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The Jesus Papers

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INTRODUCTION

MAY 28, 1291, THE HOLY LAND: Acre, the Crusader Kingdom's last city port, lay in ruins. Only the great sea tower of the Knights Templar remained standing.

For seven weeks the Arab armies of Khalil al-Ashraf, the young sultan of Egypt, had first besieged and then attacked the city. The last capital of the Christian kingdom was finished. Its streets, once crowded with warriors and nobles, merchants and beggars, were now filled with tumbled buildings and bodies. There was no sense of embarrassment over "collateral damage" in those violent days; when a city fell, slaughter and theft were freely indulged.

The Arabs were determined to force every last vestige of the Crusaders into the sea; the Crusaders were equally determined to survive with the hope, however forlorn, that they might be able to resurrect their kingdom. But this hope faded once Acre had fallen. Beyond the smoking, bleeding ruins of the city only the great tower of the Templars stood undamaged. Crammed inside were those who had so far survived, together with fifty or sixty knights—the last remnants of what was once a great fighting force, a standing army, in the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem. They waited. There was nothing else they could do. No one was coming to save them. A few ships returned, a few more knights and civilians fled. The others

waited for the end to come and for the next week fought off continual assaults.

Such had been the intensity of the fighting that even the Templars despaired. When the Sultan offered to let all the knights and civilians depart unharmed if they abandoned the castle, the Marshal of the Templars, who was directing the resistance, agreed. He allowed a group of Arab warriors led by an emir to enter the castle and raise the Sultan's standard above it. But the ill-disciplined Arab troops soon began to molest the women and boys. In fury, the Templars killed them all and hauled down the Sultan's standard.

The Sultan saw this as treachery and set about his own brutal retaliation: the next day he repeated his offer of safe passage. Again it was accepted. The Marshal of the Templars, together with several knights, visited him under a truce to discuss the terms. But before they reached the Sultan, in full sight of the defenders manning the walls of the Templar castle, they were arrested and executed. There were no further offers of an orderly surrender from the Sultan, and none would have been considered by the Templars: it was to be a fight to the end.

On that fateful day, the walls of the Templar castle, undermined by Arab miners, started to crumble: the Arabs began their assault. Two thousand white-robed mameluk warriors crashed their way into the breach made in the Templars' tower. Its structure, compromised by weeks of assault, gave way. With a sudden roar the stones fell, tumbled down upon themselves, crushing and burying both attackers and defenders. When the stones stopped moving and the dust settled, the silence proclaimed that it was all over. After almost two hundred years, the dream of a Christian kingdom in the Holy Land had been quashed.

Even the Templars now abandoned their few remaining castles and withdrew from the land that had claimed some twenty thousand of their brethren over 173 years of often bitter fighting.

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THE TEMPLARS HAD long fascinated me. Not just their role as a professional army and their great but much ignored contribution to the beginnings of our modern world—they introduced the power of money over the sword by means of checks and safe financial transfers from city to city and country to country; they drove a wedge between the dominant aristocracy and the exploited peasantry that helped open a space for a middle class—but the aura of mystery there had always been about them. In particular, at least some of them seemed to hold to a type of religion that ran counter to that of Rome. Bluntly, they seemed to harbor heresy within their ranks, but little was known about this. I was curious, and I was determined to seek out some answers. I began to research the mysterious side of the Knights Templar.

One day while I was sitting in a bookshop in London, a friend of mine who happened to own the store came up to me and said that there was someone I should meet, someone who had information about the Templars that might interest me. And that is how I met my colleague, Richard Leigh. We ended up writing seven books together over the next twenty years.

Richard was certainly sitting on some interesting information—data that had been passed on to him by Henry Lincoln. Richard and I quickly realized that we should combine forces. A few months later Henry came to the same conclusion. We formed a team, and as they say, we went for it. The result, six years later, was the best-selling book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*.

Our major hypothesis involved an insight into both the Crusades and the Grail legends—two subjects rarely linked by historians. Behind both subjects, we discovered, lay an important bloodline, a dynasty: that of the Jewish royal lineage, the Line of David.

The Grail legends combined elements from ancient pagan Celtic tradition with elements of Christian mysticism. The symbol of a bowl or cup of plenty that ensures the continued fertility of the land derived from the former, while from the latter came the descriptions of the Grail in terms of mystical experience. But significantly for us, the legends stressed that the Grail Knight, Perceval or Parsival, was "of the most holy lineage," a lineage stretching back through history to Jerusalem and the foot of the cross. Clearly, this was referring to the Line of David. This point had been missed by all commentators on the Grail before us.

We argued that the term for the Grail, the *Sangraal* or *Sangreal,* which was rendered as *San Graal* or *San Greal*—Holy Grail—had been a play on words: splitting them slightly differently, as *Sang Real*, gave the game away: *Sang Real* translates as "Blood Royal," meaning, we argued, the royal blood of the Line of David. Truly, for medieval times, this was a "most holy lineage."

That the Line of David existed in southern France in the early medieval period is not in doubt. It is a fact of history.

When Charlemagne was establishing his kingdom, he named one of his close companions, Guillem (William), Count of Toulouse, Barcelona, and Narbonne, as ruler of a buffer princedom between the Christian kingdom of Charlemagne and the Islamic emirate of Al Andalus—Islamic Spain, in other words. Guillem, the new prince, was Jewish.[1] He was also of the Line of David.[2]

The twelfth-century Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela, in his chronicle of his journey from Spain to the Middle East, revealed that the prince at the head of the Narbonne ruling nobility was "a descendant of the House of David as stated in his family tree."[3] Even the *Encyclopedia Judaica* mentions these "Jewish kings" of Narbonne—but ignores their bloodline.[4] Of course, no one liked to ask where this

bloodline, mentioned by Benjamin of Tudela, might have come from. In fact, as we were to find out, the situation was quite complicated.

When looking at the genealogies of these princes of the Line of David in the south of France, we discovered that they were the same figures as the ancestors of one of the leaders of the First Crusade, Godfrey de Bouillon, who became the king of Jerusalem.[5] There had been four great noble leaders of this crusade. Why was Godfrey de Bouillon alone offered the throne, and offered it by a mysterious and still unknown conclave of electors that assembled in Jerusalem to rule over the matter?[6] To whom would these proud lords have submitted, and for what reason? We argued that blood took precedence over title—that Godfrey was reclaiming his rightful heritage as a member of the Line of David.

And what was the source of this bloodline? Well, from Jerusalem, from Jesus, the result of—we argued in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*—a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.[7] In fact, we wondered, was not the marriage at Cana that of Jesus and Mary? At the very least, that would explain why he was "called" to the wedding and subsequently had the responsibility over the wine! Naturally, with the publication of our book, worldwide controversy erupted.

"Mr. and Mrs. Christ," wrote one commentator, searching for a smart sound bite. And as sound bites go, it was rather a good one.

That was in 1982. In 2002, Dan Brown published his novel *The Da Vinci Code*, which draws in part from our books' theories. A media circus erupted once more. "Mr. and Mrs. Christ" were back in the news. It was clear that people still had a hunger for the truth behind the gospel legends. Who was Jesus really? What was expected of him? The world still clamors today for clarity about Jesus, Judaism, Christianity, and the events that took place two thousand years ago.

Since the publication of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail,* I have had twenty-two more years to reflect on these very questions, to do more research, and to reassess the history and implications of those events. In other words, two decades of research over and above what is explored in *The Da Vinci Code.* Here I endeavor to reconstruct my twenty-two-year-long journey of discovery, taking readers down each path with me—some paths leading to dead ends, others to great realms of possibility. All paths lead to a broader understanding of the life of the man we call Jesus, as history proves he lived it, not how religion says he did.

The data I present herein need to be read at your own speed. Each of the building blocks of my explanation should be considered in your own time. This is extremely important, for when long-held beliefs are being challenged, as they are here, we need to be able to justify each step taken along the way so as to be clear about why we have taken them. For that way, we can be confident in where we stand on the issues in the end. A questioning, contemplative read will allow you to wade through the new findings in such a way that you will ultimately make your own choices and hold firm your own beliefs. If you're ready for that journey, let's start now.

ONE

HIDDEN DOCUMENTS

My telephone rang. It was about 10:00 A.M. I remember the sun dappling the wall before me. It sparkled. It was the perfect day to be in an English country village.

"Can you get the next train to London? Don't ask why."

I groaned silently: wall-to-wall cars. Scarce taxis. Noise, pollution, crowded subways. A day spent either inside rooms or traveling between them, the sun a distant memory.

"Sure," I replied, knowing that my friend would never have made such a request unless it was important.

"And can you bring a camera with you?"

"Sure," I replied again, vaguely bemused.

"And can you hide the camera?"

Suddenly he had my attention. What was up? My friend was a member of a small and discreet group of international dealers, middlemen, and purchasers of high-value antiquities — not all of which carried the required paperwork permitting them to be traded on the open market.

I put a camera and some lenses in a standard-looking briefcase, threw in plenty of film, and jumped in my car for the drive to the station.

I met my friend outside a restaurant in a famous London street. He was an American, and with him were two Palestinians, a Jordanian, a Saudi, and an English expert from a major auction house.

They were all expecting me, and after brief introductions the expert from the auction house departed, apparently not wishing to be involved in what was to happen. The rest of us walked to a nearby bank, where we were quickly led through the banking hall, along a short corridor, and into a small private room with frosted windows.

As we all stood around a table placed in the middle of the room, making desultory small talk, the bank officials carried in two wooden trunks and laid them down before us. Each trunk bore three padlocks. As the second was carried in, one of the officials said pointedly, as if "for the record": "We don't know what is in these trunks. We don't want to know what is in them."

They then brought a telephone into the room and departed, locking the door behind them.

The Jordanian made a telephone call to Amman. From the little conversation that ensued (which was in Arabic), I gathered that permission had been requested and obtained. The Jordanian then produced a set of keys and unlocked the trunks.

They were stuffed full of exact-fitting sheets of cardboard. And on each sheet, I was horrified to note, there were hundreds of pieces of papyrus text roughly fixed to the cardboard by small strips of clear adhesive tape. The texts were written in Aramaic or Hebrew. Accompanying them were Egyptian mummy wrappings inscribed in demotic—the written form of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

I knew that it was common for such wrappings to bear sacred texts, and so the owners of this hoard must have unwrapped at least a mummy or two. The Aramaic or Hebrew texts looked, at first sight, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, which I had seen before, although they were mostly written on parchment. This collection was a treasure

trove of ancient documents. I was very intrigued and increasingly desperate to let some scholars know about their existence, perhaps to secure access for them.

As the cardboard sheets were removed from the trunks, I was told that the owners were trying to sell the documents to an unspecified European government. The price asked was £3 million (approximately $5.6 million). Those present wanted me to take a representative selection of photographs that could be shown to the prospective buyer in order to move the sale one stage further toward a successful conclusion. I then realized which government was the most likely to be interested. But I kept my thoughts to myself.

Over the next hour or so, as the trunks were emptied, certain pages were pointed out to me, and standing on a chair, by the soft light filtering through the frosted windows, I took black-and-white photographs. In all, I shot six rolls of thirty-five-millimeter film—over two hundred photographs.

But I was becoming increasingly anxious that these documents might simply vanish into the limbo from which they had emerged. That they might be bought by some purchaser who would sit on them for many years, as had happened with the Nag Hammadi texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Or worse, I feared that without a purchaser, they might simply disappear back into the deepest, darkest recesses of the bank, joining the many other valuable documents known to be locked away in safe-deposit boxes and trunks around the world.

It seemed likely that since I had taken a lot of photographs, and since no one would be counting, I would be able to hide at least one of the rolls of film so that there might be at least some proof that this collection even existed. I successfully slipped one into a pocket.

When the photography was finished and the cardboard sheets were being placed back into the trunks, I gave a handful of exposed film rolls to one of the owners. He looked down at them.

"Where is the other film?" he said immediately. He had been counting.

"Other film?" I said lamely, trying to present an image of abstracted innocence while ostentatiously patting my pockets.

"Oh. You're right. Here it is." I produced the film I was hoping to keep. I was irritated and rather depressed. I really wanted to have some proof of what I had seen.

At that point my friend realized what I was up to and, in an inspired move, came to the rescue.

"Where are you getting these films developed?" he asked innocently.

"At a photographic shop," replied the man holding my film.

"That's not very secure," said my friend. "Look, Michael was a professional photographer, and he could do all the developing and print you off as many sets as you need. That way there is no risk."

"Good idea," the man said and handed back the films.

Naturally I printed a full set of photographs for myself. Later I arranged to meet the Jordanian—who seemed to be in charge--for lunch, where I was to give him the prints and negatives. During lunch I argued that if some scholars could look at the texts and identify what they saw, then perhaps their insight would be helpful in raising the value of the collection. I asked the Jordanian if he would give me permission to speak to a few experts on the matter—very discreetly, of course. After some thought, he agreed that this was probably a good idea, but he made it very clear that neither I nor the experts could talk about this collection to anyone else.

Several days later I went to the Western Asiatic Department of the British Museum with a full set of prints. I had dealt with the department before during the course of researching one of my books, *From the Omens of Babylon*, and I trusted the scholars there not only to give me an honest opinion but to maintain confidentiality as well.

The expert I had dealt with before was not there, and one of his colleagues came into the small anteroom and spoke with me instead. I briefly told him the story about the trunks of documents and about my photographs. I stressed that this was a commercial exercise for the owners and that I would be very grateful for his discretion, since large sums of money sometimes cause equally large problems. I requested that he find someone competent in the field to take a look at these photos to see if they were of any importance. If so, I would do my best to get the interested scholar access to the entire collection. I then passed over my set of prints.

Weeks passed. I heard nothing from the British Museum. I became concerned. Finally, after a month, I returned to the museum and made my way up to the Western Asiatic Department. I met with another expert there.

"I brought a set of photographs in a month ago, which I had taken of a large number of papyrus texts. I have not heard anything back from you. I wonder if anyone has had a chance to take a look at them?"

The expert stared at me blankly.

"What photographs?"

I went through the story again for his benefit. He seemed distracted, unconcerned. He had not heard of any such photographs being brought into the department; in any case, it wasn't his field. They were most likely given to another specialist who was working there for a time and who had now left.

"Where has he gone?" I asked.

"I don't know" was the reply. "I think to Paris. I am sorry about your photographs."

I never heard any more about them. Without a written receipt for them, there was nothing I could do. Luckily I had a few reject prints still at home so I could prove that the collection did in fact exist, but

not nearly enough to give anyone an idea of the range of subjects that might have been in it. An expert, looking at my few remaining prints, identified most of the texts as records of commercial transactions.

Ten or twelve years later I was walking down a street lined with expensive shops in a large Western city when I saw one of the Palestinians who had been present in the bank that day. I went up to him and asked if he remembered me.

"Of course," he replied. "You were the colleague of . . ." and he gave the name of my friend.

"You know," I began, "I have always wondered what happened to those ancient texts I photographed that day in the bank. Were they ever sold?"

"I haven't heard anything about them," he quickly replied, unconvincingly, and then, giving a good impression of being rather busy, he elegantly and politely excused himself and walked off.

I cannot say that I was surprised, for I have spent many years living in a world where potentially crucial keys to the mysteries of our past are simultaneously available and elusive. As we will see, these trunks of documents are not the only such examples of important evidence remaining, tantalizingly, just out of reach.