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THE CRUCIFIXION OF MARY MAGDALENE

Christ, and *The Gospel According to Mary* (Magdalene). While the discovery of all of these works was exciting, a Gospel attributed to a female disciple of Jesus came as a complete surprise to Christian academia.

Not only is Mary's Gospel unique because it is attributed to a woman, it is also unusual in that it highlights the struggle for apostolic authority in the early Church.

The first English translation of *The Gospel According to Mary* was not published for another two decades, and the first scholarly analysis of Mary's Gospel (that of Karen King's) was not published until 2003.²⁹ Long before the world learned of Mary's Gospel, two more (but extremely fragmentary) manuscripts of this Gospel were discovered during

excavation of the ancient town of Oxyrhynchus, along the Nile in Northern Egypt. Whereas the four manuscripts of the Berlin Codex were written in Coptic and date to the fifth century,³⁰ the Papyrus Rylands 463 and Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525 fragments of *Mary* found at Oxyrhynchus were written in Greek, and date to the third century. The Gospel itself was probably composed sometime during the second century,³¹ and Karen King believes that it may have been written as early as 125 C.E.³²

The Gospel According to Mary, however, was not the only manuscript in the Berlin Codex to refer to Mary Magdalene. *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*—a Christianized version of a first-century work known as *Eugnostos the Blessed*—also mentions Mary. This same work was also discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945.³³

All four works contained in the Berlin Codex have been significant for the study of early Christianity, but no text more so than *The Gospel According to Mary*. Not only is Mary's Gospel unique because it is attributed to a woman, it is also unusual in that it highlights the struggle for apostolic authority in the early Church. Other works bearing the tradition of Mary Magdalene hint of this struggle, but Mary's Gospel addresses it directly.³⁴

VOICES FROM THE PAST

Although *The Gospel According to Mary* has been available to academics for some time, most scholars have only recently begun to address the central issue of this Gospel: the early struggle for apostolic authority that pitted male apostles against female apostles. No doubt academia has been slow to recognize the importance of gender issues in the early Church simply because New Testament scholarship has heretofore been the exclusive domain of men.

Study on *The Gospel According to Mary* also languished for many years because scholars had a hard time categorizing it. Specialists in Gnostic Christianity focused on such texts, but generalists in the field of New Testament studies tended to view Mary's Gospel as just one more "Gnostic" or "heretical" work that had no relationship to the evolution of "legitimate" Christianity. During the 1980s, this attitude slowly began to shift as a result of Elaine Pagel's ground-breaking work, *The Gnostic Gospels*. Pagel insisted that many gospels, long considered "Gnostic," needed to be reviewed in an entirely new light. Karen King's seminal work on *The Gospel of Mary* has given this argument considerable support.

As to the contents of *The Gospel of Mary*, there are a number of important themes. The first six pages of this Gospel are missing, and the extant manuscript begins with the Savior discoursing on the nature of matter (all matter returns to its source of origin), and the nature of sin (sin does not exist in reality, but is the by-product of disharmony within the individual due to passions of the flesh).

At this point the Savior bids farewell to his disciples and instructs them that from this moment on they should seek, and then follow, the infallible teacher that abides within every human soul. He also tells them that, as apostles, they should not lay down ecclesiastical laws as "the lawgiver" (the orthodox Church) does. As his disciples and apostles they are merely to follow his teachings and preach the ever-present kingdom of God—called here the Son of Man, or Child of True Humanity.

Once Jesus disappears, Mary Magdalene takes his place by comforting the grieving disciples and encouraging their faith. The other disciples



III. The Suppressed Tradition of Mary

MARY AS APOSTULA APOSTOLORUM

We have learned so far that only Matthew's Gospel (80-90 C.E.) specifically argued that the risen Jesus commissioned only his male disciples as apostles. That the other Gospels are vague on this point suggests the possibility that not all early apostolic traditions were based on a patriarchal model. Even though Paul argued against the women of Corinth, for example, he referred to at least one woman, Junia, as an apostle.¹

The most impressive argument against the Church's claim that all of the apostles were men, however, can be found in the resurrection narratives themselves. Even though each of the evangelists attempted to obscure the apostolic tradition of Mary to one degree or another, they did not altogether succeed. A careful reading of the various resurrection accounts will, I believe, reveal that the earliest apostolic commission was granted to a woman—Mary Magdalene—not to *any* of the male disciples of Jesus.

Although many Christians may not be aware of it, the tradition of Mary Magdalene as the first apostle goes back to ancient times. Church leaders throughout Christian history have often referred to Mary Mag-

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dalene as the *apostula apostolorum*, the apostle *to* the apostles!

The Greek word, *apostolos*, means “one chosen and sent with a special commission as the fully authorized representative of the sender.”² Due to

Church leaders throughout Christian history have often referred to Mary Magdalene as the apostula apostolorum, the apostle to the apostles!

theological and political necessity, the male evangelists took pains to obfuscate Mary’s true status in early Christianity. It is easy to read the canonical Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus and still miss one of the story’s main elements: the commissioning of Mary Magdalene—not as an apostle to the world at large, but as an apostle to the

other apostles. The author of *The Gospel of John* is even more specific in stating that Mary was commissioned to go to the *male* disciples of Jesus!³

Once we begin to accept Mary’s apostolic claim as standard Gospel tradition, then all of the references to Mary as leader, teacher and comforter *of men* in extra-canonical literature (such as *The Gospel of Mary*) no longer seem new or out of place. These claims for Mary were solidly based on canonical tradition.

Mary Magdalene was first given the honorific of “*apostola apostolorum*” by Hippolytus, Bishop of Rome during the early part of the third century.⁴ Hippolytus—like others before and after him—noted that Mary’s commission was inherent in the words: “Go and tell.”

As an apostle, Mary was more than a messenger, however. She was not just sent to deliver a message that Jesus had risen, she was sent to *convince* the other disciples that Jesus had transcended death. This is an important distinction since first-century Jewish men routinely ignored and belittled the testimony of women. If the male disciples eventually came to believe in the risen Jesus as a result of Mary’s testimony, then that turn of events would have been highly unusual (and embarrassing to the early Church fathers). Even so, we will discover that this transference of faith was neither automatic nor immediate.

Since the names of other women who accompany Mary Magda-

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But in Mary's case, the relationship with Jesus is intensified due to her unique ability to perceive the true meaning of his teachings. A perfect example of this relationship can be found in *The Gospel of Mary*, where Mary is the Savior's star pupil; the next master-in-waiting. As his intern, Mary is being groomed by Jesus to take his place and, indeed, she does just that.

Mary's unique spiritual status is confirmed by her titles and descriptions: "The Blessed One,"⁴⁰ The "companion of Wisdom,"⁴¹ the "Pure Spiritual One,"⁴² the "woman who understood completely."⁴³ Rather than lusting after Mary, the enlightened Jesus fully recognizes and respects the enlightened Mary:

Mary, thou blessed one, whom I will perfect in all of the mysteries of the height, speak openly, you whose heart is raised to the kingdom of heaven more than any of your brothers.⁴⁴

For you are blessed before all women on the earth, because you will be the fullness of all fullness, and perfection of all perfections.⁴⁵

Excellent, Mariam, the blessed one, who will inherit the whole kingdom of Light.⁴⁶

Understanding how the word "kiss" is used in mystical literature, let us turn to the sentence about Jesus and Mary Magdalene in *The Gospel of Philip* that Dan Brown made so much of in his novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. For Brown, and those who read his fiction as fact, this sentence "proves" that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a physical relationship:

Jesus loved her (Mary Magdalene) more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on the mouth.⁴⁷

Dan Brown's version of this sentence, however, does not exist. The actual sentence from *The Gospel of Philip* reads like this:

... her more than ... the disciples ... kiss her... on her ...

SEX, MYTH AND METAPHOR

The words above are all that remain of this part of *Philip's* text. As it happens, the papyrus manuscript of *Philip* (Codex II, tractate 3 of the *Nag Hammadi Library*) is badly damaged. Based on the *context* of the surrounding text, however, scholars have reconstructed this sentence and feel confident that the reconstruction accurately represents the intention of the author. The *reconstructed* sentence that appears in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* reads:

[... loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to]
kiss her [often] on her [...].⁴⁸

The brackets around the words above indicate “lacunas” or blank spots in the text. Given the context we can feel confident that the sentence has to do with Jesus and Mary. As for the word “kiss,” just when we are about to discover what part of Mary’s anatomy Jesus used to plant his lips on ... there is a *hole* in the papyrus!⁴⁹ Some translators supply the word “mouth” here to fill the lacuna because they understand the context within which this sentence fits. And that *context* makes all the difference. Although it was ignored by Brown, the author of *The Gospel of Philip* is very clear about how he is using the word “kiss”:

It is from being promised to the heavenly place that man [receives] nourishment. [...] him from the mouth. [And had] the word gone out from that place it would be nourished from the mouth and it would become perfect. For it is by a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth. For this reason we also kiss one another. We receive conception from the grace which is in one another.⁵⁰

Now that we know the author’s intent, let’s put the kiss sentence back into its original context:

As for Wisdom (Sophia) who is called ‘barren’ (without

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of angels, who said that he was alive. And certain of them who were with us went to the tomb, and found it as the women had said; but they did not see him.¹¹

...the discovery of an empty tomb was a secondary, and ultimately meaningless, story element.

This passage is testimony to Christian resurrection faith at the time Luke wrote his Gospel, and it has four main elements: 1) the women discovered an empty tomb; 2) the women had one or more visions which convinced them that Jesus had transcended death; 3)

male disciples confirmed the existence of an empty tomb; and 4) this confirmation did *not* lead to faith as it had for the women.

In terms of the myth itself, then, the women's discovery of an empty tomb acted as a catalyst for visions that convinced them that Jesus was alive. The *same* discovery on the part of the men, however, did *not* have this effect. *The transformative event, therefore, was not the discovery of an empty tomb, but the visionary experiences that followed it, and only women had those visionary experiences at first.* In reality, the empty tomb itself has always been irrelevant to Christian faith.

With this in mind, we can reread all the other Gospel accounts of the resurrection and realize that the discovery of an empty tomb was a secondary, and ultimately meaningless, story element. Resurrection faith developed, not as a result of material evidence, but from inner spiritual transformation on the part of the believer.

In *Matthew, Mark, Luke* and *John*—in each and every case—Mary and the other women came to believe that Jesus was alive, not because they found his tomb empty, but because they experienced his living presence in some manner. This suggests to me that *the earliest resurrection tradition having to do with Mary Magdalene was originally independent from the later tradition about an empty tomb.* It seems highly likely that the empty tomb legend, whenever it was invented, was grafted onto Mary Magdalene's tradition as a matter of narrative convenience.

MARY MAGDALENE ACCORDING TO *LUKE*

Where does all this evidence leave us? I believe it allows us to propose a new hypothesis for the origins of faith in the resurrection of Jesus. It allows for the possibility that the *original* resurrection tradition was one in which only women had visions of a living Jesus. At some point, rumors about women having these experiences reached other groups of Jesus' disciples. At first these rumors were dismissed out of hand because they originated with women. As those rumors continued to build, however, they finally reached critical mass within the larger Jesus community. Through the power of suggestion, *some* male disciples of Jesus also began to have visions of Jesus. Later still, when Christians like Mark and Luke felt compelled to justify resurrection faith on the basis of historical events, the empty tomb legend was invented and appended to the resurrection legend about Mary Magdalene.

Assuming, for the sake of argument that this scenario represents historical fact, it certainly would have left Luke with a problem. As a promoter of patriarchal Christianity, he did not want his audience to come to the conclusion that Christian faith originated in the company of women.

Luke therefore had to take pains to diminish the importance of women. He did this, first, by suggesting that Mary Magdalene's visions were not altogether credible because she had once been possessed by demons. Secondly, Luke erased Mary Magdalene, by name, from the crucifixion scene. Thirdly, he insisted that the male disciples of Jesus did not find any value in the women's post-crucifixion visions.

Finally, Luke invented—or, perhaps, accurately reported—other resurrection traditions that included only men. After his Emmaus story, Luke tells another story in which Jesus appeared directly to the male disciples, insisted on his physicality, and then commissioned the men to go forth and preach in his name (24:36-53).

Luke further diminished the importance of women by claiming that when they arrived at the empty tomb on Easter morning they were met, not by a young man in white, and not by an angel, but by “two *men*” in “shining garments” (24:1-4). Stating that these two men wore “shining