


## Article

# The Holy Chalice of the Last Supper Venerated in Valencia, Spain: Answering Historic Questions to Pilgrims as a Basis of Fostering Cultural Tourism

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**Abstract:** The Cathedral of Valencia has kept an important relic since 1437: the Holy Chalice of the Last Supper. It consists of an agate cup, a gold stem, and a gemstone foot. According to a pious tradition, this cup is the one used by Jesus of Nazareth to institute the Eucharist. Tourists visiting Valencia Cathedral often doubt its authenticity. There are certain queries that pilgrims wonder about, some of which have not been studied in depth. For example: What is known about the family who owned the chalice? Why would Jesus use a gemstone cup instead of one made of glass, silver, or gold? Aimed at clarifying these concerns, the research methodology was essentially centered on a review of the literature. The main conclusions are the following: (i) The Cenacle belonged to a rich disciple of Jesus, who would have lent him a valuable cup of blessing. Quite likely, it was the family of Saint Mark, who had a close link with Saint Peter. (ii) It is unlikely that Jesus used a cup made of glass because this material was relatively affordable. By contrast, gemstone vessels were highly appreciated. This case study highlights the importance of promoting historic and scientific studies about Christian artworks as a pre-requisite to foster heritage tourism.

**Keywords:** Holy Grail; Cenacle; heritage tourism; religious culture; Passover meal; Eucharist



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## 1. Introduction

The tourism industry is one of the most important economic sectors [1]. Cultural tourism relies on a destination's cultural heritage assets [2]. It has been defined as the movement of people to cultural attractions such as heritage sites, and artistic and cultural manifestations in cities outside their normal place of residence [3]. Tourism, culture, and society are strongly related [4], because tourism can bring individuals and human communities into contact, leading to the development of local culture and, thereby, an improvement in life quality [5].

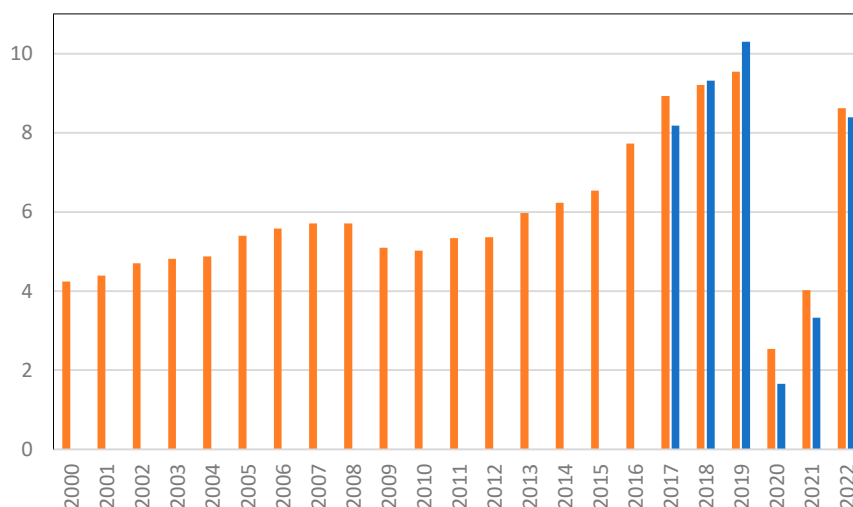
Tourism in Spain is an important economic activity. This destination was visited by 31.1 million international travelers in 2021. Tourists are attracted by the warm beaches, pleasant climate, gastronomic wealth, and abundant cultural heritage. Valencia is the third most populated Spanish city. In 2022, about 2.4 million foreign travelers were recorded in the city, with 1.8 million for leisure, recreation or vacations [6]. Valencia's cultural heritage is broad and varied, but the city is becoming internationally recognized due to one distinguished relic kept in the Cathedral since 1437: the so-called "Holy Chalice of the Last Supper". The Last Supper refers to the ritual Passover dinner that Jesus of Nazareth celebrated with the Apostles before his crucifixion. It took place in a large room (Mk 14:15; Lk 22:12) often called the *Cenacle*, derived from the Latin term *cenaculum*, and assigned by Jerome in the Vulgate.

There is no written early tradition about how was the chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper (Mk 14:23–24), which is often referred to as the Holy Grail. Nonetheless, according to a pious tradition, the Holy Chalice in Valencia is supposed to be the one used by Jesus. More precisely, the upper agate cup, as the gold stem and foot were added in the medieval

period to exalt and beautify the relic. This cup would have been presumably kept by the disciples of Jesus [7] (p. 49), ending up in the hands of Saint Peter, who would have taken it to Rome, being also used by the first popes [8] (p. 125).

In 258 AD, Saint Lawrence supposedly sent it to his relatives in Osca (present-day Huesca, Spain). During the Muslim invasion of the Iberian Peninsula, the Chalice was hidden in 713 AD in different places in the Pyrenees. As the Christian reconquest progressed southwards, the Holy Chalice was kept in different churches, being guarded for about 300 years at the Monastery of San Juan de la Peña (Huesca) [9].

Given the relevance of this relic, in 2014, the Holy See granted the Diocese of Valencia the ability to declare one Jubilee Year of the Holy Chalice every five years. This is an outstanding privilege that very few places have around the world. Two jubilee years have already been celebrated, in 2015 and 2020, which is expected to stimulate the number of pilgrims and tourists visiting the city. Figure 1 shows the number of international tourists visiting the Valencian Community (orange bars). The considerable drop in 2020 and 2021 was due to the coronavirus pandemic. The number of visitors to Valencia Cathedral has been available since 2017: 303,009 (2017); 345,150 (2018); 381,408 (2019); 61,188 (2020); 123,347 (2021); and 310,827 (2022), being the sixth–eighth place most visited in the city, depending on each year [10]. If these values are multiplied by 27, they become quite similar to the number of visitors to the Valencian Community (Figure 1), which leads to the assumption of a similar trend in previous years. In summary, the evolution of visitors to the Cathedral is expected to increase progressively in the future, given the demand for Valencia as a tourist destination but also due to the fixed periodicity for the celebration of the jubilee years [11].



**Figure 1.** Evolution of the number of international tourists visiting the Valencian Community, Spain, in millions (orange bars). Data source: [12]. Blue bars correspond to the number of visitors to the Cathedral of Valencia since 2017, multiplied by 27 to facilitate the comparison of the trend. Data source: [10].

According to an archaeological study on the Holy Chalice published in 1960 [13], recently revised [14], it cannot be rejected that the cup in Valencia Cathedral was the one used by Jesus. Nonetheless, tourists visiting this cathedral often doubt the authenticity of the famous relic. Scholars of tourism have made authenticity a matter of debate but without consensus about what the concept represents [15]. Research studies demonstrate the continuing public desire to see the “real things” rather than copies or virtual alternatives [16] (p. 15). The concept of authenticity in heritage can be defined into two levels of understanding: (i) the authenticity of tourist emotional experiences, and (ii) the authenticity of toured objects. The latter refers to the genuineness of artifacts based on evidence data,

documented facts, and demonstrable context [17,18]. This is an objective authenticity, though this issue is still a matter of debate [19].

For scholars of tourism, the concern is for the authenticity of experiences. By contrast, museum curators or archaeologists may be concerned primarily with the authenticity of objects, since an engagement with an object may be a moment of direct connection with the past [16] (p. 14). Lau recalls the importance that tourists put on object-based authenticity as the source of the experience with which they are able to engage [20]. This issue is relevant to tourists visiting Valencia's Holy Chalice because they often wonder about the relic's authenticity for different reasons. One of them is due to the scarce evidence supporting the oral history, according to which, the cup travelled from Jerusalem to Rome. Another reason is because currently there are other cups that claim to be the authentic Holy Grail [21] (pp. 42–44), [22]. Nonetheless, the one at Valencia Cathedral yields the stronger evidence to be considered as the true relic, mainly given its ancient tradition supporting this consideration. Actually, the first historic written document mentioning the Chalice of the Last Supper is dated to 1399 AD [21] (pp. 161–165).

Taking into account these considerations, the main goal of the present study is to clarify two key concerns raised by the Holy Chalice that visitors often wonder about:

- What is known about the family who owned the Holy Grail?
- Why would Jesus use a gemstone cup instead of one made of glass, silver, or gold?

Answering both questions is essential for establishing a plausible story about the Chalice from the beginning, capable of attracting the interest of tourists and pilgrims. Neither of these two issues that visitors would like answered has been studied in depth and the information is not easily available to visitors; hence, they are the research problems that will be tackled separately in the present work.

## 2. Methods

Aimed at addressing who the family was that owned the Cenacle and the Holy Grail, the methodology applied is the following. Firstly, it has been verified whether this information is available on the official website of Valencia Cathedral and other related websites. Searches have also been carried out on the internet. Next, the main historic studies on the Holy Chalice have been reviewed, reaching the conclusion that there is a diversity of opinions regarding this issue, although some scholars suggest that the Cenacle could have belonged to the family of Saint Mark the Evangelist.

The work of Clausen [23] is currently the most updated and exhaustive publication on the history and archaeological studies about the Cenacle. This author also states the lack of consensus among experts regarding the family who owned the Cenacle. Next, a literature search has been performed about commentaries on the biblical passages relating to the Upper Room where the Last Supper was celebrated, and it was found that most modern exegetes consider that it was probably the house of Saint Mark.

Section 3.1 presents the results and discussion of this literature review undertaken, exposing in an orderly manner the main arguments supporting the hypothesis that the Cenacle might have belonged to Saint Mark's family. In order to back up the oral history, according to which the Holy Grail was brought to Rome by Saint Peter, it is essential to understand the connection between Mark and Peter, for which an exhaustive literature search has been carried out on the biography of the former (Sections 3.1.3 and 3.1.4).

Regarding the second question (i.e., why Jesus would have used a gemstone cup), the approach has been to search the state of the art of glass manufacture at the time of Jesus, and also the legal considerations of glass according to Jewish culture (Section 3.2.1). Next, a study has been addressed regarding the material used for the Eucharistic chalices during the first two centuries (Section 3.2.2). Recent studies about the archaeological findings of carved stone vessels in Palestine have been reviewed (Section 3.2.3), supporting the hypothesis that such containers were regarded as immune to ritual impurity. This aspect is important from a theological standpoint, which further supports that Jesus might have

used a valuable gemstone cup (Section 3.2.4). Based on all these considerations, other cups that claim to be the authentic Holy Grail are discussed (Section 3.2.5).

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Regarding the Family Who Owned the Holy Grail

The archaeological study of Beltrán [13] highlighted the difficulty of tracing the Holy Grail from Jerusalem to Rome, from where it was supposedly sent to present-day Huesca by Saint Lawrence in 258 AD. There are multiple historic aspects prior to this date that have not been investigated yet in detail. One of them, which is addressed in this section, is the information about the family who owned the Cenacle and the Holy Grail.

##### 3.1.1. The Cenacle Belonged to a Rich Disciple of Jesus

Jesus gave precise instructions about the place and preparations of the Last Supper: “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house’” (Mt 26:18). The expression “to a certain man” seems to refer to someone unknown, but this is not the case, because Jesus designates himself as “the Teacher” (Lk 22:11; Mk 14:14), a term opposite to disciple, which reveals that this man was his follower [7] (p. 37), [24–26]. Interestingly, the term διδάσκαλος (*didáskalos*, teacher) appears just once in the Gospel of Mark (14:14), when referring to the house owner. Maybe Jesus had celebrated Passover in the same place on previous occasions [27] (p. 392). The biblical text insinuates that the Cenacle’s owner was someone important who preferred to remain anonymous.

The Last Supper took place in a *large* room upstairs (Mk 14:14–15). The word *room* (Mk 14:14), in the original Greek κατάλυμα (*katályma*), means “guest room” [28] (p. 650), [29]. It was usually the largest room in the house, located on the upper floor. Between 10 and 20 diners had to gather for the Passover dinner [30] (p. 273). The Cenacle was probably a spacious chamber because, according to tradition, it is the place where the apostles lived after the ascension (Acts 1:13), and where they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4). Apparently, it became a meeting place for the first Christians (Acts 12:3,12), and Peter went there after being released from prison (Acts 12:6–14). The servant recognized Peter’s voice, which suggests that the Apostles were fully trusted by the owners of that house. Next, it is mentioned that the servant did not open the *door* immediately (Acts 12:14). The original Greek word for door, πύλωνος (*pylōnos*) properly means *entrance passage*, that is, the passage joining the front part of the house leading to the street with the inner courtyard [31], which is also indicative of a big house.

The location of the Cenacle remained in the memory of the first Christian communities. On the southwestern hill of modern Jerusalem, today called Mount Zion, what remains of the famous Church of the Apostles is now part of the building structure traditionally venerated as King David’s tomb, though the second floor is still revered as the Cenacle [23,32,33]. Hence, the Upper Room was likely located in the part of Jerusalem known as the Upper City, the aristocratic neighborhood, about 400 m away from Herod’s palace [34]. This is consistent with the Gospel, since Jesus chose a large two-story house with servants (Lk 22:10,12), which should correspond to a wealthy family.

Around 25 BC, Herod the Great built his palace in the Upper City, and many aristocratic families moved to this part of Jerusalem, south of Mount Zion. They belonged to the priestly classes, members of the royal family, main merchants, tenants of tax collection, large landowners, high officials, and military officers [35,36] (p. 107). Archaeological findings support this consideration [37,38]. Judea suffered an earthquake in 31 BC that caused severe damages [39], which might have been a motivation for aristocratic families to build new residences in the Upper City.

##### 3.1.2. Speculations about the Family Who Owned the Cenacle and the Holy Grail

The website of Valencia Cathedral contains a detailed description about the Holy Chalice [40]. It states that the relic was taken to Rome by Saint Peter and was used by the

successive Popes until Sixtus II, but nothing is mentioned regarding who the owner of the Cenacle was. Such information is also absent in the leaflets that tourists receive when visiting the Holy Chalice. By contrast, the webpage of the Royal Brotherhood of the Holy Chalice mentions that the Cenacle belonged to the family of Saint Mark [41]. By performing a web search on this matter, it turned out that this issue is also mentioned in a few blogs, but with no doubt this information is not easily available to tourists.

In a rigorous study on the Holy Chalice published in 1736, it is speculated that the Cenacle belonged to the noble and opulent Chuza (Lk 8:3), steward and treasurer of Herod Antipas [8] (p. 30). Another study reviews this issue and states a lack of consensus, proposing Simon the Leper, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea as plausible candidates, but no sound reasons are provided [7] (pp. 38–40). Both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (Jn 19:38–39) were discreet disciples of Jesus for fear of the Pharisees. The rabbinic literature mentions that Nicodemus was a great wheat merchant who lived luxuriously [36] (p. 114). Joseph of Arimathea (Mt 27:57) was also a rich landowner.

Beltrán did not discuss this issue in depth [13], but a subsequent study reviews the diversity of opinions stated by previous works and comments that, according to some bible scholars like G. Ricciotti, F. Prat, and A. Fernández-Truyols, the Cenacle might have belonged to the family of Sant Mark [21] (pp. 47–49).

The most updated and rigorous study about the Cenacle, published in 2016 [23], also revises who the owner of the Upper Room was. One tradition narrated ca. 530 AD by the pilgrim Theodosius in his work *De situ terrae sanctae* affirms that the Church of Zion in Jerusalem was the house of the evangelist Mark [42]. Although there is no consensus about the exact location of such a church because different names have been given (e.g., the Church of God, Upper Church of the Apostles, Holy Sion, etc.), it is quite probable that Theodosius was referring to an ancient Judeo-Christian synagogue built in the place associated with the Upper Room [33]. Based on this early Christian tradition and exegetical studies, the Cenacle was quite likely the house of “Mary the mother of John, also called Mark” (Acts 12:12) [33] (p. 3), [43,44] (p. 202). She was probably a wealthy and influential widow from Jerusalem, mother of Saint Mark.

A quote from Mark’s gospel reinforces the hypothesis that the Cenacle’s owner was rich, since it insinuates that the family also owned the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives [45]: “A young man followed him covered only with a linen cloth. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked” (Mk 14:51–52). Theophylactus of Ochrida (11th century AD) considers it probable that this young man was from the house in which Passover had been celebrated. Given that Mark is the only evangelist who mentions this episode, this young man might be the evangelist himself [28] (p. 680), [30] (p. 318), [46,47]. Actually, Mark was much younger than Peter, since he refers to him as “my son” (1 Pet 5:13), as a sign of appreciation. It has been speculated that Mark would have been about 8–12 years old when Jesus was crucified [33] (p. 27).

The word *σινδών* (*sindóna*) in Mk 14:51–52 means fine linen fabric [48]. The youngster who appears on the scene, on a cold night (Mk 14:67) dressed only with a thin garment, probably lived nearby. Gethsemane means *oil press* in Aramaic, which suggests that there might have been a house or oil mill where this young man would have been sleeping, who, awakened by the racket of Jesus’ arrest, would have left in a hurry without time to get dressed, just with a sheet or sleeping garment [44] (p. 174), [45]. Someone who sleeps with a linen garment is indicative of belonging to a wealthy family [28] (p. 679), [30] (p. 319) because linen fabrics were very expensive (Lk 16:19; Rev 15:6; 18:12.16; 19:8.14). This is consistent with the hypothesis that the young man lived in a large house with servants located in the upper area of Jerusalem.

### 3.1.3. Biographical Details about Saint Mark

The expression “John who is called Mark” (Acts 12:12.25; 15:37) indicates that he had a Jewish name (John) and another Hellenized Latin name (Mark). Interestingly, the name *Μάρκος* (*Márkos*) is a Greek transliteration of the Latin name *Marcus*, supposedly

originating from the adjective *marticus*, meaning “dedicated or consecrated to Mars”, the Roman god of war. Furthermore, the name of the house servant, Ῥόδη (*Rhódē*) (Acts 12:13) is also of Greek origin. These clues reveal that Mark belonged to a Greek-speaking family [49]. The quote Acts 6:1 states the differences between the two first Christian communities: Hellenists and Hebrews. Those who spoke Greek gathered at the house of John Mark, whose leader was Stephen (Acts 6:5.8), martyred ca. 34 AD. Another meeting place was the house of James, a relative of Jesus (Gal 1:19; 2:9). Actually, when Peter was released from prison ca. 43 AD and went to Mary’s house (i.e., the mother of John Mark), he told those gathered there: “Communicate this to James and the brothers” (Acts 12:17).

Mark accompanied Paul on his travels (Acts 12:25; 13:13; Col 4:10; Phm 24) and also walked with Barnabas (Acts 15:36–39), who was his cousin (Col 4:10), a native of Cyprus (Acts 4:36). Mark participated in their first missionary journey, but he left them in Perga, Pamphylia (Acts 13:13), probably due to the risks of the planned trip, and decided to return to Jerusalem. This incident caused a disagreement between Barnabas and Paul, to such an extent that they both went in different directions (Acts 15:37–40). It seems that Mark had the charisma of service (Acts 13:5), since Paul calls him a co-worker (Phm 24).

According to Saint Irenaeus (ca. 180 AD) [50] and to the Ecclesial History written by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (ca. 325 AD) (II, 15; III, 39:15, VI, 14:5–7; VI, 25:5) [51], Peter had Mark as a disciple, who helped him as an interpreter for a long time. When Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas, he probably also developed administrative tasks like the preparations of travels, food, accommodation, messages, interviews, etc. [28] (pp. 30, 52). These activities would justify Paul’s comment: “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me in the ministry” (2 Tim 4:11).

Eusebius’ Ecclesial History (II, 16:1) [51] and Jerome (ca. 385 AD) [52] mention that Mark was the first bishop of Alexandria in Egypt. This tradition must have emerged very soon, given the early importance of the Christian community of Alexandria, with prominent scholars like Clement (ca. 150–ca. 215) and Origen (ca. 184–ca. 253). However, strangely, none of them make reference to Mark’s connection with the city, which leads us to doubt whether he was actually present in Alexandria [53], [54] (pp. 425–427). The tradition that he died as a martyr in this city arose around the 4th–5th century [28] (p. 54), but there is no prior evidence.

#### 3.1.4. Clues about Saint Mark Derived from His Gospel

The Ecclesial History (III, 36) states that Peter presided over the Roman Church until his death [51]. The composition of the second gospel is attributed to Mark, by request of the Christian community of Rome [55] (pp. 136–138), around the year 65–67 AD, probably shortly after Peter’s death. Mark writes in uncultured, simple, and popular Greek. His style presents great liveliness and realism. Apparently, the text was composed in Greek. Some experts claim that it is the Greek that an Aramaic-speaking Jew would write, which may be influenced by Mark being Peter’s interpreter, whose native language was Aramaic. Since Peter was an uneducated man (Acts 4:13), his knowledge of Greek would have been limited, which would explain why Mark helped him as an interpreter, and it is probable that he translated for Peter from Aramaic [55] (p. 126).

It is uncertain whether Mark was fluent in Hebrew because he uses the Greek version of the Bible (Septuagint) in some of his quotes and expressions, instead of the Hebrew or Aramaic version. For example, in Mk 7:6, the evangelist inserts the quote from Is 29:13 according to the Greek version. Moreover, it is also unclear if Mark would have spoken Latin, which was the official language of the Roman Empire, used in laws and the army. Jews living in Rome would have spoken Latin and Greek, but few would also be skilled in Aramaic. Given that Mark has been regarded by early historians as Peter’s interpreter in Rome, he would help Peter to put his Aramaic into Greek and, maybe, he also assisted him to address those who spoke only Latin [56]. The fact that Mark might have also spoken Latin would be consistent with him being from an educated family of the upper classes.

In summary, the probable location of the Cenacle in the upper aristocratic neighborhood of Jerusalem and the fact that it was a large two-story home with servants, with a child who sleeps with linen garments and educated in the study of languages, attests that it was the residence of a wealthy family.

### 3.2. *Why Jesus Would Have Used a Gemstone Cup*

The Cenacle was lent to Jesus with everything ready (Mk 14:15) including the tableware, which would comprise the cup of blessing that he used to institute the Eucharist. Few allusions to this cup are found in the early Christian authors. John Chrysostom, in his homily 50:3 on Saint Matthew (ca. 395 AD), writes that “at the last supper, it was not of silver that table, nor the chalice in which the Lord gave his disciples his own blood” [57]. It is just mentioned that the Holy Grail was not made of silver, which leads us to speculate that it might be a glass cup, taking into account that the first Eucharistic chalices were commonly made of glass, as stated in Section 3.2.2. In order to discuss this hypothesis, the next section reviews the technology of glass manufacturing in Palestine in antiquity.

#### 3.2.1. Development of Glass Manufacturing in Palestine and Legal Regulations

Glass was practically unknown in Palestine before the Hellenistic period, being a rare and very expensive material [58] (p. 192). In 1968, the archaeological excavations of a Hellenistic city in Tel Anafa, north of the Sea of Galilee, discovered several thousand glass objects dating back to the mid-2nd century BC [59]. They were mainly mold-made drinking bowls. No blown glass objects were found. These finds in Tel Anafa and other places attest to the manufacture of glass with the use of molds and higher temperature furnaces. This technological development of the mid-2nd century BC led to a large-scale production of glass vessels, which became common and affordable, being an ordinary craft in Palestine. Alexandria became the most famous and preferred glass-producing center of the Greek and Roman trade.

The glass blowing technique was invented at the end of the 1st century BC [60,61], which simplified the manufacturing process by not having to depend on complex furnaces, so colorless glass vessels (*crystallina*) spread dramatically. The trade of these objects is usually dated to the beginning of the reign of Augustus (27 BC). The cost of these vessels was much cheaper, gradually becoming available throughout the Roman world in a few decades [62]. These blown glasses were highly appreciated due to their lightness and transparency, which allowed for the quality of wines to be appreciated. The fragility of glass was also valued, as attested by Seneca (59 AD) [63]. Some of these vessels were true works of art and could become as appreciated as those made of silver and gold, as mentioned by Pliny the Elder ca. 77 AD [64].

The technological development of the mid-2nd century BC with molds and improved furnaces resulted in a large-scale production of glass objects. This generalization of their use in Palestine made legal regulation necessary. According to a tradition that appears in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud, Rabbis Jose ben Joezer and Jose ben Johanan decreed that glass vessels were susceptible to ritual impurity [58] (p. 197). Both were the first of five pairs of wise rabbis (*zugot*) who directed the Sanhedrin in the mid-2nd century BC. This decree was promulgated as a measure applicable to all socio-religious classes, which reflects the common use of glass in daily life at that time. The treatise Keilim of the Mishnah (ca. 2nd century AD), which deals with the laws of ritual purity relating to glass vessels, mentions that they are susceptible to impurity [65].

#### 3.2.2. Eucharistic Chalices Made of Glass

Since the persecution of Christians unleashed by Nero (64–68 AD), many others followed until the last one by the Roman emperor Julian (361–363 AD). In these difficult early times for Christians, expensive ritual chalices would not always be available, which further supports the use of glass as an appropriate material for Eucharistic vessels.

The *Liber Pontificalis* states that Pope Zephyrinus (199–217 AD) gave orders that, in front of the celebrating bishop, the ministers should hold glass patens [66]. This fact insinuates that, originally, the calyxes were also made of glass. Tertullian, in his work *Pudicitia* (7:1, 10:12) written ca. 217–222 AD, mentions a decorated Eucharistic chalice that was translucent, which suggests being made of glass [67].

As time went by, the cost of glass vessels became much cheaper and common [62], so their appreciation as a noble material would have declined considerably. Probably for this reason, and given the fragility of glass, Pope Urban I (227–233 AD) instituted the use of silver chalices [68]. Saint Augustine mentions that the church of Cirta in Numidia (Africa), during the persecution of Diocletian (303 AD), had “two chalices of gold and six of silver” [69], but none made of glass are named, which seems to reflect the custom at that time. The oldest surviving metal chalices date from the 6th century AD.

Despite the use of glass for the Eucharistic chalices for two centuries, it is unlikely that the Holy Grail was made of glass because, at the time of Jesus, the use of blown glass was widespread in the domestic sphere and these vessels were relatively affordable. Taking into account that the Cenacle owner was a rich disciple of Jesus, it seems unlikely that he would have lent Jesus a cup of blessing of little value like glass or pottery. On the contrary, it would have been the most precious and valuable ritual cup owned by the family.

### 3.2.3. Legal Considerations of Vessels Carved in Stone

In the 1970s and 1980s, a great number of vessels carved from local limestone were discovered in diverse Roman-era archaeological excavations in Palestine. In the district of Jerusalem, quarry caves have been discovered where these vessels were crafted [70] (pp. 3–4). Based on the archaeological evidence, experts consider that the manufacture of these limestone vessels arose at the end of the 1st century BC in Jerusalem. They were used by wealthy families probably as domestic utensils for purification rites. It was customary for Jews to purify or clean household utensils before being used.

Some decades later, around the mid-1st century AD, limestone vessels became popular and affordable, so their manufacture spread to other areas of Palestine. In domestic settings, the most common container found is a hand-carved mug. In Jerusalem, hemispherical bowls were also common. The archaeological evidence suggests that carved stone vessels used by Jews in this time period were considered immune to ritual impurity [70] (p. 32), [71] (p. 40). Hence, they did not need to be purified and could be reused without the need of being rinsed with water after each use.

The rites of purification were intended to cleanse of all imperfection, leaving people or things free of certain impurities. Impurity was understood in a broader sense, as “a negative state of being that should be avoided as much as possible” [71] (p. 55). Jewish regulations in the Torah prescribed how to purify oneself from impurity acquired by contact, by performing rites of washing and ablutions (Lv 11:32; 15:12; Nm 31:23) as soon as possible in order to recover the proper state.

If Jesus had celebrated Passover in a middle-class house, perhaps the owners would have lent him tableware carved from limestone, which was appropriate for domestic ritual uses. Moreover, limestone vessels were popular and affordable in Jerusalem at that time. However, a wealthy disciple such as the Cenacle’s owner would have most likely lent Jesus the most valuable ritual cup owned by the family. The hypothesis that such a cup was carved in agate stone, according to the Holy Chalice at Valencia Cathedral, is consistent with the Jewish culture at that time because gemstone cups were regarded as valuable, as discussed next, and, moreover, not susceptible to ritual impurity.

### 3.2.4. Other Precious Materials for Ritual Vessels in Jewish Tradition

John Chrysostom comments that the Holy Grail was not a silver cup, and it is insinuated that it was probably not a gold bowl either [57]. This consideration is reasonable because all metals were regarded by Jews as susceptible to becoming impure (Nm 31:22–23), which is a disadvantage from a theological standpoint. Another possibility is that Jesus



used a gemstone cup, which were regarded as immune to legal impurity as discussed above [71] (p. 40). The manufacture of these luxury vessels was booming during the 3rd–1st centuries BC in the eastern Mediterranean [13] (p. 76). In the Hellenistic–Roman period, gemstone bowls were very popular among the aristocratic classes to inspire discussion at refined banquets, being used to impress the guests and as a sign of social distinction [14] (p. 177). The book published by Del Bufalo in 2016 is currently the largest compilation of Hellenistic–Roman gemstone vessels [72]. Some experts suggest that the production of such bowls was in decline in the mid-1st century BC due to competition with glass vessels, the quality of which had improved significantly [70] (p. 25).

Cups carved from agate were very expensive for several reasons: due to the presence of veins or bands that offered unusual beauty, because the raw material came from very far away, and because the carving process was enormously slow and delicate, with a high risk of cracking. Their translucent character was also appreciated. With no doubt, the agate cup at Valencia Cathedral would have been extremely valuable in antiquity, which agrees with the celebration of the Last Supper at a wealthy house located in the aristocratic district of Jerusalem.

### 3.2.5. Chalices Claiming to Be the Authentic Holy Grail

Tourists visiting Valencia Cathedral often wonder about the authenticity of the famous relic, for different reasons. One of them is because, currently, there are other cups that claim to be the Holy Grail [22]. Some of them are as follows:

- The Sacred Basin (*Sacro Catino*), kept in the Cathedral of Genoa, Italy, is a hexagonal dish of green glass regarded as the Holy Grail since the 13th century. But, given its small depth and large perimeter, it could not have been used as a blessing cup.
- The Antioch Chalice is a silver cup dated around 500–550 AD. Currently, it is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, USA. It was discovered in Syria in 1910, and the interior cup of the chalice was initially considered to be the Holy Grail. Based on the aforementioned comment by John Chrysostom that the Holy Chalice was not made of silver, this candidate has to be disregarded.
- The Ardagh Chalice was discovered in 1868 in Ardagh, Ireland. On view at the National Museum of Ireland, this silver chalice is dated to the 8th century AD. Being made of silver, the same consideration applies as in the previous case.
- The Nanteos Cup is a medieval wooden bowl, held for many years at Nanteos Mansion, near Aberystwyth in Wales, UK. By the early 20th century, it had become a candidate for the Holy Grail, but there is no tradition supporting this consideration.
- The Hawkstone Grail is a small onyx cup discovered in 1920 at Hawkstone Manor in Shropshire, UK. It has been identified as a 1st-century Roman scent jar and was purported to be the Holy Grail by its owner in 2004.
- The Chalice of Doña Urraca is a jewel-encrusted onyx chalice kept at the Basilica of San Isidoro in León, Spain. It belonged to the infanta Urraca of Zamora, the daughter of King Ferdinand I of León. Since the year 2014 it has been claimed to be the true Holy Grail, but there is no prior tradition.

A study about Valencia's Holy Grail mentions another five chalices that have claimed in the past to be the authentic Holy Grail [21] (pp. 42–44). However, all of them lack evidence to support this consideration.

## 4. Conclusions

The Holy Chalice kept at Valencia Cathedral is one of the most outstanding relics of Christianity. The Holy See recognized its importance in 2014 by authorizing the periodic celebration of a Jubilee Year of the Holy Chalice. This event has led to a growing interest among tourists and pilgrims visiting Valencia, who wonder about the relic authenticity (i.e., to what extent it can be stated that the agate cup was the one used by Jesus).

#### 4.1. Theoretical Considerations

The present work addresses two concerns that visitors often wonder about, which were not discussed in depth by Beltrán [13]. Regarding the family who owned the Cenacle and the Holy Grail, it has been discussed in Section 3.1 that it was the residence of a rich disciple of Jesus, as it was a two-story house with servants (Lk 22:10.12) located in the aristocratic neighborhood of Jerusalem. The identity of the owner remains anonymous, but it was likely Saint Mark's family, according to an early tradition mentioned by Theodosius (ca. 530 AD), which is consistent with the common opinion of modern exegetes.

With respect to the concern of why Jesus would have used a precious cup carved in gemstone, it has been stated (Section 3.2) that, according to John Chrysostom, the cup of the Last Supper was not made of silver [57]. The fact that glass Eucharistic chalices were common until approximately 220 AD suggests that Jesus may have used a cup made of glass. However, this is unlikely, because glass vessels were relatively affordable at that time, and they were considered susceptible to impurity.

The hypothesis that Jesus used a valuable gemstone cup, as deduced from the Holy Chalice at Valencia, is consistent with the premise that the Cenacle belonged to a rich disciple of Jesus, who would have lent him the most valuable cup of blessing owned by the family. Moreover, cups carved in stone were regarded as immune to impurity, which also fits with the theological meaning of the Eucharist, because it would be inappropriate to hold the consecrated wine in a container that could be susceptible to impurity.

#### 4.2. Practical Recommendations

Responding to the concerns that tourists often wonder about is necessary to provide a plausible and credible story that will trigger the curiosity of visitors, which could enhance tourism to Valencia in the future. It is recommended to make the main conclusions derived from the present work available to visitors and tour guides. This information should be included on the official webpage of Valencia Cathedral and in tourist guides. Moreover, the brochures handed over to visitors could also be updated.

#### 4.3. Limitations of the Research and Future Directions

The periodic celebration of jubilee years in Valencia is going to be a worldwide tourist attraction in the forthcoming years. Therefore, research on the Holy Grail is an open topic, as there are still several issues awaiting further investigation. One limitation of the present work is that the perception that visitors have about the authenticity of the relic has not been evaluated, nor what their interest would be in knowing the foundations that support this authenticity. Surveys could be carried out to evaluate this issue.

Regarding the supposed journey of the Holy Grail from Jerusalem to Rome, some issues still remain uncertain, like what indications point to the presence of this relic in Rome until 258 AD. Another limitation is that it becomes difficult for the current Western mentality to comprehend why vessels carved in stone were considered by Jews as immune to ritual impurity, and the theological implications of this property.

Visitors often ask various questions about archaeological aspects of the Holy Grail, but such information is not easily accessible. For example, what is known about the origin of the design pattern, whether it was common at the time, what criteria are used to date the cup, and what modern science can contribute to the study of the Holy Grail. Another aspect of interest is to guess what the price that a gemstone cup like this might have had in antiquity. Beltrán dated the agate cup between the 4th century BC up to the 1st century AD, but more precisely between the 2nd–1st centuries BC [13] (p. 77). However, in a review of Beltrán's study, it has been dated between the 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD [14] (p. 170). Further research will be necessary to establish a more precise dating. With no doubt, research on the Holy Grail is a challenge for the city of Valencia that must be encouraged and promoted.

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