

The Passover Cup and the Holy Grail of Legends

There is a unique fascination among men to seek out the extraordinary and vanished relics of history. One such pursuit for the mystical is the quest for the “Holy Grail”. The legend of the “Holy Grail”, in short, states that Joseph of Arimathea took the cup used in the Lord’s Supper to “collect drop of blood from Jesus’ body at the Crucifixion”¹ and after it had been lost, it became the object of a legendary search during the Middle Ages. The Grail has been represented both as, “a food-providing, self-acting talisman” and a goblet “wrought of gold richly set with precious stones... [with] light issuing from it”.²

What can be said of this famous relic? Does it exist? What would it have looked like? Is there truth in the Grail legends? To begin, we need to answer a few questions. What meal was this cup being used in? What cup would have been used at this point in the meal and what would such cups look like in New Testament times?

What meal was the cup being used in? The synoptic gospels are unanimous that the Lord’s Supper took place during the Passover meal (Mt 26:17-35; Mk 14:12-31; Luke 22:1-23). The only difficulty occurs when reading John’s gospel which states that the Lord’s Supper was, “before the Feast of the Passover” (13:1) and then identifies the next day, the day of Jesus’ crucifixion as, “the day of preparation for the Passover” (19:14). This is resolved by noting that Galileans counted a day from sunrise to sunrise and the Judeans from sunset to sunset. “Thus, Jesus [as a Galilean] had eaten the Passover meal when His enemies, who had not as yet had the Passover, arrested Him”³, since for Judeans it was the day of preparation. The cup at the Lord’s Supper was a Passover cup.

What cup would have been used? Both Passover tradition and Scripture give us the answer. Tradition tells us that the Passover meal utilized four cups – a cup to open in thanksgiving, a cup to eat unleavened bread and *charoseth* with and for the youngest to ask about the meal, a cup of blessing and a 4th cup to drink after the *hallel* psalms were sung⁴. Luke identifies two of the cups (Luke 22:17, 20); it is clear that first one is not the cup we are concerned with and since the gospels mention the bread before the cup (Mt 26:26-27) and no cup after singing the psalms (Mt 26:30), it must be the 3rd cup of blessing. 1 Corinthians 10:16 affirms this calling it “the cup of blessing”.

What would a Passover cup look like in New Testament Times? This is a much harder question to answer since we must rely upon archeological evidences where the Bible is silent. But we can say a few things. We know that, “The cups mentioned in the NT were, beyond much doubt of Roman

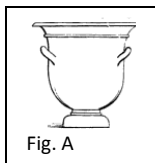


Fig. A

style”⁵ and that they would have “remained bowl like and varied in size.”⁶ Ποτήριον is the Greek word used for the “cup” and, according to Kittel “it was usually an earthen bowl... though vessels of stone and metal are found from ancient times, and of glass from the Hell. period”.⁷ Sir William Smith’s Dictionary of

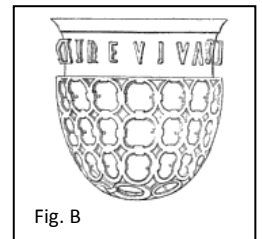


Fig. B

Greek and Roman Antiquities⁸ offers a sketch of a kind of Roman vinegar cup (*Acetebullum*; Fig. A)

and a personal drinking cup (*Vitrum*; Fig. B) that give us a flavor for the kinds of drinking vessels used during the time. The most explicit testimony, however, comes from Dr Leen Ritmeyer⁹ a Dutch born archeologist-architect who spent 22 years in Jerusalem, holding a M.A. in Conservation Studies and a Ph.D. from the University of Manchester. He is quoted on the “Bible Illustration Blog” (by Graham D. Kennedy) as stating, “The cups were made of ordinary pottery - no holy grail, as you can see! Here is my illustration (Fig. C) of the 4 cups, which is based on actual cups that have been excavated.”¹⁰

The legend of the Holy Grail is just that – a legend. The third cup of the Passover was no jeweled chalice, no golden goblet, no food-providing charm but an ordinary clay cup representing the extraordinary work of God to initiate a new covenant whereby those who trust him have their sins forgiven and access to the true and the living God. The quest for the “Holy Grail” is a quest of futility but the quest to be found “in Christ” is one worth giving your all for (cf. Phil 3:7-15).

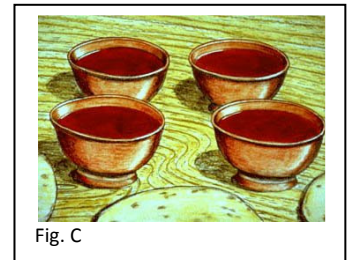


Fig. C

The Passover Cup and the Holy Grail of Legends

Leif Jensen – 2010

References:

- 1) Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language: Encyclopedic Edition, Grail, 627
- 2) The Encyclopedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts Sciences Literature and General Information. Eleventh Edition Volume XII, *Grail, The Holy*, 320
- 3) Hoehner, Harold, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 1977, 87
- 4) Feeley-Harnik, Gillian *The Lord's Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity*, University of Philadelphia Press, Philadelphia 1981, 121-124 (see also: Edersheim, Alfred *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids 1971, 491-512)
- 5) The Zondervan Pictorial Bible (General Editor: Merrill C. Tenney) Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids 1963, *Cup*, 191
- 6) Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary (General Editor: Trent C. Butler) Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville 2003, *Vessel and Utensils*, 1649.
- 7) *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964-c1976. Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin. (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (6:148). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- 8) A Dictionary Of Greek And Roman Antiquities Edited By William Smith, PH.D. AND Charles Anthon, LL.D. Harper & Brothers, New York 1843, *Acetebullum* and *Vitrum*.
- 9) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leen_Ritmeyer; accessed on November 5, 2010
- 10) <http://bibleillustration.blogspot.com/2008/07/passover-cup.html>; accessed on November 5, 2010

This article is copyright 2010 by Leif Jensen. This article may be quoted, in part or in whole, without permission.

You may contact the author through: <http://www.christianfallacies.com/contact.php>