

Character Research for *Unholy Grail*

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October 4, 2010

If you steal from one author, it's plagiarism. If you steal from two, it's research.
~ John Burke

In J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy masterpiece *The Silmarillion*, the author introduces the character of Feanor. He is essentially the protagonist, and even though he dies near the beginning of the story, virtually everything that comes afterward is related to his actions, both good and evil. Feanor spent a long time studying his craft of mining and gemology, and it was said that when he finally made the holy jewels—the silmarils that are the heart of the story—that they were “crystals which contained divine light,” and in making them “he summoned all of his skill and all of his lore.”

Unholy Grail can in no way be compared to the silmarils in value, nor do I think myself fit to be compared with a genius like Tolkien. But there are certain similarities: the premise of this book was a divine inspiration, it was written over a period of years, and all of the underlying themes have developed over a lifetime of study and experience.

Niccolo Machiavelli, an author of the fifteenth century, said of his writing,

At nightfall I return home and enter my study. There on the threshold, I remove my dirty, mud-spattered clothes, slip into my courtly robes, and thus fittingly attired, I enter the ancient court of bygone men...I am not ashamed to speak with them and to inquire into the reasons for their actions, and they answer me in kindly fashion. I become entirely one of them.

I personally fall short of Machiavelli as well, as I am often dressed rather poorly while sitting up late at night, typing at my computer, with a space heater to keep my feet warm in the winter. But I like to think that I have at least preserved the spirit of Machiavelli's efforts.

There is another and more important comparison between Tolkien's works and this one—both attempt to span virtually the entire history of the worlds in which they are set. In the case of the former, it is the imaginary world of Valinor, Middle Earth, and Westeros, whereas this story is set in the real world, and is involved with events covering approximately 5,000 years of history, from around 3000 BC until the near future. As in the case of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, this novel is an attempt to unify history, expose the footprints of God and Satan, and provide inklings to where they will ultimately lead.

As with most historical novels, the framework for Book One of *Unholy Grail* is largely based on history as we currently know it. Although some of the characters are fictitious and the dialogue has been almost entirely constructed, it was my conscious attempt to meld the story fully into known history—into history as it may well have

happened if all of the facts were known, rather than attempting to create an alternative reality. Any historical errors in the flow of the story are unintentional.

Some of the events in Christ's ministry with his disciples, however, have been rearranged and some of Christ's words were truncated and/or expanded to provide more drama and clarity, and for the sake of re-telling the story from Judas' perspective.

Following are notes on various characters in this story:

Judas Iscariot

Nothing is known of Judas Iscariot's history or ethnicity except that his father was named Simon. Even the circumstances of his becoming a disciple are unknown. Therefore, his lineage and history prior to joining the disciples was entirely constructed, and his actions as a disciple/apostle were drawn from the few stories about him told in the Gospels (Matthew 10:4, 26:6-25, 26:47-49, 27:3-10; Mark 3:13-19, 14:3-46; Luke 6:12-16, 22:1-53; John 6:66-71, 12:1-8, 13:1-30, 18:1-9).

Judas' appellation "Iscariot" most likely means "man of Kerioth." Kerioth was a small town ten miles south of Hebron, identified today with the ruins of el-Kureitein. It was listed as one of the towns in the territory of Judah (Joshua 15:25), and also possibly referred to in other places (Jeremiah 48:24 & 41, and Amos 2:2) as one of the towns of Moab. There are no natural boundaries or fixed borders in southern Judah, so the Jewish population, the descendents of Isaac and Jacob, intermingled with the Edomites (Idumeans) and the Moabites, the descendents of Ishmael and Esau. Judas was therefore most likely Judean or Idumean.

Some have speculated that the "Iscariot" appellation was related to the word "sicaroth" (dagger). They further speculate that Judas was member of the Zealots and possibly one of the "sicarii" (dagger-men), who were a group of Jewish assassins. However, John 6:71 and 13:26 speaks of "Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot", so if the name "Iscariot" had any Zealot connotations, then his father would have to have been involved as well, making the "sicarii" speculation more dubious.

A few have suggested that Judas was a leader of the Zealots, and a friend of Jesus. He was supposedly trying to protect Jesus, but then turned on his Master when the latter refused to take up the sword against the Romans.

But seeing Judas as Jesus' "friend" contradicts other things that we know about Judas, who is referred to by Jesus in very negative terms:

1. "But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, who was intending to betray him, said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?' Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it." (John 12:4-6)
2. "The one who has eaten my bread has lifted up his heel against me." (John 13:18)
3. "I guarded them and not one of them perished except the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled." (John 17:12)
4. "For the Son of Man will go just as it is written of him, but woe to that man by who the Son of Man is betrayed! It would better for him if he had never been born!" (Matthew 26:24 and Mark 14:21)

Unlike Judas, most, if not all, of the other disciples were from the Galilee region. Galileans were considered to be country bumpkins by the urbane and sophisticated Jews of Jerusalem, and ethnicity may have been a source of tension between Judas and some or all of the other disciples. The Gospels indicate that there was conflict between various disciples on a number of occasions.

The fact that he is not called “Judas, son of Simon” may have been due to the fact that there was more than one Judas who had a father named Simon, and he was called “Iscariot” to distinguish him from other Judases. But instead, I have taken it as an indication that he and his father had a troubled relationship, and that he did not wish to be referred to by his father’s name.

We do not know Judas’ age or occupation prior to joining the disciples, although from the Gospels we know: 1) that he was the treasurer of the group; and 2) he was an embezzler. Therefore a background as a tax collector seems reasonable, as tax collectors at that time were typically greedy and uncaring. Judas may furthermore have been an associate of Matthew Levi, as in this novel, and this provides a rationale for his being in the Galilee region and thus for his selection and inclusion as one of Christ’s disciples.

In Judas’ outburst during Mary’s anointing of Jesus, he knew the identity and the value of spikenard—how many men can identify the type and price of a perfume by its aroma? That fact could indicate that Judas had worked for a perfumer for some period of time. Most of Jerusalem’s perfumeries were located along southern edge of the city, and a person entering through the southern water gate, where Judas would most likely have entered Jerusalem, would have smelled and eventually seen them.

The Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*, along with other Gnostic writings from Nag Hammadi and elsewhere, have recently been touted as providing “new insight” into various biblical characters. In this story, Judas is a hero and the favorite disciple of Christ, and his betrayal of Christ to the Sanhedrin was supposedly done at Jesus’ direct request. Therefore, Judas was said to be helping Jesus, essentially assisting him to commit suicide. But as with the other Gnostic writings, this “gospel” was written many decades after the events it claims to represent. The content is totally at odds with the rest of the New Testament, and is simply one more attempt to promote the Gnostic notion that the body is evil and the spirit is good. Judas was thus supposedly helping Christ get rid of his “evil” body. Despite the assertions made in the *Gospel of Judas*, it is obvious from the above references that Jesus and Judas were not close friends, and most likely they never were.

Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons mentions the *Gospel of Judas* in his work *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies) written around AD 180. He indicated that this document was written by a Gnostic sect known as the Cainites, who worshipped Cain as a hero (the son of Adam who killed his brother Abel).

Why was the *Gospel of Judas* written, and what caused the surge in Gnosticism’s appeal during the second century AD? It was a reaction on the part of some to the despair and the darkness of those times. Judaism had held the upper hand over Christianity from the standpoint of politics and money, and had persecuted the church since a few years after the death and resurrection of Christ. The Jews also continued their revolt against Roman power, which led to the Roman general Titus invading Jerusalem in AD 70, and destroying the Jewish temple so thoroughly that there was “not one stone left on top of

another.” The temple mount that still exists today, on top of which the Dome of the Rock was later constructed, is all that survived.

Further unrest followed, culminating in the Bar Kokba rebellion of AD 132-135. The Jewish leadership had never accepted Jesus as their Messiah because the latter had not been a military ruler, and had refused to be co-opted as a political figure. Seeking for another Messiah, the Jews came to regard their military commander, Simon Bar Kokba, whose name means “son of a star,” as their “chosen one.” This caused a deep schism between traditional Jews and Jewish Christians. Under Bar Kokba’s leadership the Jews surprised the Roman garrisons and wiped them out, and for two years a Jewish kingdom was reestablished in Israel.

But the Roman emperor Hadrian determined to annihilate Jewish resistance to Roman rule once and for all. He had originally been sympathetic to the Jews, and therefore felt personally betrayed. Therefore he crushed this revolt with great ferocity – his armies destroyed every fortification and razed almost every town in the land. Over a half-million Jews were slaughtered. Hadrian then burned a copy of the Torah on the temple mount, banished Jews from Jerusalem, forcibly resettled Jewish survivors in other lands, and renamed the land “Palestine” in place of “Judea” in order to take it off the map and wipe out the existence of the Jews as a people. The identity of the country as Palestine thus dates from Hadrian. The word “Palestine” derives from “Philistine,” the sometimes enemies of the ancient Jews, and who lived on the coastland of Israel in what is now the Gaza Strip. Ironically, they had ceased to exist as a people since they were conquered by the Babylonians in 604 BC and the survivors forcibly resettled in other areas of Mesopotamia.

In the bitter aftermath of the Bar Kokba catastrophe, betrayed by their hopes for a Messianic military deliverance, many turned away, sought other religions, and created a number of antinomian sects. The Gnostic Cainites were an example of this—former Jews who came together after the Bar Kokba revolt, and who in embittered cynicism rejected all prior doctrine. The Cainites taught that Jehovah of the Old Testament was evil, and they venerated Cain, the son of Adam and the first murderer in history. The *Gospel of Judas* celebrating the subversive actions of Judas Iscariot, was a Cainite writing. There is only one known surviving copy of the *Gospel of Judas*, and the text has not yet been fully translated and released.

For centuries Bible scholars have been troubled by Judas’ motivation—why did he betray Christ? The thirty pieces of silver—a relatively modest amount of money¹—seems to be insufficient to explain his actions. Christ’s statement about Judas is chilling: “it would be better for that man if he had never been born.” What could a man do that would merit such a denunciation?

There is no indication in the Bible that Judas had an actual relationship with either Mary Magdalene or Mary of Bethany, except for the intriguing fact that Judas is the one who objected to Mary’s anointing of Jesus. The Gospel of John indicates that the reason for Judas’ objection was the fact that he was a thief and greedy for money. But jealousy and sexual lust are much more powerful emotions than simple greed. If lust for Mary was

¹ The thirty pieces of silver were worth approximately twenty to thirty thousand dollars in today’s money; enough to buy a field located outside a city.

also involved, then Judas' angry comments following the anointing, and the deal that he immediately struck with the Sanhedrin for the betrayal of Christ, make much more sense.

Continually frustrated by Jesus' refusal to become king and provide him with the wealth and success he craved, Judas then sees Mary throwing herself on Jesus and kissing the Master's feet. In Judas' mind, Jesus has stolen his future, kept him poor, and now the Rabbi was taking his woman; Mary was throwing herself on Jesus instead of on him. That was the last straw and Judas could no longer bear his humiliation. He sought money from the Sanhedrin as a means of compensating himself for the damages that Jesus has supposedly caused, and as a way of enticing Mary to elope with him.

It is significant that two of the Gospel accounts mention Judas going to Sanhedrin, directly after witnessing and objecting to Mary's service (Matthew 26:14, and Mark 14:10). In other words, Mary's actions seemingly precipitated Judas' desire to betray Christ; the money he would earn from this deed was almost a secondary concern.

These actions reveal the weaseliness of Judas' character. Rather than taking direct action against Jesus, he sucks up to the Sanhedrin and identifies Jesus with a kiss so that he can get paid for the betrayal. Hence my portrayal of Judas as the ultimate loser—"to him who has, more shall be given, but to him who has not, even the little that he has will be taken away."

The Bible states two methods for Judas' death, 1) by hanging; and 2) by falling down and having his "bowels burst open." This is resolved in the story when he hangs himself, but the rope breaks, he falls down a hill, and is impaled and cut open on sharp rocks.

Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene's identity has been debated for a long time. There are several Marys in the Gospel narratives as well as other unnamed women who could all possibly be identified as the same person:

1. Mary Magdalene (Matthew 27:57-61, 28:1-8; Mark 15:42-47, 16:1-13; Luke 8:1-3, 24:1-12; and John 19:16-25, 20:1-18).
2. Mary of Bethany, who anointed Jesus' feet (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; and John 12:3-8).
3. The unnamed woman who anointed Jesus' feet during his ministry in Galilee (Luke 7:37-50).
4. The unnamed woman who was taken in adultery and forgiven by Jesus (John 8:3-11).

Many contemporary Bible scholars treat these as four different women, but for the purpose of this novel, Mary Magdalene is 1, 2, and 3 above. In other words, in this story Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the woman who anointed Jesus in Luke's account are all the same person. This was also the traditional view of the church as first stated by Pope Gregory the Great, circa AD 600. The reason that these association can be made are as follows:

1. The anointing of Jesus mentioned in three of the Gospels that took place a week before the crucifixion, was performed in Bethany by “Mary of Bethany,” who was the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and who had a special love for Jesus. But the Mary at the crucifixion, the Mary who came to anoint Jesus’ body with spices, the Mary who was the first woman at the tomb, and the Mary who was the first to see the resurrected Jesus were all identified as “Mary Magdalene,” with no indication of any involvement by a “Mary of Bethany” in any of those incidents. The latter’s home was Bethany which is two miles from Jerusalem, so given her proximity and the depth of her love and concern, it is likely that she would have been involved. Therefore, it would make sense that “Mary of Bethany” and “Mary Magdalene” were one and the same person.
2. There were two anointings of Jesus by a woman. The first one was described only in the Gospel of Luke (7:36-50), although it was possibly also alluded to in the Gospel of John (11:2), and it was performed by an unnamed woman. The event took place during one of Jesus’ trips in the Galilee region while he was visiting the home of Simon the Pharisee. Just after this first anointing, Luke mentions that Mary Magdalene as the first of the female followers of Christ, and given the additional evidence from John’s Gospel, in the next point below, Mary Magdalene could well have been the woman who also performed the Luke anointing in Galilee.

The second anointing of Jesus by a woman is mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew (26:6-16), Mark (14:3-10), and John (12:1-8). In the Matthew and Mark accounts the woman is not named, but John indicates that the anointing was performed by Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. It took place in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper just before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.

Some have suggested there was only one anointing; that Luke got the location and/or the details of his story wrong; that “Simon the Pharisee” was the same person as “Simon the leper”; and that therefore all four of the Gospels were describing exactly the same event. This is unlikely, however, for a number of reasons:

- a) The Luke account clearly takes place during Jesus’ ministry in Galilee.
- b) In those times a leper would never have been a Jewish religious leader as was Simon the Pharisee.
- c) In Luke’s account, Jesus has an extensive dialogue with Simon the Pharisee, and rebukes him for his pride and arrogance, and Luke is the only Gospel author to record such a conversation. It is hard to conceive of a leper also being an arrogant religious leader.
- d) The other Gospels all indicate that Judas sought out the Sanhedrin to make his deal to betray Christ immediately following this event, but not so in Luke, who states that after this event Jesus began traveling from one city to the next along with his disciples, indicating that this anointing took place near the beginning of his public ministry.
- e) Luke is the Gospel writer with the most background as a historian, and who generally took the most care with the details that he mentions.
- f) Luke may have avoided mentioning the woman’s name so as not to stigmatize her, as Simon the Pharisee was apparently eager to do.

3. In John 11:1-2, during the time when Lazarus was sick and dying, “Mary, the sister of Lazarus” is described as having previously poured perfume on Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair, as in the Luke account described above. Then in the next chapter (John 12:3) the anointing at Bethany is described, and Lazarus who is now identified as being raised from the dead was sitting at the table with Jesus. In other words, the author of John’s Gospel is seemingly describing two different anointings, both of which were performed by Mary of Bethany. If John is indeed referring to a previous anointing, and Mary Magdalene had performed it, then she and Mary of Bethany must be the same person.
4. The unnamed woman who anointed Jesus in Galilee used ‘an alabaster vial of perfume,’ Luke 7:37. The perfume used by Mary in the Bethany anointing is described as follows: ‘an alabaster vial of very costly perfume,’ Matthew 26:7; ‘an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard,’ Mark 14:3; ‘a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard,’ John 12:3. The same type of perfume container—an alabaster vial—is thus described as being used for both anointings. Furthermore, what the woman actually did in both events is also described in similar terms: “standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume,” Luke 7:38. “Mary anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair,” John 12:3. It is possible that two different women used the same type of perfume container and anointed Jesus in the same way, but it seems more likely that it was the same woman in both cases.
5. The depictions of Mary in early Christian art show only one person who was both the sister of Lazarus and Martha, the woman who anointed Jesus, and the woman who was at the tomb and to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection.
6. Later tradition has Mary Magdalene traveling by ship along with her brother Lazarus to France. As discussed below, this tradition is very popular.
7. There is some indication that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute or at least a “loose woman” (i.e., an adulterer/divorcée), but it is not conclusive. During the Galilee anointing, the woman who anoints Jesus feet is described by Simon the Pharisee as being a “sinner,” which would seem to connote some type of sexual sin. Jesus also indicates that “her sins are many,” but nevertheless, he ennobles her actions and ascribes them to the depth of her love and devotion. Assuming that this woman was Mary Magdalene, the designation of her as a sinner may therefore be due to the fact that she had demons cast out of her (i.e., her sin was not necessarily related to sex). It may also have been due to the fact that she unbound her hair to wipe Jesus’ feet, as a woman with unbound hair was considered immodest, and unfortunately in the thinking of that day, “loose.” It does seem reasonable that a woman possessed by demons would have also been involved in some type of deviant sexual practices, and Mary Magdalene did have seven demons cast out of her—Mark 16:9, Luke 8:2. But there is not sufficient evidence to even seriously suggest that Mary Magdalene was the adulterous woman forgiven by Jesus in John 8:3-11.²

² As one researcher of this issue said, “A great many minor characters appear briefly in the Gospel narratives, ‘unheralded and unpursued.’ There is a natural tendency for the imagination to try to tidy things up by identifying them, so that, for example, the centurion at the crucifixion who said, ‘Truly this was the

8. An objection has been raised over the fact that usually a person is fully identified by the Gospel writers. In other words, they would not have simply used the name “Mary” if the person they were describing was actually “Mary Magdalene.” The writers were sensitive, however, to identifying living people at the time that they were writing. Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene, and the Gospel writers may not have wanted to slur her or damage her reputation, especially because her family was apparently fairly wealthy and well known in the area of Bethany, and because of her connection to Lazarus. Another example of this is the references to Matthew (the disciple and author of the first Gospel), in the three other Gospels. Because of his disreputable occupation as a tax collector, the other writers, including Mark, Luke, and John, refer to him as “Levi” rather than “Matthew.”
9. An objection may be raised relating to Mary’s residence and place of birth: if the Magdalene appellation meant that she was from the town of Magdala, then she could not have also been from Bethany. This objection is resolved in the novel by the fact that the Magdalene appellation does not designate her place of birth. She is from Bethany, but her deliverance takes place in Magdala, and so she uses the “Magdalene” appellation because of the significance of that event in her life, as well as the fact that she lived in Magdala for an extended period.

We do not know the actual significance of the appellation “Magdalene,” but traditionally it was assumed that she was originally from or had a significant association with Magdala, a town on the western coast of the Sea of Galilee. Even assuming that was the case, there are a number of possible explanations of the source of this name which do not conflict with the Bethany location: a) her parents may have originally been from Magdala; b) she could have grown up in Magdala and later moved to Bethany; c) she or her parents may have owned property in Magdala; d) she could have been married and lived in Magdala with a husband (perhaps she was divorced, and perhaps her ex-husband had something to do with her being afflicted with evil spirits).

The word “migdol” means “tower,” and some have speculated that either she or her supposed husband owned property or buildings from which that appellation was taken. The thirteenth century *Lengenda Aurea* indicated that the Magdalene name came from the large home (castle) in Bethany or Jerusalem in which she lived with Lazarus and Martha. Another possibility is that “Magdalene” was a Talmudic expression which meant “curling the hair,” and which would have denoted a loose woman.

There is no indication in the Gospels that Mary was a witch or a medium, but they do state that Jesus cast seven demons out of her, so her association in the novel with mediums and fortune telling seems very reasonable. The Gospels speak of this action in literal rather than figurative terms, and therefore it should not be interpreted as the “seven deadly sins” or other allegorical meaning, as some have alleged.

The later activities of Mary Magdalene are known only through traditions. In one of these she travels to Ephesus with Mary the mother of Jesus and dies there. But by far the most popular tradition is her voyage to Marseille in France. This is supported by the many churches and shrines in Provence and the Languedoc dedicated to her, and at first

Son of God,’ is said to be the same centurion whose servant was healed at Capernaum. But real life is not always tidy.”

glance, this seems to be quite convincing. She is the patron saint of Marseille, and her supposed remains are kept at the Basilica of St. Maximin in the Baume Mountains near the coast and thirty-five miles from Marseille. Her coffin is in the crypt of the church, as well as her skull, which is displayed in a reliquary. The skull has been carbon dated to her general time period, and brochures in the Basilica tell the story of Mary Magdalene's voyage to Gaul as historical fact. Every year on July 22, her feast day, there is a procession in her honor, in which the reliquary is paraded through the town. In the mountains near St. Maximin is a site that is claimed to be Mary Magdalene's grotto, where she is said to have gone to pray.

Maximin was said to be one of the seventy disciples that Jesus sent out ahead of him (Luke 10:1-20), and was said to have sailed with Lazarus and Mary to Gaul. Some of the other members of this group that appear in the New Testament were said to be: Mark, Luke, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, Appolos, Aquila, Barnabas, Philip, Silas, Silvanus, Stephen, and many others.

There are a number of accounts from the middle ages and following of the presence of Mary Magdalene and Lazarus (named as brother and sister) in Marseilles. For example, Roger of Howden, who was more-or-less the official chronicler of the Third Crusade, wrote this account on his visit to Marseilles in 1190 along with the army of King Richard, the Lionheart:

Marseille is a city situated twenty miles from the mouth of the Rhône, and is subject to the King of Aragon. Here can be found the relics of St. Lazarus, the brother of St. Mary Magdalene and of Martha. After Jesus raised him from the dead he became Bishop of Marseilles.³

As with Joseph of Arimathea in Britain, ascribing the start of Christianity in France to the actions of Mary and/or Lazarus has a powerful romantic and historic cachet that many have found irresistible. In the last twenty years or so, the notion that Mary Magdalene was a significant preacher and evangelist, and therefore the first female in that role, has become a feminist totem. Mary Magdalene is "exhibit A" for those who believe that the church has misogynistically suppressed women. This idea, however, fails to rise above wishful feminist thinking, as there is no evidence whatsoever that she had any such role.

Regardless of these speculations, asserting that Mary Magdalene and/or Lazarus lived and ministered in France is tenuous. There are no early tales of the activities of either Lazarus or Mary in Gaul as there were for other evangelists, such as St. Patrick in Ireland (AD 460—500). If individuals as significant to the history of Christianity as Lazarus and Mary Magdalene had actually lived in Gaul for many years, and were instrumental in the evangelization of the Celts and the Franks, there certainly would have been many stories about them from that time. The complete lack of early evidence does not definitively disprove the tale, but places it in the realm of legend rather than fact.

The documented history is much more prosaic. A ninth-century French monk who journeyed to Palestine is said to have brought back the supposed remains of Mary Magdalene when he returned to France. These were kept initially in the town of Vézelay near Paris, and later they were moved to St. Maximin near Marseille. The literary

³ Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, edited by William Stubbs, 1868-71

development of Mary Magdalene began soon after that and was first summarized in a tenth-century (circa AD 930) sermon attributed to Odo of Cluny. This sermon which was subsequently used as a source of the liturgy for Mary Magdalene's feast day of July 22, relates her life up to the time of Christ's Ascension. According to Victor Saxer⁴, one of the pioneering Mary Magdalene researchers, the tradition of her life afterward, especially her years in France, came from five sources:

1. The *vita eremitica*, telling of her years of solitude in the mountain grotto, was probably borrowed from the Greek legend of a reformed prostitute, Mary of Egypt.
2. The *vita apostolica*, recounting Mary Magdalene's apostolic work in Provence, dates from around the same time in the tenth century as Odo's sermon.
3. A portion was added in the eleventh century to explain how her body had been rediscovered in Provence some 200 years earlier and brought north to the abbey of Vézelay.
4. The story of the prince of Marseilles, which became a favorite part of the common legends of Mary Magdalene, was added even later—probably in the twelfth century.
5. In addition to these major components, the Provençal legend in its fully developed form often includes two other kinds of relatively late additions: brief accounts of Lazarus, Martha, and other saints who supposedly accompanied Mary to Marseilles and participated in the evangelization of France from sources such as the immensely popular *Lengenda Aurea*; and stories about her miraculous intercessions for believers who have prayed to her or honored her memory in other ways.

The Cluniac abbey of Vézelay, which had gained papal recognition in 1058 for its claim to possess the Magdalene remains, grew into one of the greatest pilgrimage centers in Europe—thanks to the prestige of its patron saint, the support of the French monarchy, and its ideal location on a main route used by pilgrims from Germany to Santiago de Compostella in Spain. The original location of Mary's activities, however, was in Provence, at the Baume grotto where she supposedly lived a monastic existence for thirty years, as well as St. Madeleine's Basilica in the town of St. Maximin, which was specifically mentioned in some versions of the legend as her original burial place. The status of the Provençal shrines improved considerably after 1279, when the monks of St. Maximin's and the Angevin prince Charles of Salerno miraculously discovered that her body was still there after all, hidden inside an ancient sarcophagus in the crypt of the church. Thus Charles and his allies attempted to reclaim the saint's patronage and protection for the county of Provence and the house of Anjou. The cult of Mary Magdalene in England came from the same general period, especially following the Norman Conquest in 1066. There were only a few churches dedicated to her through the tenth-century, but by the fifteenth-century there were around 200, as well as an Oxford

⁴ Victor Saxer, *Le Culte de Marie Madeleine en Occident*. Paris: Clavreuil, 1959

college named for her.⁵ C.S. Lewis, the famous atheist-turned-Christian author, taught at this school, which is known as Magdalene College.

Why did Mary Magdalene become such a popular figure? There are a number of reasons:

1. The tradition that she and Lazarus personally had brought Christianity to Gaul in the first century had such deep appeal that it remained stubbornly lodged in popular belief.
2. Her life was multi-faceted and therefore appealed to many different groups.
3. She was the prototypical sinner who repented and found mercy, especially for women.
4. She became the patron saint of hospitals and other organizations of mercy because of her anointing of Christ and her care for his body.
5. Her life of contemplation as evidenced by sitting at Jesus feet provided a model for nuns and monks.
6. Her life as a supposed prostitute and her attempt to love and serve Jesus with unbound hair, in a way that hinted of scandal, titillated and appealed to many.

It has been speculated that Mary Magdalene had some form of relationship with Jesus, and thus became deeply involved in the future of the church. But there is no evidence whatsoever that she was given any authority in the church—this is a recent fabrication. The only support for her alleged intimate relationship with Jesus are weak and confusing hints in the Gnostic documents written many decades after her death. The so-called *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* was written in the second or third century, and describes Jesus making theological statements that are totally at odds with the New Testament.

The theology of Gnosticism, in which matter and the body are evil and only spiritual things are good, posits that God and Satan are equally powerful beings. From the perspective of the Bible, Gnosticism has a completely flawed understanding of the nature of God.

Even the Gnostic writings, however, never claim that Jesus and Mary were married, nor do they claim that there was any sexual relationship or that any children were born to them. What they allege at most is that Jesus kissed Mary, and that the other disciples were irritated that Jesus seemingly preferred Mary over them. This would have been a very strange reaction on their part if she had in fact been married to Jesus, or had been his formal consort or concubine.

In each Gnostic gospel, the central figure is always portrayed as Jesus' favorite follower. Thus, Thomas is the favorite disciple in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Judas is the favorite disciple in the *Gospel of Judas*, and Mary is the favorite disciple in the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. Furthermore, the Gnostic writings originated during the period of AD 150-350, and therefore represent speculations by writers who lived one to three hundred years after Jesus and the disciples died. In contrast, the Gospels and other New Testament books were written during the period of AD 50-90, when eyewitnesses to Jesus life and resurrection were still alive and available to provide first-hand testimony.

⁵ Sherry L. Reames, editor, *The Legend of Mary Magdalene, Penitent and Apostle*, www.lib.rochester.edu/Camelot/teams/11sr.htm

Regardless of the doubt hanging over the story of Lazarus and Mary in France, there is another possibility that could redeem the legend, and still associate the Merovingians with Mary's progeny. She and Lazarus could have made the voyage to France but perished soon after arriving. This could explain the lack of historical accounts of their ministry, and would also allow for Mary's child to intermarry with an influential family that eventually became the Merovingian dynasty of kings, which began in the late 300s.

Lazarus

There are several stories of the deeds of Lazarus after he was raised from the dead by Jesus. According to the *Lengenda Aurea*, Lazarus traveled to Cyprus where he became the first bishop, and lived there for thirty years. The church leaders of Cyprus later claimed the mantle of Lazarus and became self-governing in AD 413. Lazarus was said to have been buried in Cyprus at the site of the first church in Larnaka, which is still a place of pilgrimage today. His bones and other relics were supposedly removed to Constantinople in 898, and then taken to France after the sack of Constantinople during the fourth crusade in 1204. In 1972, however, ancient human remains were discovered in a marble sarcophagus under the alter of the Larnaka church, and these are thought by some to be the bones of Lazarus.

The most popular story of Lazarus, however, is his voyage with Mary Magdalene to France. He was said to have been the first bishop of Marseille and buried at Saint Lazaire, the Cathedral of Autun, which is dedicated to him. This is undoubtedly what Roger of Howden, chronicler of the Third Crusade, was referring to in the quote appearing above.

Despite the popular appeal of this tale, there is no documentary evidence for Lazarus in either Cyprus or France. Like the story of Mary Magdalene in Provence, the first evidence is from over nine hundred years later. Pope Benedict IX wrote a letter in 1040 in which Lazarus' relics are mentioned, but the first known document that clearly refers to an episcopacy of Lazarus in France was the *Otia Imperialia* written by Gervase of Tilbury in 1212.

In an ancient tomb an epitaph from the fifth century was recently discovered, indicating that a bishop named Lazarus was buried there. But in the opinion of archeologists, this man was Lazarus, Bishop of Aix, who was consecrated at Marseilles about 407. He was said to have left Marseille in 411, traveled to Palestine, and then returned to Marseille, where he later died.

As with Mary Magdalene, the lack of early evidence does not disprove these stories, but places them in the realm of legend rather than fact. However, as mentioned above, there is another possibility that could redeem the legend, and have Lazarus and Mary come to France. The two of them could have landed first on Cyprus and stayed for several years, becoming involved in planting churches there, as indicated above. The journey to France could have been made later, and both could have died during the voyage or soon afterward. This could explain the lack of historical accounts of their ministry in France, and would also allow for Mary's child to intermarry with an influential family that eventually became the Merovingian dynasty of kings.

Martha

Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, is interpreted in this novel as being somewhat jealous of her sister Mary. She is the “good daughter” who stays home while the “bad daughter” Mary goes off and supposedly has her fun. But Martha has a good heart and is eventually reconciled.

Martha’s briefly-mentioned romance and marriage are constructed, as nothing more is known about her. According to one tradition, she sails with Lazarus and Mary Magdalene to Gaul, where she supposedly helps Lazarus plant the church in France. But that scenario seems unconvincing for several reasons:

1. Unlike Lazarus, Martha was not a threat to the religious authorities.
2. Martha’s conflicts and differences of temperament with her sister make it less likely that they would go together.
3. It would make sense that someone in the family would stay to keep and maintain the extensive family property in Bethany (what has traditionally been thought to be their house can still be seen today).

Although we do not know who the parents of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were, there have been many theories advanced that connect people in various ways, for example:

1. Their parents were wealthy Jews, as in this story. The *Lengenda Aurea* names them as Cyrus and Eucharis who supposedly owned a castle (“migdol” or “magdalo”) near Jerusalem, and also held land in both Bethany and Jerusalem.
2. Their parents were wealthy Romans, perhaps even the “Theophilus” to whom Luke dedicated his Gospel as well as the Book of Acts.
3. That “Simon the Leper” who gave the dinner for Jesus at his home in Bethany (the dinner at which Martha was serving and where Mary anointed Jesus), was their brother (i.e., this was supposedly the home of the entire family).
4. Their parents owned property in Magdala of Galilee where Mary went, and perhaps this was the town in which she was married.
5. That the family was somehow related to Jesus and/or Joseph of Arimathea.

It seems that Jesus had a love for this family and indeed, for the entire region—Bethany, the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane, Mount Olivet where the ascension to heaven takes place, etc.—that goes beyond what is told in the Gospels. It seems reasonable that there were specific and perhaps long-standing friendships and/or familial connections that were not documented in the biblical accounts. Hence the addition of the fictional Eleazar and Naomi and their connection with Jesus’ parents in this novel.

Joseph of Arimathea

There are many stories about this unusual man, who was a wealthy iconoclast and willing to jeopardize his religious and business connections with the Jewish leadership in

Jerusalem because of his faith in Christ. Joseph was therefore relatively unknown but nevertheless a towering figure, and it is not surprising that many stories sprang up about him.

The Bible has little to say about Joseph, and indicates only five things: 1) he was from the town of Arimathea; 2) he was a wealthy Jew and a member of the Jewish leadership; 3) he asked Pontius Pilate for the body of Jesus after the crucifixion; 4) he owned the tomb that Jesus was placed in; and 5) that he buried Jesus with the help of Nicodemus, another Pharisee and fellow member of the Sanhedrin.

Joseph's story in the Bible ends there, but the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, probably written in the fourth century (i.e., it was not written by the actual Nicodemus), tells more tales of Joseph, and other traditions add details and embellishments. According to these sources, Joseph was supposedly the Virgin Mary's uncle, and perhaps was involved with Jesus during the "missing years," the time between Jesus' twelfth birthday and his public ministry begun at age thirty.

Joseph's occupation is not known, but it is implied in various apocryphal sources that he was involved in mining and metallurgy. The Cornwall area of Britain had long been known for its lead and tin mines, and if Joseph indeed was involved in metallurgy then he may have known something of Britain and perhaps visited the country. Also, he may have owned a fleet of vessels used to transport ore and metals.⁶

According to the King Arthur tales, when Joseph came to Britain he met with the British King Aviragus. After hearing and being moved by the story of Christ, the king gave Joseph twelve hides of land in Somerset (approximately 1,200 acres) to build a church and a monastery. Joseph supposedly built the first church in Britain at Glastonbury—a "mud and wattle church"—and it is said that he went on to become the first evangelist to Britain.⁷ The area around the church was called Glaston ("grassy") and later Glastonbury. The tales also state that there was an island known as "Avalon" or "Avalonia" in a swampy area of Glastonbury, that was eventually drained. This may have been the setting for the Isle of Avalon, a metaphor for heaven in the King Arthur stories.⁸

The Celts were dominant in Britain at that time and had overcome the Britons several centuries earlier. Legends state that Joseph's daughter Anna married a man who became king of Britain (Wales), possibly Bran Fendigaid. This presumed union led to a line of Welch Celtic Christian kings who ruled parts of Britain for the next several centuries until the Saxon invasions, and that Joseph of Arimathea was therefore an ancestor of King Arthur.⁹

The story of Joseph of Arimathea in Britain, however, rests on a tenuous historical and literary basis. It came from a marginal note made by an unknown monk around AD 530 while making a copy of the *Liber Pontificalis*, the papal chronicles. The note indicated that Pope Eleutherus (AD 170-185) had received a letter from the British King Lucius asking for a religious representative to be sent so that he could become a Christian. Later English writers seized on this as early evidence of missionary activity in Britain. The evidence was magnified and exploited by clerics of Glastonbury, who,

⁶ Frank C. Tribbe, *I, Joseph of Arimathea*, Blue Dolphin Publishing, 2000

⁷ *St. Joseph of Arimathea, Ancestor of Kings*, www.britannia.com/history/articles/josanc.html

⁸ E. Raymond Capt, *The Traditions of Glastonbury*, Artisan, 1987

⁹ *Joseph of Arimathea ~ Other Characters in Arthurian Legend; King Arthur & The Knights of the Round Table*, www.kingarthursknights.com/others/joseph.asp

lacking funds after the death of their patron King Henry II, and needing to make repairs to their cathedral following a fire in 1184, developed a marketing gimmick to increase pilgrim traffic and raise more revenue. In 1191 they announced the discovery of the graves of King Arthur, Guinevere, and Joseph of Arimathea. At the time of the alleged letter from the *Liber Pontificalis*, there was no king of Britain, because it was a Roman province. The “King Lucius” referred to in the marginal note was instead probably King Abgar VIII of Edessa (177–212), whose full name was Lucius Aelius Septimus Megas Abgarus VIII. He was likely the same King Abgar who was pictured centuries later in the Byzantine era holding the Shroud, and was said to have been healed by it. Also, the city of Edessa was sometimes referred to as a “citadel”; in Syriac the word used was *birtha*, and in Latin, *britium*. The tomb of St. Jude-Thaddeus in Edessa was thus said to be in *Britio Edessenorum*, the Citadel of Abgar, hence the confusion between Edessa and Britain.¹⁰

As with Mary and Lazarus, the lack of documentary evidence concerning Joseph of Arimathea in Britain does not mean that the tale is false, but it requires that the story be placed in the realm of legend. As in the case of other legends, the actual history has become commingled with lore, and it is now impossible to separate truth from fiction.

Nimrod and Semiramis

The story of Nimrod and Semiramis in *Unholy Grail* was a dramatization of tales that are part-history, part-legend. Many strange stories surrounded this ancient queen of Babylon—that she was a daughter of the fish goddess; that she was raised by doves; that she went about armed like an Amazon; that she created the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; and so on. Some historians therefore claim that Semiramis was a legendary queen of the ancient Assyrians or Babylonians and therefore not a real figure of history.

But there are too many stories and myths about this woman for her to be fictional. In addition to the Babylonian and Assyrian stories about her, the Armenians, people from the region west of the Caspian Sea, even have a tale involving her and Ara the Beautiful, a legendary Armenian king. According to this story, Semiramis had heard of the fame of the handsome Armenian king Ara and lusted after him. She asked Ara to marry her, but he refused. Being enraged, she then gathered the armies of Assyria and marched against Armenia. The battle supposedly took place in the Ararat valley (ironically near the place where Noah’s ark landed after the flood, and near the borders of modern Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran), during which King Ara was slain. Semiramis, who was reputed to be a sorceress, prayed to the gods to bring Ara back from the dead, and tried by her magic arts to revive him, but to no avail. When the Armenians advanced to avenge their leader, she disguised one of her lovers and spread the rumor that the gods had brought Ara back to life. As a result, the war ended. There are many versions to the ending of the legend, but it is usually accepted that King Ara, like Nimrod and Osiris, never returned from the dead.

¹⁰ See: Daniel Scavone, *Joseph of Arimathea, The Holy Grail, and the Edessa Icon*, www.shroud.it/scavone1.pdf

There are some common threads about Semiramis running through virtually all of the stories about her:

1. She appeared in the early legends and tales of all of the ancient peoples—the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, and the Armenians.
2. She was a prostitute and sexually adept—men had an irresistible and fatal attraction to her.
3. She was power-hungry and treacherous—the first *femme fatale* of history, and “la bell dame sans merci” (the beautiful woman without mercy).
4. She betrayed and killed her man/husband.
5. She was associated with the development of goddess worship and false religion.

Nimrod, in contrast, is a definite historical figure, mentioned in Genesis 10:8-10, I Chronicles 1:10, and Micah 5:6. He was a “mighty hunter” who established the first empire in the world, consisting of the cities of Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar (the land is also known as Sumer, Sammur-Amat, and Semiramis), as well as building Ninevah and other cities in what later became the land of Assyria. His identification as the builder of the Tower of Babel is not directly mentioned in the Bible, but was recorded by Jewish and Muslim historians. According to most accounts, Nimrod was brutal, powerful, cruel, and tyrannical, and he died a violent death.

Understanding the Biblical story of the curse on Nimrod’s grandfather Ham, and on his uncle Canaan by great-grandfather Noah (Genesis 9:18-27), and Ham’s subsequent departure in shame, helps to explain Nimrod’s motivation in forming an army to conquer the lands and the people of his ancestors. Noah planted a vineyard, made wine, drank too much, and exposed himself in his tent. While Noah was in a drunken stupor, his son Ham and his grandson Canaan did an unspecified sexual act on the inebriated Noah. When the latter awoke from the wine, he became aware of what they had done, and cursed them. Each son became the head of a tribe who left the lands of their father to journey south and westward. Canaan settled in the land that later bore his name, and the sons of Ham settled in northwestern Africa and were probably the ancestors of the African peoples. Ham’s sons included Mizraim, the founder of Egypt, Put the founder of Libya, and Cush, the founder of Ethiopia and Sudan. Cush was the father of Nimrod.

It was not simply a desire for power that led Nimrod to organize his army. The real reason may have been a craving for revenge—to humble the people who in his mind had humbled his clan, and had supposedly forced them to leave their ancestral homeland. His clan may have brooded on this curse for years and nurtured their animosity until a leader finally arose who had the strength and the organizational abilities to stir up the people and focus their hatred on what at the time was an enormous and unprecedented undertaking—the armed invasion of a territory that was more than one thousand miles away. This hatred would also help to explain Nimrod’s rejection of God, and everything to do with Noah, and how he may have been able to recruit a large number of soldiers from the other Hamitic families (the descendents of Put and Mizraim, and the other sons of Cush).

Nimrod probably sailed his army up the Red Sea from what is now Ethiopia, Sudan, or Egypt, and landed at the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba. Semiramis was

probably captured somewhere on the march northward through the land of Canaan, and taken by Nimrod for entertainment. It is interesting that in the Biblical account of Noah's drunkenness, that it is primarily Canaan, Ham's son, who was cursed by Noah. Canaan (the man) was apparently a sexual deviant, and the ancient Canaanite peoples, in keeping with their forebear, have long been known for various sexual perversions: fertility cults, phallic worship, religious prostitution, infant sacrifice (e.g., the Canaanite gods Chemosh and Molech), and militant homosexuality (e.g., Sodom and Gomorrah). Semiramis may therefore well have been a Canaanite prostitute and a in the mold of Delilah, the Canaanite/Philistine woman who betrayed Sampson centuries later.

The basis of the story as told in *Unholy Grail* derives from the 1853 book *The Two Babylons*, by Alexander Hislop. His research on Semiramis and Nimrod is accepted by many scholars, although some of his conclusions are questionable, such as his identification of the Virgin Mary with Semiramis, and his association of the Roman Catholic Church with idolatry and corrupted worship (although for much of the Catholic Church's history this was certainly true).

The original name for the planet Venus was "Ishtar" (meaning "star"; the name of the Assyrian goddess "Astarte" is simply a transliteration of the Babylonian "Ishtar"). This name was given to the planet by—who else—the ancient Babylonian astrologers. Astronomers today call the northern continent of Venus the "Ishtar Terra," and the southern continent is "Aphrodite Terra." Semiramis thus had the "female planet of love" named after herself—the goddess whose identity she had created. The planet Venus was known to the ancients as both the morning and evening star, perhaps explaining why Semiramis created two goddesses or personifications for herself—Innana for the day and Ishtar for the night. Semiramis is thus the source of the "star within a circle" symbol—the pentagram—which is the symbol of Satan.

Note the amazing similarities of the Armenian legend mentioned above to the Osiris/Isis/Astarte/Tammuz legends, and to the story of Nimrod and Semiramis. When the etymology of the names for various god and goddess are studied in different cultures, it is often confusing because sometimes the same name from the older culture is used for the god or goddess, and later a new series of names and characteristics are developed and employed. Thus the Babylonian "Innana" and "Ishtar" appear in Assyria and are later replaced by "Astarte." The Assyrian "Astarte" becomes "Ashtart" in Canaan, and "Isis" in Egypt. Understanding the common and single origin of the all of these gods and goddesses helps to make sense of what is otherwise a confusing muddle.

It is clear that all of these false deities had the same root in historical reality. Even though some of the details vary from story to story and people to people, and are often stated in mythological terms, Nimrod and Semiramis were real historical figures who conquered and ruled the world's first empire with tyranny and treachery. They launched astrology as a corruption of the Star Gospel,¹¹ and under the influence of Satan, this evil couple created the first false gods and goddesses, which later metastasized into all of the others.

¹¹ For more information on the Star Gospel, see the article *Dossier on the Birth of Jesus and the Star Gospel* on the same web site as this paper.