

Review: DH228

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

SEARCHING FOR THE HOLY GRAIL — AGAIN¹

a book review of

Holy Blood, Holy Grail

by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln
(Delacorte Press, 1982)

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If someone were to write a book that recounted the life of Jesus but completely disregarded the available accepted historical material, what would be the result? No doubt it would be something along the lines of the book written by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln titled *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*.

The book grew from research for a series of BBC television specials years ago. It has again been receiving media attention because of the recent success of books such as *The Da Vinci Code*.

Holy Blood, Holy Grail tells the tale of a poor priest in a small, obscure French village. While restoring a church in 1891, this priest discovers some strange parchments dated from the 13th, 17th, and 18th centuries. These parchments launch a historical detective story that leads to the discovery of a super-secretive politico-religious order called the Priory of Sion.

The authors' theory is that Jesus was a wealthy Jewish opportunist who had a legitimate claim to the Jewish throne. Jesus supposedly arranged His life to correspond to Old Testament messianic prophecies, married Mary Magdalene for dynastic reasons, had a child (or children) by her, and staged His own crucifixion.

They suggest that after an uproar in Israel, Mary, along with Jesus' offspring, escaped to Southern France, where their descendants became the Merovingians, the early French kings who ruled from AD 500 until 750. The Merovingians were finally deposed, but their various royal claims (to the French and other European thrones) have been kept alive by a secret society that has preserved the "true" history of Jesus.

MYTHS, FACTS, AND RAMIFICATIONS

The authors' approach to historical investigation is to start with the most current events and work back into the past, drawing on a wide range of subject matter in order to substantiate their claims. They explain their attempt to connect a chain of "what ifs" and ingenious speculations as "an interdisciplinary approach...a mobile and flexible approach that permits one to move freely between disparate disciplines, across time and space. One must be able to link data and make connections between people, events, and phenomena widely divorced from each other" (p. 283).

The result of this approach to history, however, is that any report, rumor, or legend is given credence and is accepted as having historical value equal to documented facts. Facts themselves, moreover, become overshadowed by their own "ramifications": "It is not sufficient to confine oneself exclusively to facts. One must also discern the repercussions and ramifications of facts, as those repercussions and ramifications radiate through the centuries — often in the form of myth and legend" (284).

The authors' approach to synthesizing myth, facts, and ramifications, is to superimpose a more recent event, concept, or theory onto history — highlighting where there is overlap, assuming correlations where there is divergence, and ignoring clearly contradictory material. They explain, "It is rather like taking a tenet of contemporary church dogma — the Immaculate Conception, for instance, or the obligatory celibacy of priests — and using it to illumine early Christianity. In much the same way the Grail romances [legends of the Middle Ages] may be used to shed some significant light on the New Testament — on the career and identity of Jesus" (283–84).

If one's theories do not begin with the facts, however, just about any conclusion can be rendered as "plausible," as Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln demonstrate. They have built a hypothesis upon speculation, assumption, and guesswork rather than on facts, and since the hypothesis is not built on facts, then facts will have little effect on it. The authors themselves make this clear: "We have formulated a hypothesis of a bloodline, descended from Jesus, which has continued up to the present day. We cannot, of course, be certain that our hypothesis is correct in every detail. But even if specific details here and there are subject to modification, we are convinced that the essential outlines of our hypothesis are accurate" (380).

It is not unusual for a hypothesis to undergo minor modifications as a result of new findings, but on what basis can the essential outline of their hypothesis be judged accurate when little, if any, evidence can be found to support it? They admit, for example, "We could find little verifiable information about the true origins of the Merovingians" (212). Rather than abandon their essential theory, however, they resort to all sorts of convoluted reasoning and arguments from silence to maintain it: "In the absence of any decisive or conclusive testimony [about the origins of the Merovingians and their supposed descent from Jesus] we had to proceed cautiously. We had to evaluate fragments of circumstantial evidence and try to assemble these fragments into a coherent picture" (362).

When trying to explain away the absence of any valid historical information concerning a certain descendent of the Merovingian line, they ask, "But why, we wondered, should Dagobert II have been excised from history? What was being concealed by such an excision? Why should one wish to deny the very existence of a man?" (231–32). Note the logic here: because there is little mention of Dagobert in history, therefore his name must have been excised. If historians were to adopt these authors' approach to historical research, most of history could (and would) be rewritten. The matter would no longer rest on whether something was factual and could be proved, but on whether a scenario could be created that would render a particular hypothesis plausible.

In order to validate their hypothesis, therefore, the authors must appeal to something other than historical facts. They state, for example, "We had already guessed that the references to viticulture [the cultivation of grapes] throughout our investigations symbolized dynastic alliances. On the basis of our hypothesis viticulture now seemed to symbolize the process whereby Jesus — who identifies himself repeatedly with the vine — perpetuated his lineage. As if in confirmation, we discovered a carved door depicting Jesus as a cluster of grapes. This door was in Sion, Switzerland" (286).

THE HOLY GRAIL

Conjecture, assumption, speculation, and an unbelievable gullibility characterize the authors' approach. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than when they turn to the Grail legends (from which comes the title of their book).

In the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, the Holy Grail is described as being the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper and subsequently used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch the blood that flowed from the Savior's side as He hung on the cross. The trio of authors rightly notes, "It would seem inconceivable that the Grail romances could in any way elucidate the mysteries surrounding the New Testament" (283). Rather than consistently maintaining *that* view, however, they go on to explain how the Grail stories are actually cryptic messages about the bloodline of Jesus Himself, hidden in the Medieval legends and myths.

Perhaps one of their more imaginative flights of fancy is their discussion on the naming of the Grail itself. From this exercise they not only come up with the name of their book, but they again demonstrate their ad hoc methodology:

In many of the earlier manuscripts the Grail is called the Sangraal; and even in the later version by Malory it is called the Sangreal. It is likely that some such form — Sangraal or Sangreal — was in fact the original one. It is also likely that the one word was subsequently broken in the wrong place. In other words, “Sangraal” or “Sangreal” may not have been intended to divide into “San Graal” or “San Greal” — but into “Sang Raal” or “Sang Real.” Or, to employ the modern spelling, Sang Royal. Royal blood. In itself such wordplay might be provocative but hardly conclusive. Taken in conjunction with the emphasis on genealogy and lineage, however, there is not much room for doubt. And for that matter, the traditional associations — the cup that caught Jesus’ blood, for instance — would seem to reinforce this supposition. Quite clearly, the Grail would appear to pertain in some way to the blood and a bloodline. (277)

The conclusion that the Grail “quite clearly” pertains to “a bloodline” and therefore substantiates their hypothesis would be less than clear to one who had read only the legends themselves. The tales that make up the Grail romances hardly support these inferences. Such a hypothesis ignores the whole setting of the legends and the issue of the “quest” for the Grail (which is the context of their Grail discussions).

The authors, moreover, fail to be consistent with their own hypothesis. If they want to set up the Grail legends as somehow authoritative in establishing the existence of a bloodline of Jesus, it would only be reasonable for them to consider *all* that the legends have to say on the subject and not just pick and choose what they like.

According to the King Arthur legends, for example, Galahad finished the “quest” and found the Grail. After something of a mystical experience, both Galahad and the Grail were taken up into heaven, no more to be seen by people (*Le Morte D’Arthur* 17.22). If the authors’ theory is correct, then the legend apparently indicates that the bloodline of Jesus was removed from the earth, no more to be seen by people. The ridiculous hypothesis concerning the Grail romances proves to be self-defeating.

THE HOLY BIBLE

When these three inventive historians approach the New Testament and, specifically, the Gospels, they fail to leave behind their audacious approach to history. They recognize the need to at least acknowledge the historical value of the New Testament in validating their claims, but they fail to approach it in an intellectually honest and objective manner.

For example, they assert, “The Bible, it must be remembered — and this applies to both the Old and New Testaments — is only a selection of works and in many respects a somewhat arbitrary one” (289). They defend this simplistic, one-sentence dismissal of the process of the canonization of Scripture by citing what they feel are major “contradictions” in the Gospels, such as the two genealogies of Jesus, the fact that one Gospel records Jesus’ being visited at birth by shepherds while another says by kings, the “different portraits” of Christ in the Gospels, and the differences between the Gospel writers in the details of Jesus’ last words on the cross. They conclude, “Given these discrepancies, the Gospels can only be accepted as a highly questionable authority, and certainly not as definitive. They do not represent the perfect word of any God; or if they do, God’s words have been very liberally censored, edited, revised, glossed, and rewritten by human hands” (289).

These three investigators apparently felt no need to consider the possibility that the supposed contradictions they found could be reconciled. Just because Luke cites the fact that shepherds visited the infant Jesus, for example, does not preclude the possibility that kings also visited Him, as Matthew records. In order for there to be a logical contradiction, one of the accounts would have to assert something that precludes the possibility of the other account; for example, if Luke had stated that *only* shepherds had visited Jesus.

In another effort to chip away at the reliability of the Gospels, the authors turn to the theories of Morton Smith. Based on the discovery of a “Secret Gospel of Mark,” Smith concluded that Mark actually wrote two Gospel accounts and, due to discrepancies between the supposed secret Gospel and the one contained in the

New Testament, neither Gospel could be considered reliable. Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln conclude: "Can one then suppose that Mark's Gospel was unique in being subjected to alteration? If Mark's Gospel was so readily doctored, it is reasonable to assume that the other Gospels were similarly treated" (293).

Even if Mark's Gospel were altered (it wasn't), that is hardly grounds to assume that the others were similarly treated — especially given the complete absence of any evidence of such alteration. Furthermore, contrary to their contention that scholars accept Smith's theory, scholars widely argue that it is quite spurious.² Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln hardly succeed in damaging the reliability of the New Testament by such efforts.

THE PRIORY OF SION

The authors are confident that they have reduced the Gospels to nothing more than unreliable, reworked accounts. They go on to conclude that there were two groups of followers of Jesus: those who were in on an esoteric secret and those who were simply following Jesus' overt teachings. This second group, whom they address as "the adherents of the message," supposedly collected stories about Jesus and reworked them into what became orthodox Christianity. The first group were the precursors of the secret Priory (monastery) of Sion.

This fanciful theory, however, does not stand up to honest evaluation. The time interval between the writing of the Gospels (and the rest of the New Testament) and the events of Jesus' life is far too short for a communal redaction process by these "adherents." The New Testament writers may have drawn on sources, but with such a brief interval, it would have been impossible for them to create a "Jesus of faith" that differed from the real Jesus and then to have their message accepted as genuine. Not only were the New Testament authors eyewitnesses, but so also was their audience. A significant error or misrepresentation would have been quickly exposed, resulting in an early death of Christianity.

They also attempt to "prove" that Mary Magdalene married Jesus at the wedding feast at Cana; that Mary of Bethany was simply another name for Mary Magdalene; that Lazarus was the "beloved disciple" of John's Gospel; that Lazarus's resurrection was staged and was actually an initiatory rite into a Gnostic "mystery" school; that Jesus wasn't a poor carpenter's son, but actually a wealthy member of "high society"; that Barabbas was Jesus' son; and that Jesus faked and survived His own crucifixion.

The following description of their investigation of the supposed marriage of Jesus and Mary is enlightening:

It was not our intention to discredit the Gospels. We sought only to winnow through them — to locate certain fragments of possible or probable truth and extract them from the matrix of embroidery surrounding them. We were seeking fragments, moreover, of a very precise character — fragments that might attest to a marriage between Jesus and the woman known as the Magdalen. Such attestations, needless to say, would not be explicit. In order to find them, we realized, we would be obliged to read between lines, fill in certain gaps, account for certain caesuras and ellipses. We would have to deal with omissions, with innuendos, with references that were, at best, oblique. (301)

This quote reveals their tendency to resort to innuendos, arguments from silence, "oblique" references, and reading between the lines when the plain reading of a text or the facts surrounding it fail to fit their theory.

The authors assert, "When our research led us to Jesus, we could approach him with what we hoped was a sense of balance and perspective. We had no prejudice or preconceptions one way or the other, no vested interests of any kind, nothing to be gained by either proving or disproving anything. Insofar as 'objectivity' is possible, we were able to approach Jesus objectively" (382).

Despite the authors' claims of objectivity, however, they make statements that reveal either a lack of perception or a preconceived bias. They argue, for example, that Jesus was deified in order to compete with the worship/ deification of emperors in the Roman world (335), but Jesus just doesn't fit the pattern. He was not a conqueror with a tradition of "divine" honors typical of those emperors who were so "deified." His first followers, moreover, were not Gentiles from a polytheistic background where heroes

could easily be assimilated into a pantheon of anthropomorphic gods; rather, they were Jews from a strict monotheistic tradition. In a vacuum, such a theory might be plausible, but in the historical-cultural setting of the New Testament, it is most improbable.

Perhaps the greatest inaccuracy in this work is in reference to the Crucifixion. The authors assert that Jesus “modeled and perhaps even contrived His life in accordance with [Old Testament messianic] prophecies,” and even “the details of the Crucifixion seem likewise engineered to enact the prophecies of the Old Testament” (327).

The premise that Jesus Himself staged the Crucifixion is too unreasonable to be accepted solely on the word of this team of researchers. Even nonbiblical historians and writers of antiquity refer to the crucifixion of Jesus as an established fact (e.g., Tacitus *Annals* 15.44; Josephus *Antiquities* 18.33).

The authors, like Hugh J. Schonfield who proposed the “swoon” theory in *The Passover Plot* (Element, 1994, first published in 1965), admit that John’s Gospel is an eyewitness account (326). They discount, however, John’s testimony that Jesus’ side was pierced by a Roman guard and that blood and water flowed out (John 19:34), which is a certain indication of death. Schonfield considered that spear thrust to be the unfortunate, but not immediately fatal, error that disrupted Jesus’ plan for faking His crucifixion. No one, including the trained executioners who presided over Jesus’ crucifixion, those who took His body down, and those who laid Him in the tomb, had any doubts that He was, in fact, dead. Even the Jews who desired His death were certain of this, as evidenced by their request to Pilate to place guards around the tomb to prevent Jesus’ body from being stolen. The authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* ignore these facts, however, and persist with their theories without discrimination.

Perhaps the most blatant example of their lack of interest in crucial data is when they attempt to explain what happened to Jesus after His crucifixion. Ignoring the Resurrection accounts and eyewitness testimonies altogether, they write, “In short, we can offer no real suggestion about what became of him — any more than the Gospels themselves do” (331). They add, “For the purposes of our hypothesis, however, what happened to Jesus was of less importance than what happened to the holy family — and especially to his brother-in-law, his wife, and his children” (332).

It is incredible that these authors would attempt to take a serious look at the beginnings of Christianity without giving any consideration to the Resurrection. To dismiss it as unimportant and insist that the Gospels don’t offer any post-crucifixion information is not only to disregard the goal and intent of the message propagated by the first Christians; it is also to ignore the historically accepted context of the early church and to turn a deaf ear to the testimony regarding Jesus and His mission. It is impossible to even feign an objective analysis of Jesus’ life and its historical significance without addressing the details of the Resurrection, the effect of that event on the lives of the disciples, and the repercussions that the empty tomb has had on all of human history. One may question the theological implications of the Resurrection, but the historically verifiable facts that the tomb was empty and that Jesus was reported as being alive cannot be easily dismissed.

The authors have resorted to flights of fancy and sophisticated speculation to advance a theory that simply cannot be reasonably aligned with any documented evidence. As fiction, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* may have some merit. As a historical study, it displays serious weaknesses. As an explanation of certain sociopolitical dynamics, it is at best contrived. As the basis for one’s view of the historical Jesus, it is deadly.

-- reviewed by Brian Onken

NOTES

1. This article originally appeared in this magazine 21 years ago. *Forward* 6, 1 (1983).
2. Edwin M. Yamauchi, “A Secret Gospel of Jesus as ‘Magnus’?” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 4, 3 (1975): 238–51; Paul J. Achtemeier, reviews of Smith’s works, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, 4 (1974): 625–58; Pierson Parker, “On Professor Morton Smith’s Find at Mar-Saba,” *Anglican Theological Review* 56, 1 (1974): 53–57; Robert M. Grant, “Morton Smith’s Two Books,” *Anglican Theological Review* 56, 1 (1974): 58–64.