



# The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief

*By Richard Barber*

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## **The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief** By Richard Barber

The Holy Grail, as created and conceived by Chretien de Troyes in the late 12th century, had no obvious religious or Christian connotations but appeared in a story of chivalric adventure involving the knight Perceval. By the medieval period the Grail was to be found at the centre of the Christian church, within its liturgy and art. This superb book tells the history of the Grail from its origins in romance literature to its role as a central object of the Christian faith, its decline during the Reformation and its resurgence in recent years, devoid of its religious connotations. The intricacies and complexities of its meaning throughout history are explored in detail, especially its links with Joseph of Arimathea, with Christ's blood and the Last Supper, its power as a restorer and sustainer of life, and its mysticism in general. Whether a dish, bowl, vessel or chalice, the Grail became an exciting topic for later writers and theologians to explore and utilise, and Richard Barber suggests why this was the case. Well written, detailed and thoroughly absorbing, this is an excellent book.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

Barber is an Arthurian expert whose purpose is to hack a path through the muddled, corrupted and conflicting versions of the grail story...[He] is scrupulous in his fairness, his conclusions are interesting and although he keeps his reins tight on some fun he might have had, he performs a valuable service in rescuing the original grail from 800 years of garbled and improbable misreadings. (Nicholas Shakespeare *Daily Telegraph* 2004-01-17)

Richard Barber's splendid new book presents a comprehensive survey of the search for the Holy Grail from the 12th century to the present day. It is part summary of the medieval romances and part synthesis of the commentary and interpretation that the Holy Grail has attracted...[T]his is a rich book, and like the romances it discusses, taps into a seemingly unending well of meaning. Barber has created a splendid foundation for a continuation to a compelling story. (Juliette Wood *The Times* 2004-01-17)

This is a stimulating study, which authoritatively explores one of the most enduring myths of Western culture. Its combination of scholarship and clarity might itself be described as an intellectual Holy Grail. (Michael Arditti *Daily Mail* 2004-01-16)

Richard Barber, who possesses both the medievalist expertise and the requisite calmness and clarity of thought...has produced a really valuable and fascinating book...Not only has Richard Barber dealt skilfully with the original medieval evidence; he has also traced the long after-life of the Grail legend, above all in its various 19th- and 20th-century avatars. This not only gives him the chance to investigate some modern literary history (Charles Williams, John Cowper Powys, et al); it also enables him to take a properly historical attitude to the various 'loony tunes' modern theories, by setting them in their own historical context...Overall, then, this is the most reassuringly sane of all modern writings on the whole 'Holy Grail' phenomenon. One finishes the book just wishing there were more works like it. (Noel Malcolm *Sunday Telegraph* 2004-01-18)

This book is a survey, as judicious as it is comprehensive, of versions of the Grail story, of the social and ideological contexts in which they evolved, of the symbols they employ and the literary conventions which shaped them. In it, Barber arrives at the conclusion, which will be shocking to new agers and conspiracy theorists everywhere, that the story of the Holy Grail had (in its original form) nothing to do with the cabbala, Cathars, Templars, Zoroastrians or Gnostics, that its origin is probably the obvious one, the first text in which it appears. The story of the Holy Grail is not a fragment of immemorially ancient lore: Chrétien de Troyes, the 12th-century author of the *Le Roman de Perceval*, made it up...In a book which consists largely of summaries of numerous versions of a single story some repetition is inevitable--this is a volume to browse in rather than one to read straight through--but Barber's sensitivity to the diversity of nuances in each of his many sources ensures that each one he looks at affords him some fresh insight. The result is a fascinating compendium of theology, literary criticism and cultural history. (Lucy Hughes-Hallett *Sunday Times* 2004-02-01)

Barber...demonstrates a gift for lucid, lively prose and an ability to make highly complex developments--cutting across religion, literature and politics--both immediate and accessible...[He] does a dexterous job of conveying the mood and texture of [the] variations on the Grail story, while at the same time illuminating the religious and political dramas that informed their creation...[M]akes for engaging reading as both literary criticism and cultural history, thanks largely to the author's fluency and aplomb as a writer. (Michiko

Kakutani *New York Times* 2004-02-20)

Consistently fascinating...It is essential reading for anyone interested in Arthurian romances and, chapter after chapter, offers sober correctives to countless misconceptions about the Grail and its supposed secret meanings...I doubt that anywhere else will one find so thorough and comprehensive an examination of the Grail, nor as careful and interesting a survey of the medieval stories that started it all. *The Holy Grail* is a major contribution to Arthuriana. (Eric Wargo *Washington Times* 2004-04-04)

What we need is a cool-headed guide through the Grail's long and curious history, and in Richard Barber's lucid, fair-minded, and wide-ranging book, we get it. (Richard Jenkyns *New Republic* 2004-10-04)

About the Author

**Richard Barber** is one of Britain's leading authorities on medieval history and the author of *The Penguin Guide to Medieval Europe* and *The Knight and Chivalry*.

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