradise, but that Adam, in his turn, lost it when he fell, for he could not bear it with him when he was driven out of Eden. Clearly, man being separated from his original center, thereafter found himself enclosed in the temporal sphere; he could no

¹ The name Longinus is related to the name of the lance itself, Greek *logké* (pronounced *lonké*); the Latin *lancea* has the same root.

² These two personages here respectively represent the royal and sacerdotal powers, as did Arthur and Merlin at the institution of the Round Table.

³ We merely observe that the symbolism of the lance frequently relates to the World Axis; under this aspect the blood which drips from the lance has the same significance as the dew emanating from the Tree of Life; it is well known that all traditions unanimously affirm that the vital principle is intimately linked with the blood.

⁴ Some say it was an emerald which fell from Lucifer’s crown, but there is here a confusion arising from the fact that, before his fall, Lucifer was “The Angel of the Crown”, which is in Hebrew *Hakathriel* (that is *Kether* [Hebrew for “crown”], the first *Sephirah*). The name has, incidentally, the numerical value 666.

⁵ On this point see *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedānta*, chap. 20.

longer rejoin the unique point whence all things are contemplated under the aspect of eternity. In other words the possession of the “sense of eternity” is linked to what every tradition calls the “primordial state”, the restoring of which constitutes the first stage of true initiation, since it is the necessary preliminary to conquest of “supra-human” states. . . .⁶

What follows might appear more enigmatic: Seth obtained re-entry into the Earthly Paradise and was thus able to recover the precious vessel; now the name *Seth* expresses the ideas of foundation and stability and, consequently, indicates, in a certain manner, the restoration of the primordial order destroyed by the fall of man.⁷ It can therefore be understood that Seth and those who possessed the Grail after him were by this very fact, able to establish a spiritual center destined to replace the lost Paradise, and to serve as an image of it; thus possession of the Grail represents integral preservation of the primordial tradition in a particular spiritual center. The legend tells neither where nor by whom the Grail was preserved until the time of Christ; but its recognizably Celtic origin leaves it to be understood that the Druids had a part therein and must be counted among the regular custodians of the primordial tradition.

The loss of the Grail, or of one of its symbolic equivalents, is, in brief, the loss of tradition with all that the latter includes; nevertheless, the tradition is, in truth, hidden rather than lost; or at least it can only be lost as regards certain secondary centers, when they cease to be in direct relation with the supreme center. So far as the latter is concerned, it always preserves the deposit of tradition intact, and is not affected by the changes which occur in the outer world; thus, according to various Fathers of the Church and in particular Saint Augustine, the flood could not touch the Earthly Paradise which is “the dwelling of Enoch and the Land of the Saints”⁸ and whose summit “touches the lunar sphere”, that is to say finds itself beyond the domain of change (which is identified with the “sublunary world”), at the point of communication between the Earth and the Heavens. . . .⁹

The Grail, accordingly, represents two strictly interdependent things at the same time: one who integrally possesses the “primordial tradition”, who has attained the degree of effective knowledge which this possession essentially implies, is thereby reintegrated into the fullness of the “primordial state”. The double meaning inherent in the very word *Grail* relates to these two things, “the primordial state” and “the primordial tradition”, for, through one of those verbal assimilations which frequently play a far from negligible role in symbolism, and which further have much more profound reasons than one would imagine at first glance, the Grail is at once a vessel (Old French *grasale*) and a book (*gradale* or *graduale*); this latter aspect plainly designates the tradition while the other more directly concerns the state itself.¹⁰

We do not intend to enter here upon the secondary details of the legend of the Holy Grail, though each has its symbolic value, nor to pursue the history of the “Knights of the Round Table” and their exploits; we merely recall that the “Round Table”, constructed by King Arthur¹¹ from the plans of Merlin, was designed to

⁶ On this “primordial” or “edenic” state, see *The Esoterism of Dante*, chaps. 6 and 8 and *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedānta*, chap. 23.

⁷ Seth is said to have remained in the Earthly Paradise for forty years. The number 40 also carries a meaning of “reconciliation” or “return to the principle”. Periods measured with this number are very frequently encountered in the Judeo-Christian tradition: for instance, the forty days of the Flood, the forty years in which the Israelites wandered in the desert, the forty days which Moses passed on Sinai, the forty days of Christ’s fasting (Lent has, naturally, the same meaning); and there are, no doubt, other examples.

⁸ “And Enoch walked with God; and he was not (in the exterior and visible world), for God took him” (Gen. 5:24). He was then carried into the Earthly Paradise, as certain theologians such as Tostat and Cajetan have also believed. . . .

⁹ In conformity with the symbolism used by Dante which places the Earthly Paradise at the summit of the mountain of Purgatory, identified by him with the “polar mountain” of all the traditions.

¹⁰ In certain versions of the legend of the Holy Grail these two meanings are firmly fused, for the book becomes an inscription traced by Christ or by an angel on the cup itself. There are ready comparisons to be made here with the *Book of Life* and with certain elements of the symbolism of the Apocalypse.

¹¹ The name Arthur has an extremely remarkable meaning which attaches it to the “polar” symbolism and which we shall perhaps

receive the Grail when one of the Knights had succeeded in overcoming it and had brought it from Great Britain to Brittany. This table is also a symbol, probably of great antiquity, one of those always associated with the idea of spiritual centers that preserved tradition; the presence of twelve principal personages around the circular shape of the table is, moreover, a formal link with the cycle of the zodiac. . . .¹²

One other symbol relating to a different aspect of the Grail legend, merits special attention: it is that of *Montsalvat* (literally “Mountain of Salvation”), the peak standing “on distant shores that no mortal approaches”, which is represented as situated, in an inaccessible region, in the midst of sea, and behind which the sun rises. It is at once the “sacred isle” and the “polar mountain”, two equivalent symbols; it is the “Land of Immortality” which is naturally to be identified with the Earthly Paradise.¹³

Returning to the Grail itself, it is easy to realize that its primary significance is fundamentally the same as that of the sacred vessel wherever it is encountered, and notably in the East that of the sacrificial cup which originally contained, as pointed out above, the Vedic *Soma* or the Mazdean *Haoma*, that is, “the draught of immortality” which confers or restores, for those who receive it with the requisite disposition, the “sense of eternity”. . . .

explain on some other occasion.

¹² The “Knights of the Round Table” are sometimes fifty in number (fifty was, among the Hebrews, the number of the Jubilee, and also relates to the “reign of the Holy Spirit”); but, even then, there were always twelve who played a preponderant role. The twelve peers of Charlemagne in other legendary medieval accounts may also be here borne in mind.

¹³ The similarity of *Montsalvat* to *Meru* was pointed out to us by Hindus, and this led us to examine more closely the significance of the Western legend of the Grail.