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The Holy Family In Modern Dress

Kenneth L Woodward with Rita Dallas in London
and Kathy Karmen in Paris.

The plot has all the elements of an international thriller. A team of investigators learn of secret documents hinting that Jesus was not a celibate saviour who died on a cross but an aristocratic pretender to the throne of David who married Mary Magdalene, had children by her, faked his own crucifixion and eventually fled his native country. Legends that Jesus survived a sham crucifixion are as old as the Gnostics, and the theory that he married goes back at least a century. But wait, this story has just begun.

As told by a trio of British and American writers in “Holy Blood, Holy Grail” (*461 pages. Delacorte Press. \$15.95.), a controversial book to be published next week in the United States, Jesus' wife and children went on to settle in Gaul, where their descendants emerged four centuries later to rule as the Merovingian kings of the Franks. Later on, the book claims, the bloodline went underground, only to surface triumphantly in 1099 when a supposed descendant of Jesus, Godfroi de Bouillon, regained David's throne as monarch of the Crusaders' Kingdom of Jerusalem. At that point, the secrets of the House of Jesus were entrusted to the Knights Templar and their own esoteric order, the ‘Prieure de Sion’ (Priory of Zion). In subsequent centuries, some of the most famous names in Western culture – from Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton to Victor Hugo and Claude Debussy – presided as Grand Masters of the Prieure, privy to knowledge withheld from ordinary Christians: for example, that the legendary Holy Grail – the Sangraal – really symbolized the bloodline of Jesus, or ‘sang royal’, and that the true Notre Dame of the great Gothic cathedrals is not the mother of Jesus but his consort, Mary Magdalene.

That's still not all. According to the book, the Prieure is still around today, keeping tabs on Jesus' far-flung kin, many of whom are now the aristocratic families of Europe and Britain. Eventually, the book contends, the Prieure hopes that these modern nobles may pool their influence and culture into a truly Christian empire ruled by – who else? – a dynasty descended from Jesus.

Like “Chariots of the Gods?” Erich Von Daniken's pseudoscientific work of the late 1960s that purported to prove that “ancient astronauts” had visited the Earth in prehistoric times, “Holy Blood, Holy Grail” is a mixture of obscure fact (the Prieure, for example, does exist) and outlandish speculation. Serious scholars dismiss it, but it seems certain nonetheless to make place for itself in popular lore. “It's an intriguing story and there is some fascinating pseudo research,” says a spokesman for a leading London bookshop, Hatchard's of Piccadilly, which has already sold several hundred copies of the book. “Every five years or so a book with this sort of intriguing sensational appeal pops up, and it always makes a great deal of money for all concerned”.

The incredible tale of “Holy Blood, Holy Grail” is the result of ten years of sleuthing by British television producer Henry Lincoln, American-born novelist Richard Leigh and New Zealand photographer Michael Baigent. In the course of producing several documentaries on the hidden treasures and secret societies of France, Lincoln had become fascinated by the story of a village priest in southern France who was said to have discovered a mysterious source of wealth in the 1890s. It turned out, or so the authors say, that the priest had stumbled across the treasure of the Knights Templar, which included a collection of ancient documents that disclosed the secrets of the Prieure. That discovery eventually led the authors to a living member of the Prieure – and the writing of their book.

“Holy Grail” has roused waves of indignation in England, where it became an instant best seller when it was published last month. The Rt. Rev. Hugh Montefiori, the scholarly Anglican Bishop of Birmingham who once suggested that Jesus might have been a homosexual, condemned “Holy Blood” as “amateurish, ignorant and grotesque.” And in Britain's Sunday Times, reviewer Marina Warner, the respected author of a feminist critique of the cult of Mary, dismissed it as “a heap of hooey”. But perhaps the most offended readers were the very British aristocrats whom the authors identified as descendants of Jesus. “It's rubbish,” snapped the Duke of Devonshire in an interview last week. “Over the centuries I'm sure that someone in my family would have said something about the great secret we are supposed to be privy to.”

De Gaulle:

Although the book has not been published in France, the authors' source inside the Prieure – former Grand Master Pierre Plantard, a retired draftsman – is reportedly furious over the assertion that members believe

themselves to be descendants of Jesus. So is French journalist Jean-Luc Chaumeil, an expert on neo-Templar orders. It was Chaumeil who led the authors to Plantard. Among other things, Chaumeil denies that the order has political ambitions. He also disputes the authors' claim that Charles de Gaulle belonged to the Priore, though he says that renegade Roman Catholic Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre was a member until last year.

Despite the harsh criticisms, the authors of "Holy Blood" insist their work is scholarly, if speculative. In any case, they prefer their story to the one told by Christian tradition. "Is it more plausible", asks Lincoln, "that a man should be married and have children, or that he should be born of a virgin, walk on water and rise from the grave?"