



Mary Magdalene: Tradition and Gospel

SESSION 2

Who was Mary Magdalene, and what is her importance to Christians? How should Christians view the Gospel of Mary?

Introduction

By the time Luke began writing his Gospel, perhaps as early as 80 CE, he knew that “many [had] undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us” (Luke 1:1). We know one of these accounts, the Gospel of Mark. It is also quite likely that Luke knew a collection of Jesus’ sayings that both he and Matthew quoted. Scholars call that imagined document “Q,” from the German word *quelle*, meaning “source.” Some historians place the *Gospel of Thomas* also in the first century. Luke’s word “many” seems to imply that in the 80s there were others. Certainly a century later there were many more. By about 180 CE the respected church father Irenaeus of Lyon wrote *Against Heresies*. The “heretics,” teachers whom he denounced, had produced their own Gospels, he charged. One of the Gospels that he named was the *Gospel of Mary*.

How We Got This Gospel

In 1896 German scholar Dr. Carl Reinhardt made the rounds of Cairo antique dealers hoping to find something interesting. This time he was lucky. What he found was a bundle of papyri (pages written on a kind of paper made from the papyrus plant). The language was Coptic, the tongue of ancient Egypt. Four books were bundled together: the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, the *Acts of Peter*, and the *Gospel of Mary*. This codex (book with pages, not a scroll) had been found, he was told, wrapped in feathers and hid-



den in a niche in a wall in a grave near Akhmim. It was soon housed in the National Museum in Berlin and given the name Papyrus Berolinensis 8502.

A century later the *Gospel of Mary* was still not widely known. Two world wars and various lesser catastrophes delayed its publication until 1955. In 1945 a farmer found a clay jar in the sands of Egypt, near Nag Hammadi. It contained at least fragments of fifty-two books, probably hidden there from orthodox Christian persecutors. For scholars the Nag Hammadi papyri were sensational. Copies of two of the books found back in 1896 were among them. That at last began to bring scholarly attention to the *Gospel of Mary*.

The codex Dr. Reinhardt found was probably copied in the middle of the fourth century. We know, however, that Irenaeus was denouncing this Gospel in 180 CE.

Fragments of it have been found in what was probably its original language, Greek. A reasonable guess as to the date when the Gospel was composed would be around 140 or 150 CE.

The High Place of Mary in “the Lost Gospels”

In our first session on Mary Magdalene we looked at the reverence, sometimes almost worship, orthodox Christians accorded Mary down through the centuries. Those deemed “heretics” by the official church spoke highly of her, too.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is usually thought of as the earliest of the Gospels not in the canonical New Testament. It says:

Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said: “Look, I will draw her in so as to make her male, so that she too may become a living male spirit, similar to you.” (But I say to you): “Every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”¹

The *Gospel of Philip*, probably from the second century, found among the Nag Hammadi papyri, tells us:

[Jesus] loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her on the mouth. . . . They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” The Savior answered . . . “Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in the darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness” (64:1–10). [Later this Gospel adds:] There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary, his mother, and her sister, and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion.²

Though most linguists do not agree, some have said that the word *companion* could be translated “wife.” Clearly some revered Mary.

The Gnostic Nature of the *Gospel of Mary*

Most of the scholars who have written about this Gospel have described it as “gnostic.” That word is used to describe a number of ancient books, most—but not all—of them Christian. There was great variation in the

FROM PISTIS SOPHIA

Peter started forward and said to Jesus: “My Lord, we will not endure this woman, for she taketh the opportunity from us and hath let none of us speak, but she discourseth many times.”³

thought of different gnostic writers, but most shared these ideas:

- Very spiritually minded, they tended to look down on this material world.
- Salvation is through *gnosis*, “knowledge.”
- One finds the deepest knowledge by looking within one’s self.
- *Gnosis* enables the souls of those in the know spiritually to break out of their confinement in this world and see visions of a higher realm.

These gnostic ideas are found in the *Gospel of Mary*. Recently, however, Esther de Boer, in her exhaustive study *The Gospel of Mary: Listening to the Beloved Disciple*, rejects classifying this Gospel as gnostic. It contains ideas suggesting stoicism. Stoics believed that the good life was the life of reason, unmarred by passion or feelings. But, de Boer warns, the *Gospel of Mary* is unique and does not fit perfectly into gnostic, stoic, or any other set category.⁴

She, like others, dates the writing of the Gospel to the second century, perhaps as late as 150 CE. But de Boer believes that it is based on the memory, perhaps even the teachings, of the woman the New Testament pictures as the most prominent of the women who followed Jesus.

Understanding the *Gospel of Mary*

At the climax of her Gospel, Mary tells of a vision granted her by Christ:

They asked the soul, Whence do you come, slayer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space? The soul answered and said, What binds me has been slain, and what turns me about has been overcome, and my desire has been ended, and ignorance has died. In a aeon I was released from a world, and in a Type from a type, and from the fetter of oblivion

which is transient. From this time on will I attain to the rest of the time, of the season, of the aeon, in silence.⁵

Most people when they first read these words find themselves responding as this Gospel tells us Andrew did: "I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas" (9:2). On the lips of Jesus those words do seem strange to us! Here, as best I can interpret it, is something of what Mary's Gospel meant.

Unfortunately, the first six pages of the ancient manuscript are missing. As the surviving pages begin, the risen Christ is speaking with several disciples. Peter asks about the ultimate fate of the material world. Christ replies that all will eventually be restored to its original nature. Some of the stoic philosophers, noting the cycles of nature, predicted that in the end everything would revert to its original state and the world will start all over again. Probably one goal envisioned by the writer of this Gospel is a sorting out of all things, all natures, now confused, to the way they were originally intended. Christ moves on a few verses later to deplore the mixing of passion with our true nature that should control us, our minds.

In chapter 4 Peter asks about sin. Christ replies, "it is you who make sin when you do the things that are like the nature of adultery, which is called sin." For "matter gave birth to a passion that has no equal, which proceeded from something contrary to nature" (vv. 26–30). The mixing of passion with our true nature, our mind, brings sickness and death. The mind must, as the stoics taught, free itself from passion. Guided by Christ's teachings, it can liberate those in the know from being bound by any rules and regulations.

Instead of evil passion, you should focus your mind on the fact that "the Son of Man is within you" (v. 34). Look for him there, within yourself. A repeated idea of the gnostics was that salvation comes from a focus on knowledge deep within us, our true human nature.

Strengthened by the Christ, the true human nature that is deep within, the disciples should take courage. Nevertheless, when Christ has left them alone the disciples are terrified. "How shall we go to the Gentiles and preach the gospel?" they mourn. "If [those who crucified Jesus] did not spare Him, how will they spare us?" It is at this point that brave Mary emerges as the heroine. "Mary stood up, greeted [one translation says "kissed"] them all, and said to her brethren, Do not weep and

KEY IDEAS FROM THE GOSPEL OF MARY

- Salvation comes through the mind.
- Salvation comes through our struggle upward.
- Women may be wiser and more courageous leaders than men.
- God still speaks and may add books to the Bible.
- Church hierarchy often suppresses creativity in lay people.
- Mary Magdalene was Jesus' personal favorite, perhaps even above Peter.

do not grieve nor be irresolute, for His grace will be entirely with you and will protect you" (5:1–2; compare 2 Cor. 12:9).

She has encouraged them. Peter seeks more. "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember, which you know, but we do not" (5:6).

Mary now reveals the secret vision Christ has given her. How, she had asked the Lord, does one see a saving vision? Christ answers that it is through the mind; in the mind is "the treasure." That mind is between the spirit and the soul. Unfortunately, the next four pages are lost, with any explanation they may have given about this location of the mind.

Mary now describes the difficult journey of the soul upwards to salvation. It must transcend four "powers." Unfortunately here four more pages of Mary's manuscript are lost, and with them the account of the first "power" the soul must overcome. The second power is desire. Desire could not really see that the soul is only a garment that could leave desire behind. The upward-bound soul rises above desire.

But now the soul must resist the third power, ignorance. The enlightened soul overcomes ignorance by the knowledge that all present things will be dissolved. The eternal soul itself, however, cannot be bound by temporal things.

Finally the soul must overcome the fourth power, a seven-fold enemy: darkness, desire, ignorance, fear of

death, domination by the flesh, earthly wisdom, and wrathful wisdom. (Later orthodoxy spoke somewhat similarly of seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.) But the soul, conqueror of what is mortal and of space itself, overcomes them all. It has slain desire and ignorance. At last it attains rest and the peace of silence.

Andrew, as quoted above, says that he just doesn't believe Jesus ever said that kind of thing. Peter has a different basis for skepticism. "Did He really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her?" Clearly the New Testament itself emphasizes the leadership role of men. But a close reading of Paul's letters shows that at first women were leaders, too. (See, for example, the list in Rom. 16:3–15 and Phil. 4:2–3.) By the time 1 Timothy 2:11–12 was written, the orthodox church sought to restrict all authority to males. There are hints, however, that some who were considered "heretics" found leadership roles for women.

Elaine Pagels in *The Gnostic Gospels* sees in Peter's protest not just male chauvinism but also the defensive voice of the second-century ecclesiastical establishment.⁶ A hierarchy was beginning to claim all authority, represented here by Peter. Second-century leadership distrusted any claim to speak for God through visions or any other way outside its approved ranks.

Peter's rebuke reduces Mary to tears. Levi (Matthew), however, voices a protest against Peter's sexism—and perhaps his entrenched authority. "Now I see you [Peter] contending against the woman like the adversaries," (those enemies of the soul Mary had described). "If the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? . . . He loved her more than us. Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect Man, and . . . preach the gospel" (9:5–9).

The Gospel ends, "And when they heard this they began to go forth to proclaim and to preach" (9–10).

Responses to the Gospel of Mary

Most historians say that the *Gospel of Mary* does not shed any light on the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth.

It does, however, give us insight into the history and diversity of the church in the second century. It voices a protest against the authority of those who claim spiritual descent from the first apostles. Women, now being excluded from leadership roles in the church, here found a protest with which they could identify. We see in it how some thinkers challenged the theology—or theologies—of the New Testament. And if we are puzzled by its cosmology, we can admire its author for trying to relate Christianity to the "science" of that day. The secret Mary concealed according to the Gospel of Mary was that Christ revealed to a woman, Mary Magdalene, special knowledge, esoteric truths not even Peter knew, offering a different path to salvation.

For nearly two thousand years, Christians have been inspired by the story of Mary's encounter with Jesus that first Easter (John 20:1–18). Mary was the first of a noble army who spread the gospel all over the world. Often braver than men, many women have given their lives in that mission.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. The Gnostic Society Library, The Nag Hammadi Library, the *Gospel of Thomas*, trans. Stephen J. Patterson and James M. Robinson, http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gth_pat_rob.htm.
2. The Gnostic Society Library, The Nag Hammadi Library, the *Gospel of Philip*, trans. Wesley W. Isenberg, <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gop.html>.
3. The Gnostic Society Library, Gnostic Scripture and Fragments, *Pistis Sophia: The Books of the Savior*, trans. G. R. S. Mead, chap. 36, <http://gnosis.org/library/pistis-sophia/index.htm>.
4. Esther de Boer, *The Gospel of Mary: Listening to the Beloved Disciple* (London: Continuum, 2005).
5. Karen King's translation, found at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm>, chap. 8:20–24.
6. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).