

THE LEADEN BOWL

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In the affairs of God, some things may not be as they seem.

So it was with a certain leaden bowl. This paper is an account of its history.

In the county of Derby in north central England, about 20 miles south of Chesterfield, and between the small towns of Sutton-in-Ashfield and Kimberly-in-Ashfield, one could see up until 1983 the foundation of the manor house of the Barons Carfour. There were even some remnants of the Abbey of Saint Rupert Adam, which lay under the house. In 1983, a six story apartment building was constructed on the site. The fourteenth Baron Carfour died in 1981. He was the last of a family which the College of Heralds recognized as continuous from Charles Carfour, created the first Baron by Henry VIII. Charles was made part of the minor nobility for his services as an inventory assistant to Thomas Cromwell. Charles' job was to dress as an itinerant priest, and seek shelter for a couple of weeks at an abbey or nunnery marked for closure. While there he made an inventory of the possessions of the institution, especially noting objects which looked valuable. Thus, when closure suddenly fell, the monks or nuns could not secrete or remove anything as they were expelled. Charles specialized in small institutions, those with which Cromwell started. When the small ones had all been taken care of, Cromwell arranged for Charles to be made Baron and to be given the abbey of St. Rupert Adam, which Charles had inventoried. By luckily retiring early, Charles became forgotten by the time Cromwell fell so far from the King's grace as to be hanged, drawn, and quartered.

The former abbey of St. Rupert Adam, was by no criterion imposing. Records list seven rooms of various sizes and uses, cells for 20 monks, a small church, and some storage sheds. The accompanying land was about 40 acres in U.S. units of measurement. The new Baron Carfour did some remodeling and moved in. His successors built, altered, and rebuilt continuously until nobody knew exactly what had been part of the old abbey. In the mid-18th century, the barons abandoned the edifice for city life in Chesterfield, where they became financially comfortable through the tobacco trade.

One of the possessions of the abbey which Cromwell left there as valueless was a lead bowl. It was a rather battered object, a foot more or less in diameter at the top. An image of an eagle and the letters P and M were engraved on the outside bottom. Several parchment documents in the abbey files gave various portions of the history of the bowl. One of the parchments was very old, dating from the Roman occupation of Britain. The others originated in the 14th century. Surprisingly, a letter concerning a bowl of the same description was accidentally found in 1970 by John McLaughlin, a classics scholar from Leeds University. He happened to be acquainted with the abbey parchments and hence paid attention when he ran across the letter in the Vatican library.

The following saga is pieced together by combining chronologically the accounts from the various documents mentioned, plus, at the end, a memo left by the 9th Baron Carfour. The story is in four parts.

Part 1

The first part comes from the letter in the Vatican Library. The letter was written during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, by Stadius Mertonis, to one of his grandsons. Stadius was an aide to Pontius Pilate before and while the latter was Procurator of Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea. Stadius served Pilate faithfully for almost 25 years. When Caligula acceded to the imperial throne in 37 A.D., the Procreator either retired or was replaced; and he and his staff returned to Rome. At that time, Pilate gave Mertonis as a memento, a lead bowl, which the governor had used for a wash basin. Pilate had it inscribed on the bottom with the eagle of the roman legions and the letters P for the giver and M for the receiver, the letter P above the eagle and M below it.

Stadius Mertonis had a daughter who married and had children. The first born was a son. In honor of her father and his central loyalty, she named the boy Stadius Pontius. His grandfather gave little Pontius the lead bowl. It became the child's privilege to eat his food from it, while his siblings had to do with mere pottery.

Things did not go well. By the age of 5, it became apparent that the mental development of Pontius was slower than normal. By the age of 10, he was obviously severely retarded, with almost unmanageable behavioral problems. He lacked physical control of his body which was subject to twitching and uttering random sounds. In short, he was suffering from what was called the senatorial disease, because its most vicious form usually appeared in the families of senators. We in the last third of the 20th century can guess that Pontius was heavily poisoned by lead.

As the situation grew worse, the family of Pontius began to disintegrate under the stress. Pontius' father hinted at divorce. The mother was on the point of a nervous breakdown. It was Pontius' grandmother, Vermilia, the wife of Stadius, who acted. She secretly put a conventional poison in Pontius' food. His death was attributed to the senatorial disease.

In a short time, stress slipped away - from everyone except Vermilia. Her conscience would not allow it to leave. She became melancholy and hard to talk to. She ate little, lost weight, and developed a haggard look. Her husband had physicians in, but their nostrums did nothing. Finally, one night, Stadius drew his wife to him, held her close, and pleaded with her to tell him, if she knew, what was wrong. Her reserve broke, and she confessed her deed. Though shocked, Stadius' dominant emotion was hope, hope that the confession would relieve the pressure on Vermilia's soul. It didn't. Her sense of guilt would not give way to mere publicity.

Stadius cast about for something else to do. It occurred to him that the lead bowl had figured in the minor incident, later recorded in Christian scripture, where Pilate had symbolically washed guilt off his hands by using water in the bowl. To Stadius, the incident was one of those irritating clashes between the secular authority and the ultra-conservative clerics. Stadius remembered it only because it had involved the sordid

release a criminal who called himself "Son of the Father" (bar Abbas). Since the clerics were commonly referred to by the title "Father", Stadius suspected that the criminal in question was the son of one of the clerics who organized the demonstrators demanding his release.

Stadius told his wife about the incident, but in a version augmented for his own purpose. He asserted that Pilate had used the particular bowl in question because it reputedly had a special property. If a murderer washed his hands in the bowl, and if the water turned red, it meant that the gods had forgiven the deed, and the blood guilt had been washed away. He urged his wife to wash her hands in the bowl. He argued that, surely, given the circumstances under which she had acted, the gods would show compassion. Vermilia was skeptical, but still enough of a believer in the Greco-Roman gods to think them capable of such actions. She procrastinated, but at last consented. In preparation, Stadius took the bowl to the altar of Jupiter for a blessing. He also rubbed the inside with a compound which, in contact with agitated water, dissolved into a red dye. Vermilia washed; the water turned red; and the only real miracle occurred: her oppressive guilt disappeared. She became her former self.

Stadius and Vermilia kept the whole sequence of events secret. She died some 30 years later. When Stadius felt his own end near, he decided it was time that somebody knew the story. He chose to tell an adult grandson, a brother of the ill-fated Pontius. To the grandson, Stadius sent the bowl accompanied by a letter telling all. In a footnote occasioned by current events, Stadius mentioned that bar Abbas had been released instead of anti-cleric rabbi named Yeshua, some followers of whom seemed to have appeared recently in Rome.

Part 2

The footnote evidently gave rise to the second stage in the history of the leaden bowl. Details come from the abbey parchment mentioned earlier, that goes back to the Roman occupation of Britain. The grandson who received the bowl from Stadius was not interested in keeping it. Instead, he sold it to one of the Yeshua groups. The grandson got an inflated price by emphasizing both the relation of the bowl to the Yeshuists' central figure and the demonstrated fact that the bowl could wash away blood guilt. He didn't mention how the demonstrated fact was manufactured.

The Yeshuists in question, or to romanize and anglicize the name, the Jesuists (Yä-zu-ists) or Jesuists (Gezh-u-ists), were a small pocket of the latest religious cult to hit Rome. This particular band had formed from individuals with three kinds of Yeshua or Jesu oriented beliefs. Some members thought of Jesus as a teacher of an ideal way to live, much as a couple of generations ago, people regarded, or said they regarded, Gandhi. A second segment called Jesus the "Anointed One", anointed by God as a King who would sweep away tyrants. They maintained that Jesus would soon return to get the process started. They can be called the messianic sub-group, since "messiah" is an old term meaning "The Anointed One." They themselves were beginning to call themselves

"christians", after the phrase which is anglicized as "The Christ", also meaning the Anointed One. It was before the descriptive phrase "the Christ" evolved into a proper name.

The third part in the Yeshuist group consisted of believers in Sophia or Wisdom. Wisdom, with a capital W, was conceived, following the neo-Platonists, as an emanation from God, a kind of spirit which had issued from God. The Sophians, as I will call them, held that Sophia had entered into Jesus so that he was an embodiment of Wisdom. The concept is perhaps more familiar in the later version used by the theologian John bar Zebedee. He identified Wisdom with the Greek notion of the Logos, an emanation expressing God's essence. Hence the assertion which created half of official Christian theology: "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. And the Logos was made flesh and dwelt among us."

The sub-groups which collectively purchased the lead bowl had various disagreements, which at first elicited stimulating discussions. The Jesus as giver of a model for living segment was basically secular. They liked the notion that Jesus was wise, but not the emanation from God idea, which came too close to giving Jesus divinity. It was in fact so close that John easily added in that property in the quotation just cited. The model for life sub-group also leaned toward non-violence and pacifism. That put them at odds with the Christians who expected Jesus to use force and war against tyrants. The Sophians were under pressure from both sides to say whether Wisdom dictated "turn the other cheek" or "fight for liberty", or, more bluntly, whether Sophia said anything specific about anything. They were also asked to explain how the male Jesus could embody the female Sophia unless Jesus was an hermaphrodite. Finally, the Christians were increasingly embarrassed by the fact that Jesus kept never showing up in spite of their assurances that he would. As we have seen, however, unfulfilled assurances of buried treasure about to come to light are irrelevant if they motivate successful conquest.

The conquest of Europe by the Jesus movement had not even begun when the Yeshuist group associated with the lead bowl disintegrated. As is so often the case in religious organizations, their internal discussions became disagreements; their disagreements became arguments; their arguments became disputes; and their disputes became dogmatic confrontations. They were ready to dissolve.

The superficial and immediate cause of the breakup was not doctrine, however, but ritual involving the bowl. There was agreement that, given its origin and reputed power, the bowl ought to be used somehow. The idea was quickly discarded of soliciting the general public for conscience stricken murderers to come wash their hands, perhaps for a fee. The idea came up against the fact that, if the water turned red, the murderer's guilt would be washed away, but he would also be revealed as a killer. Probably not many people would want to acquire a religiously cleared conscience attached to a secular execution. Instead, the group members took to dipping or washing their own hands periodically in water put into the bowl. It was a kind of purification ritual based upon the

example of Pilate purifying himself in the same manner. Not everyone participated; but most did.

Older religious beliefs intruded, however. A few members of the messianic wing argued the following. If symbolic blood in the form of red water indicated that God (or some important god) had granted favor to an individual, then probably real blood would elicit divine favor. That was, after all, the basis of the age-old practices of animal sacrifice. Those members who found that argument sound, began occasionally sacrificing a cock and letting its blood spill into the bowl. The model for living Yeshuists were disgusted and angered. Sacrificing animals was not advocated by Jesus and was antithetical to the whole tenor of his teachings. The Sophians held that the practice had nothing to do with Wisdom, and they felt that the purification ritual was rendered farcical by using a bowl contaminated with sacrificial blood.

Already existent hostility between the sub-groups was thus exacerbated. The disintegrating event occurred on a Saturnalian night, as Rome celebrated the winter solstice. One of the model for living sub-group had spent a decade as a legionnaire. He had participated in numerous battles, and had killed his share of both enemies of Rome and tribesmen who resisted the Roman slave raids into Germany. After becoming a Yeshuist, this particular individual suffered inner turmoil because of the killing he had done. If anyone could have benefited from a bowl that really removed guilt, he could have. Again, and again, he washed his hands in the bowl, but the water never changed color. He came to believe that water could never wash away his guilt. A deeper kind of expiation was necessary. On the night in question, he turned in desperation to the blood sacrifice of cocks which so disgusted him. In the darkness which sets in before dawn, when even the festival revelers had gone to bed and only the night watch and ghosts were active, he slit the veins in his wrists and let his blood flow into the bowl. His body was found in the morning.

That was more than the modelers and the Sophians could tolerate. They accused the Christians of setting a horrid example which warped the mind of the suicide victim. The three factions split apart. The lead bowl remained with the messianic faction. Neither of the other two sub-groups wanted it after the suicide. And neither of the two had any expectation that Jesus would return, much less that he might have any interest in the bowl.

The breakup took place in 56 A.D., the second year of the reign of Nero. Persecution of people who could be accused of being Christian was underway. To escape it, a small number of the old messianic sub-group left Rome for Marseille. That is where the parchment account of the Yeshuists and the leaden bowl was written. What happened during the next 1300 years can only be conjectured. Around the mid-1300's, the bowl and the parchment came to light in England at the ancient site of a Roman villa. The easiest supposition is that the Christians in Marseille fled onward to Britain, and all was forgotten when the Roman army withdrew from the island.

Part 3

I will now turn to the record that can be compiled from abbey papers written by various unknown monks, probably over the course of 30 or 40 years. In the 1300's, an abbey known as that of Adam Progenitor was located at the edge of the hamlet of Sutton-in-Ashfield. The abbey was a struggling collection of a dozen or so monks held together mostly by a mutual lack of anyplace else to go. The monks had constructed for themselves living quarters and a small church. Economically, they were not far above being poor, subsisting on a meager stream of alms and food they grew on the immediately surrounding land. Earlier they had legally been squatters; but, in time, the local Norman lord granted them possession of a small area in return for daily prayers on behalf of his immortal soul.

One spring day, a wandering peddler appeared offering to sell an item that could be used to attract the faithful to the abbey. Properly handled, it could even become a serious rival of the hair clippings of St. Rupert, offered by the abbey of that name in the village of Kimberly just up the road. The item in question was, of course, the lead bowl. The peddler said that he had found the bowl while digging in some roman ruins looking for gold or silver coins. Alongside the bowl was a sealed pottery jar containing the Yeshuist manuscript. Surely a bowl which could wash away blood guilt would draw people to the abbey, especially since the local lord was not altogether effective in preventing violence.

The abbey bought the bowl and the manuscript, in spite of some wondering why the peddler had come to so obscure an abbey instead of to one of the rich cathedrals such as Durham or Wells. Doubts were squelched by the fact that the abbey desperately needed a holy relic. Word of the bowl and its miraculous power soon spread. A trickle of curious faithful came to look at it. To increase the flow and motivate offerings, the abbey announced a public demonstration using a professedly guilt-ridden murderer from among the several soon-to-be-hanged killers in the lord's dungeon. For its own assurance, the abbey put the bowl to a prior test by taking it to the dungeon and having one of the condemned wash his hands. The water did not turn red. It was obvious that God needed help, or at least the abbey did. The monks turned to the trick which had long before started the bowl on its career. They found a red dye which would dry on the inside of the bowl and manifest itself in agitated water. On the announced day, a murderer was brought from the dungeon to the abbey church. He washed his hands; the water turned red; and the onlookers were astounded. The monks took up a collection, and everybody went out to watch the criminal hanged.

The number of visitors to the abbey church rose immediately; as did offerings left in a special box beside the bowl. For a prepaid fee, the faithful were allowed to wash their own hands in the bowl under the discreetly promulgated possibility that sins in general might thus be washed away. Now and then someone, in the secrecy of confession, told of killing another person and asked to wash. He or she was allowed to do so out of the public view, so as not to reveal the washer's past. The water always turned

red, which usually elicited a grateful contribution in addition to the charge for the privilege.

The rival abbey of St. Rupert soon grew alarmed. The faithful were going to the bowl instead of coming to the saint's hair clippings. Revenue was falling off. To stop the process, the abbot of St. Rupert declared in a sermon that the saint had revealed during prayer that the bowl was a fraud. The abbot issued a challenge. He would send to the bowl on an agreed upon day either a repentant, locally unknown, accidental killer, or a man innocent of all violence. On the next day, the opposite individual would appear. The Abbey of Adam Progenitor would not know which person would come on which day both would wash their hands publicly. If the water in the bowl did not react appropriately, fraud would be proved.

The monks of the bowl could not refuse the challenge. There was much frantic discussion before a decision was reached on how to handle the test. On the first day of the challenge, the water turned red. On the second day, it turned red again. The monks of St. Rupert were elated; for the second candidate was a disguised, elderly member of the abbey, known for a long life of cloistered piety. So much for that hunk of lead. The elation lasted barely a week. Adam Progenitor unexpectedly produced a woman from Kent who claimed that 44 years earlier, before the pious monk entered his novitiate, he had fathered a child by her. When the child was a day old, she had allowed the father to carry it into the forest, from which he returned empty handed.

Consternation reigned at St. Rupert and triumph at Adam Progenitor-until the former abbey brought forth another woman who asserted that she had overheard the first woman agree to lie in exchange for a tribe from Adam Progenitor. The first woman grasped the altar cross at Adam Progenitor and vehemently swore to the truth of what she had said. The second woman laid her hand on the alter cross at St. Rupert and with equal vehemence swore to her truthfulness.

The reputations of both abbeys began to suffer. The scandalous controversy had to be ended, and it had to be done through a probe by a neutral third party. In secret apprehension on both sides, the abbeys were forced to summon the rector of the church in Chesterfield. He came. He interviewed the two women and all the monks of the two abbeys. He then listened to those same individuals in confession, three times each. He studied the lead bowl and the document which had come with it. He examined the hair clippings of St. Rupert. He talked to numerous people who had washed in the bowl, some of whom he also invited to confession. He even sent an investigating aide to the area in Kent of the alleged sexual relationship of woman and pre-novice. At long last, he announced his conclusions. All parties to the controversy had confessed their sins, he said; and all had received absolution. Where God no longer considers there to be evil and scandal, there is none. No relic of a saint or revered object can remove guilt and sin. Only God can do that, either directly, or through priests ordained in the apostolic succession from St. Peter. But God can, if he chooses, use relics or objects to reveal his actions. The case was therefore closed. In a remonstrance, the pastor reminded the two abbeys that the business of monks was to glorify God in praise and prayer, not to magnify the

abbey's income. He suggested that, in penitence, the abbeys send a tenth of their following year's alms to the church in Chesterfield. He then went home.

The women accusers instantaneously disappeared. The defamed venerable monk was named successor apparent to the Abbot of St. Rupert. Of course, he died some years before the Abbot. The two abbots presided jointly over reconciliation masses, one at each abbey, and never spoke to each other again. Public titillation waned, as did the initial rush of excitement over the lead bowl. Eventually, it sank in pilgrimage value to equality with the hair clippings of St. Rupert. When a generation had passed, the abbeys merged under the name of St. Rupert Adam. They built a new compound at the site between Sutton-in-Ashfield and Kimberly-in-Ashfield, where Thomas Cromwell's agent, Charles Carfour, infiltrated it three hundred years later.

Part 4

The last incident in the history of the bowl is described in a memo written in 1815 by Bentley Carfour, the 9th Baron. Bentley had a son named Douglas. At the age of 12, Douglas received a puppy which became his constant companion. One day, when Douglas was 14, he and the dog went out hunting pigeons together. Douglas was holding his gun loosely when he tripped over a stone. The gun fell to the ground, discharged, and mortally wounded the dog. It died as Douglas held it in his arms. He could not be consoled. Grief, and guilt stemming from his carelessness, turned his life into endless misery. His father sought some cure. After all the preceding tale, you can foresee what he did. But bear with me. The circle of this history must overlap in order to close. So far as Bentley knew, his son had never heard about the bowl and the way red water had been manufactured. In unknowing imitation of Stadius Mertonis, Bentley therefore hoped that the old trick would remove Douglas's feeling of guilt. Then maybe the grief would go away of its own accord.

Bentley prepared the bowl, coating its inside with his own version of red dye. He then gave it to the parlor maid, instructing her to put water into it and, when he rang, bring it to his study. He called in his son and described the power of the bowl. Douglas listlessly agreed to play the game. The maid brought the bowl. Douglas washed, and the water turned red as planned. The psychological miracle of ancient Rome occurred again. Douglas suddenly felt free of an immense emotional pain. He cried for a while and then became ravenously hungry. Thereafter he went cheerfully on his way to becoming eventually the 10th Baron.

The next year after the Douglas incident was 1815. Napoleon slipped away from exile on Elba and moved triumphantly north through France, gathering his old army on the way. The Superintendent of the Royal Armory issued an emergency appeal for objects of lead to be melted and recast into bullets for the British force hurriedly being mustered. The lead bowl went into the furnace.

When rejoicing at the outcome of Waterloo reached the house of Baron Carfour, the parlor maid boldly remarked to her master, "Old Bony couldn't stand up against that

lead bowl.” “Well, it helped,” the Baron replied, “just as it helped my son.” “It helped somebody else, if you want to call it that,” said the maid. “Somebody had a party and used the bowl for wine. They just let the wine dry up. When I poured water into the bowl, that old wine turned the water red. I had to scrub the bowl out good an clean before I brought it in to you.”

In the affairs of God, some things may not be as they seem.