


# GEMSTONE

## *The Holy Grail in*



### What is the Holy Grail?

For many, the answer is straightforward: the chalice from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper with the words, “This is the cup of my blood.”

But that is just one of a number of ideas of the Grail, a word, according to author and scholar G. Ronald Murphy, SJ, that is etymologically confusing. The earliest known European tradition, started in the late twelfth century by Chrétien de Troyes, a writer of Arthurian romances and legends, was that the Holy Grail was a group of dishes, one of which contained a consecrated host. It was Robert de Boron, an early thirteenth-century writer of Arthurian romances, who identified the Grail as the Last Supper cup. According to him, the cup also caught Jesus’ blood during the crucifixion and was taken by Joseph of Arimathea to Britain.

For others, the Grail was Jesus’ burial cloth, which held his blood. *The Da Vinci Code* hangs on a tradition that *san-graal*, the Holy Grail, was confused with *sang-réal*, royal blood, giving rise to the legend that the Merovingian dynasty was founded by Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Murphy draws attention to another

Grail legend, one that is found in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, an epic poem, a courtly romance written in German around 1210. The Grail, according to Wolfram, was neither plate nor cup nor cloth but stone—a stone inset into an altar—symbolic of the stone that was Jesus’ tomb.

The author’s research led him to the cathedral museum in Bamberg, Germany, to view, at long last, a green stone inset into a portable altar of a type commonly used during pilgrimages and Crusades. This particular altar, according to Murphy, was Wolfram’s inspiration for the idea of the Grail in *Parzival*, which suggested that the Crusades were unnecessary, unseeing, fratricidal journeys. The Crusaders’ quest was to reach and see the stone tomb of their Lord’s Resurrection, the Holy Sepulcher, the Grail; but this sacred stone could be found, without the sword, in every altar on which the Eucharist was celebrated: the altar stone.

The following excerpt from Murphy’s *Gemstone of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram’s Parzival* picks up at the point when he first sees the altar in the museum.

**I**T WAS SO ORDINARY, and so extraordinary. It was against a side wall, and yet I thought if people knew what this small object might be, it would be in the center of the room.

I made myself take a quick glance at the top of the object to see the stone. It was green. I tried to take it all in, all of it.

Let me give it a name: the Bamberg Paradise Altar. It has the small size and proportions of an average medieval portable altar: it is about 10 inches long, 6 inches wide, and about 6 inches high. It is dated to the second half of the twelfth century, and thus was in use at the time Wolfram was composing his *Parzival* (c. 1202–1210). It is very hard to give a definitive place of origin for the altar, but it seems to have been associated for some time with Bamberg. Of the four enameled plates that once formed the top surface, two have been preserved, and two are lost.

Let me attempt to describe the Paradise Altar and to explain why I think it is the stone that Wolfram was thinking of, or inspired by, when he came to his realization about the true nature of the Grail. Viewed from above, the center of the upper table of the little altar is the altar stone. It is, of course, as one would expect after reading Wolfram, green. This would not have been surprising in Wolfram’s day, since green serpentine, which is just translucent, was a commonly preferred material for altar stones. The stone covers a rectangular recess cut into the oaken body of the altar. This recess, the sepulchrum, is now empty. As this was a portable altar, the recess would have once held three pieces of the sacramental Body of Christ, three

# OF PARADISE

## *Wolfram's Parzival*

grains of incense (in honor of the spices brought by the women and Joseph of Arimathea), and the relics of saints, all wrapped in silk and sealed by the stone.

To the left of the green stone is Abel rushing forward toward the altar stone with a lamb in his hands, ready to make it his offering (see next page). To the right is King Melchisedech hastening toward it with his offering of bread and wine as he reaches out to place them on the altar. This means that on the missing plaque below the altar stone would have been Abraham with the knife ready to offer his son Isaac on the altar, with the ram caught in the thicket nearby. It is not uncommon to find these three figures on portable altars, since all three prefigure Christ's

Crucifixion in patristic thought, and all three are mentioned by the priest at Mass: "Look with favor on these offerings and accept them as You once accepted the gifts of your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the bread and wine offered to You by your priest Melchisedech." They therefore point directly to the Mass as celebrated on this stone and to the consecratory Body of Christ beneath it.

The four evangelists whose symbols are in the four corners of the tabletop point to the story of Christ recorded in the Gospels.

To my happiness and amazement, on the left of Abel on the edge of the altar was a man pouring water. It was the personification of one of the rivers of Paradise, drawn as a man with an

*by G. Ronald Murphy, SJ*



The author's search for Wolfram von Eschenbach's inspiration for his idea of the Holy Grail led him to this portable altar in the cathedral museum in Bamberg, Germany. The flat green stone inset in the top covers a sepulcher, a hollow for consecrated hosts and saints' relics.

## It is pretty clear that the religious poet who designed this altar felt that the Mass

The green stone covers the sepulcher in the middle of the top of the altar. The evangelists are in the corners; to the left and right of the stone Abel and Melchisedech bring sacrifices. The four trees of Paradise and two of its four rivers (the figures with the jugs) are represented; plaques missing above and below the stone most likely showed Abraham and Isaac and the other two rivers of Paradise.

oriental cap and, in the classical manner, pouring a stream of water out of a jar onto the earth. In the same way, to the right of Melchisedech, a male figure also wearing a Persian cap in the style of antiquity pours water out of an amphora that runs in a stream behind him, reaching to the edge of the altar. Both personifications of the rivers are looking back to the green altar stone that covers the sepulchrum at the center of the altar table, their source, making the sepulcher of Christ's passion and resurrection an analogue to the primal river rising in the middle of the Garden of Paradise. As their heads tilt in reverence toward their stone source, the rivers' urns are filled with water, just as the baptismal font filled miraculously with water at the moment when it was tilted toward the Grail for Feirefiz's baptism in *Parzival*. From the middle of Paradise miraculously and invisibly comes the water that divides into the headwaters of the four rivers, the Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates, that irrigate the whole world. The personifications of the other two rivers we can assume were on the top and bottom missing panels. Augustine would

have been happy to see the design so indebted to his reading of Genesis.

At each of the four corners of the altar stone (the serpentine stone measures  $3\frac{3}{4}$  inches by  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches) stands one of the four trees of the Garden of Paradise: "And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:9). It is pretty clear that the religious poet who designed this altar felt that the Mass was the mystical restoration of humankind to the once lost Garden of Paradise. This is so very close to Wolfram's constant description of the Grail as being the root and branch of paradisaical happiness that it supports seeing the Grail ceremony as related to the restoration of the original bliss.

An inscription around the outer edge of the altar, restored, reads: "[What you see here is] witness to the heavenly [banquet] hall, the wide-open gate of heaven, for He is setting up places in heaven [lit.: "in the air"] for His holy ones" (*aule celi testis, pervia porta celestis, sanctis enim eius componit*



## was the mystical restoration of humankind to the once lost Garden of Paradise.

*in ethere sedes*). The significant expression *pervia porta celestis*, “the wide-open door of heaven,” finds its own perfect parallel in Wolfram’s great door that opens to permit the passage of Overflowing Happiness carrying the Grail as it makes the transition from one realm of time to another, from the gray aged man of the past to the present translucent table of Anfortas, and in the future to Parzival. Thus the Grail uninterruptedly provides the banquet of bliss for all throughout the passage of time, *per omnia saecula saeculorum*. The presence of the Gate of Heaven in the inscription and the inscription’s identification of the gate with the altar stone and the mention of the hall and the preparing of seats for those who die give support to the idea that Wolfram knew this altar and imagined it lifted in benediction over the body of his Red Knight.

There is also an inner inscription that directly borders on the stone itself:

*Ara crucis Christi  
Mense comunicat isti,  
Hac et enim rite  
Sacratur victima vitae*

“The altar of Christ’s cross is one with this table, and this is therefore the proper place for the sacrifice of the victim who secures life.”

This is the wood and the stone that guarantee the passage from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, death to life. The portable altar, and perhaps this very portable altar, is Wolfram’s special stone of Resurrection, the phoenix stone in Wolfram’s language, that was imagined by him as being lifted in blessing over the body of Ither, the fallen Red Knight. I had found my altar stone with the rivers of Paradise. Now I looked at the side of the Paradise Altar, and what to my eyes should appear but a beautifully enameled winding blue stream of water making its way along the edge around the periphery of the altar table. The four rivers of this stone’s Paradise were overflowing, encircling the whole world, entwining themselves around the golden line marking the *limes*, the final border, the edge of the earth. The water from the urn on the right is flowing all the way to the edge of the tabletop and overflows onto the side. Wherever the Paradise river flows all along the edge, the artist has placed vegetation on both sides of the water. This harks back not only to the Paradise of Eden but to the heavenly Paradise as well:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb

down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations . . . They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. (Rev. 22:1–5, NIV)

This water-centered presentation is unique among surviving portable altars. Most artists simply marked the edges of the altar table with abstract or geometric designs, with no attempt made to do more than provide decorative color. This altar has a clearly depicted overflow of the streams of Paradise encircling the world. Now I felt sure that this stone played a role in Wolfram’s poetry of the Grail of sacramental and emotional overflow.

As I looked closer, I saw another most unusual design, not in enamel, but in brass relief on the beveled edges that connect the altar table and the base table to the central altar: moving along in a regular pattern, canted at a slight angle away from being perpendicular to the side of the altar, row after row of waves. The overflowing water seems even to have contributed to all the oceans and water of the earth, so that even the twelve apostles who surround the central altar have to have come through the water and are now in the midst of it—all flowing from under the central stone. This stands in such concord with the filling of the font in book 16 of *Parzival* that I believe it further confirms the identification of the Bamberg Paradise Altar as the inspiration for the scene in which the miraculous water that comes into the ruby baptismal font for Feirefiz’s baptism comes from the Grail stone. It also stands parallel to the priest’s sermon on the power of water to give fructification and sight. Only after baptism does Feirefiz look back and see the stone from which the waters of Paradise flow to the font of Baptism.

This is Wolfram’s Grail. 

Fr. G. Ronald Murphy, SJ, is professor of German at Georgetown University. He wrote “A Merry Message,” about a 9th century monk’s retelling of the Gospel story for Saxons, for *Company*.

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