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Dynasty of the Holy Grail: Mormonism's Sacred Bloodline

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Vern Grosvenor Swanson.
Dynasty of the Holy Grail: Mormonism's Sacred Bloodline.
Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2006

Reviewed by Jesse D. Hurlbut

What do the Virgin Mary, King Arthur, and Joseph Smith have in common? This is one of the questions that Vern Swanson attempts to answer in *Dynasty of the Holy Grail: Mormonism's Sacred Bloodline*. Swanson, who has been director of the Springville Art Museum in Utah since 1980 and who has published extensively in art historical topics, applies his skills to a different body of material in this impressive, large-format volume of over five hundred pages.

The author refers to his own work as a “scattershot miscellany of random thoughts” (411). While some may find in this statement a self-effacing motif, most readers will acknowledge that the phrase provides a fair assessment of this unusual project. This book falls outside the parameters of traditional academic inquiry. It can be categorized neither as fictional narrative nor religious treatise. It is not history, theology, or science. It borrows from each of these disciplines as well as from a significant body of folklore to derive and to propagate myth. I use the term “myth” in its original sense of something that a group holds to be true, although I am not certain who constitutes the believers in this case. To be sure, Swanson’s arguments will be most intelligible to an educated LDS audience, but the degree of speculation required to accept them as fact will dissuade most from buying into the theories. The author does plainly state (at least four times in the front-matter sections) that his conclusions do not represent official LDS doctrine, although the tone throughout the book is matter-of-fact.

Professor Swanson’s claim that “legend often contains hidden knowledge” (39) governs his approach to the central ideas and the justification for this book. He constructs a fascinating narrative of possibilities, but which more than strains the limits of traditional academic approaches. He relies heavily on questionable source material, including legends, fictional literature, arcana, sensationalistic research, and even hearsay. To be fair, his arguments deal with matters that presumably have either been deliberately

withheld, concealed and embedded in folklore, or which have at some point been purged from surviving records; hence recourse to standard historical documentation provides limited help. He admits that in some cases, he is unable to establish observations on conclusive data, and so he studies, rather, its “cumulative effect” (78). Nevertheless, while he accuses a number of authors of bending “to their own purpose whatever material crosses their path” (188), he is happy to rely on what he calls “internal theological logic” (132) to reconstruct a jigsaw puzzle that has too many pieces missing.

When stated in a nutshell, each of the author’s conclusions sounds at least a little far-fetched: The Virgin Mary was born in England (or Ireland); Jesus visited England to study with the Druids; Joseph Smith is a direct descendant of Jesus Christ; the Holy Grail of King Arthurian legend represents Joseph Smith and the light and truth of the gospel as restored by him. But Swanson’s strength is found in the manner he discusses and substantiates each of these claims by connections to other evidence or studies, including statements from modern-day prophets and Apostles. As tenuous as some of the source materials may be, the overall effect is a well-crafted hypothesis. The connections drawn from one hypothesis to the next yield a solid, well-structured argument that has a ring of truth to it.

For example, an important premise of the book is that the inherited Y-chromosome of Joseph Smith Sr. and the mtDNA of Lucy Mack Smith remained unmutated over centuries. Preliminary DNA testing substantiates this claim back through a number of generations. If Christ had had children, presumably through Mary Magdalene, and if a daughter of Christ provided the mtDNA for the lineage of Lucy Mack Smith, and if a son of Christ provided the Y-chromosome for Joseph Smith Sr., then it can be argued that Joseph Smith Jr. was a pure descendent of Christ. Professor Swanson cites Brigham Young on the matter of Joseph’s pure heritage: “That blood which was in him was pure and he had the sole right and lawful power, as he [Joseph Smith] was the legal heir to the blood that has been on the earth and has come down through a pure lineage. The union of various ancestors kept that blood pure” (285). The proposed purity of Joseph Smith’s lineage is a reflection of the lineage of the Virgin Mary, whose father descends from Judah through the branch of Zerah (Judah’s twin son), while Mary’s mother descended from the lineage of Perez (the other twin), after passing through Jesse, David, and King Zedekiah. Hence, Mary was uniquely able “to pass on the inheritance of the full house of Judah to Christ” (29) through both branches of her own genealogy.

The argument of the purity of Joseph Smith’s genetic heritage back to Judah, indeed, to Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, hinges entirely on the question of whether Jesus had children. Several quotations from discourses

by LDS Apostles Orson Hyde and Orson Pratt proffer that Christ was married, he was a polygamist, and he had children (85–108). “Evidence” suggests that for their protection, the children of Christ were carried away and hidden in different nations, notably, in Western Europe (France and the British Isles, today). Swanson establishes the presence of Israelite blood in Europe by drawing upon Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln’s pseudo-scholarly notions,¹ popularized by Dan Brown in *The DaVinci Code* (383), purporting that the myth of the Holy Grail conceals the location of Christ’s progeny in the western edges of the continent.

According to Swanson, the Holy Grail refers specifically to “that vessel being the uterine chalice or womb of Mary Magdalene” (102–3). The idea that a hot-button issue like the offspring of the Savior might need a code name for security purposes seems reasonable, but Swanson gains nothing by calling upon the faulty research of late twentieth-century authors who suggested that King Arthur and the Holy Grail provided this security function. By Swanson’s own reckoning, the mystery of the Holy Grail defies analysis: “So complex, enigmatic, profound, and cryptic is its message that to the unknowing it is merely the confusing miasma of bygone prophets, troubadours, and romancers. Even the poets of this holy drama were never quite sure what the script meant” (183). While modern revelation provides answers to many longstanding mysteries, there is nothing in the *Journal of Discourses* (or in any other latter-day prophetic writings) that sheds light on the question of the Grail. The Holy Grail is an enchanting metaphor, but the fact that it surfaces for the first time only in the twelfth century—more than a millennium after there could have been a need for a security mechanism—marks it as a contrivance. If the author’s project constitutes an attempt to assemble a jigsaw puzzle, then the pieces dealing with the Holy Grail come from a different box.

Stylistically, the author’s writing is generally clear and well organized with the exception of the chapter on Gnostics and the divine feminine (chapter 5), where he seems to assume that the reader is already equipped to enter into an ongoing and heated discussion of these topics. He does provide a useful introduction to the history of the discourse on these issues in the closing chapters, but this material would be helpful earlier in the book. I should also note that the text reveals the author’s strong reaction against attitudes in this debate that he categorizes as “a fuzzy gnostic, leftwing, liberal, and adamantly feminist bias” (56). Instead of countering with a strong empirical stance, he resorts at times to sharp, even sarcastic, rejoinders to these arguments. This tone does not prevail throughout the book but may have the unintended consequence of weakening his position overall.

Professor Swanson's book benefits from his background in art history. Several plates of beautiful artwork and illustrations accompany the text. While not an essential part of his exposition, the plates offer corroborating visual evidence for his dominant hypotheses. Curiously, the caption for plate 13 misidentifies what clearly looks like a modern printed tarot card as a tempera painting on paper from the fifteenth century.

More than fifty pages of bibliography generously accompany the text. In a rare move that more scholars might emulate, Swanson has indicated which books he has not yet read and includes them in the interest of compiling an exhaustive list of resources. Because of the length of the list, he has subdivided it into twenty-three topical categories. This extensive bibliography provides readers with a rich resource for further investigation into any of the subjects covered. The disadvantage of the topical organization is that many works fit neatly into more than one category. For instance, Zina Petersen's lecture entitled "The Divine Feminine and the Goddess Movement" is found under the section "*Da Vinci Code* and Dan Brown" and not under "Goddess and the Divine Feminine," where it might also logically be located. Moreover, searching for the work of a given author, as one might want to do while examining the extensive footnotes throughout the text, requires one to scan tediously through each of the twenty-three topical bibliographies.

In conclusion, this large volume is not a response to the fervor created by *The Da Vinci Code*, since its conception and development predate the publication of Dan Brown's popular fictional novel. The two works draw upon some of the same source material and were conceived in parallel. No doubt, however, the appearance of *The Da Vinci Code* and the surprising attention it received created an environment favorable for Swanson to present the conclusions of many previous years of research. It remains to be seen between the two books—the novel or the footnoted study—which one is found more persuasive and which one tells a better story.

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1. Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1982).