
APOSTLE TO THE APOSTLES

David Lorimer

THE GOSPEL OF MARY OF MAGDALA

Karen L. King

Polebridge Press, 2003, 230 pp., \$24, p/b – ISBN 978-0-944344-58-3

THE GOSPEL OF MARY MAGDALENE

Jean-Yves Leloup

Inner Traditions, 2002, 178 pp., \$14.95, p/b – ISBN 978-0-89281-911-9

THE MEANING OF MARY MAGDALENE

Cynthia Bourgeault

Shambhala, 2010, 289 pp., \$18.95, p/b – ISBN 978-1-59030-495-2

MARY MAGDALENE REVEALED

Meggan Watterson

Hay House, 2019, 239 pp., \$24.99, h/b – ISBN 978-1-4019-5490-1

Since reading and reviewing *The Gospel of the Beloved Companion* with its subtitle the Complete Gospel of Mary Magdalene, I have been researching other scholarly work on this Gospel of Mary and its background. There are three versions extant, two in Coptic and one in Greek, but they all have the same missing sections at the beginning and in the middle. The first was discovered as far back as 1896, but, for various reasons, no version was published until 1955, 10 years after the Nag Hammadi discovery of Gnostic Gospels in Upper Egypt. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of the rediscovery of these Gospels, buried for more than 1500 years in the wake of the order given by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in 367 to destroy non-canonical texts. Those who hid them in an urn in a cave must have preserved them in the hope that they would one day be rediscovered. They present a very different portrait of Jesus as sage, a teacher of transformative wisdom and gnosis. And far from being the prostitute conjured up by Pope Gregory the Great in a homily in 591, Mary Magdalene emerges as the beloved companion, herself embodying a profound inner knowing beyond the understanding of male disciples such as Peter and Andrew. She represents Sophia as the counterpart to Yeshua as Logos.

These books explore her role from a number of different angles. Karen King is professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard, Jean-Yves Leloup is an Orthodox priest and spiritual teacher in his own right who also has a background in psychology, and has translated and edited not only the Gospel of Mary, but also the Gospels of Philip and Thomas (he gave me a French edition of this in 1988). In addition, in developing the bridal chamber imagery of the Gospel of Philip (his edition is subtitled *Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Gnosis of Sacred Union*) he has written *The Sacred Embrace of Jesus and Mary - the sexual mystery at the heart of the Christian tradition*, as a result of which the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church requested him to write his confession

of faith. In the course of this, he remarks that there is no evidence that permits him to claim that Jesus expressed his full sexuality with Mary Magdalene or any other woman, but he adds that there is equally no evidence that permits him to claim that he did not do so, noting in the book that what is not lived cannot be redeemed. Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest and retreat leader, among whose other books is *The Wisdom Jesus*. Meggan Watterson is a feminist theologian with a Masters in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School and facilitator of REDLADIES, a community of radical love that lets her preach about female saints and mystics who inspire and teach us to live in service of love.

Karen King dates the Gospel of Mary - the only one written in the name of a woman - to the early second century (also about the time of the Gospel of John) which means that it must have been circulating for at least 250 years before disappearing. In this early period, there were many communities of belief trying to make sense of Jesus and his life and message, but what she calls the 'master story' and consequent sharp distinctions between orthodoxy and heresy had not yet crystallised. The picture was one of pluralism, and the creeds only came into existence in the early fourth century when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and established it as the state religion, calling together the (male) bishops at Nicaea in 325. In this way, he consolidated it into a classic dominator system, as characterised in the work of Riane Eisler, whose latest book I reviewed below. In the Gospel of Mary, it is Mary **who** steps forward in a leadership role after the death of Jesus. She models the courage of true discipleship, strength of spiritual character and prophetic visionary insight.

In this gospel, as well as in the Gospel of the Beloved Companion (I have carried out a precise textual comparison), the disciples ask how they are going to go out to the rest of the world to announce the good news given that if they did not spare Jesus, how will they be spared? At this point, Mary stands up and greets them (in one text 'tenderly kisses them') as brothers and sisters and tells them not to be irresolute but rather to praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us truly/fully human. This is an important concept, corresponding in the Greek to *Anthropos*, with gender neutral connotations and denoting an archetypal state of integration or the marriage of Heaven and Earth, masculine and feminine, spirit and body. King explains that this means 'to come to know that one's true self is a spiritual being whose roots are nourished by the transcendent Good. Salvation means appropriating the spiritual Image as one's truest identity.' (p. 61) Another image evoked in Watterson is the Aramaic *idihaya*, meaning undivided.

Peter addresses Mary as sister, saying that the Saviour loved her more than all other women and asking her to tell us the words that she remembers, the things that she knows but which they don't because they have not heard them (in GBC, 'the words of the Rabbi which you know and understand, but we do not, nor have we heard them.' Mary then says that she will teach them about what is hidden from them. In the texts of the Gospel of Mary the vision begins, and then pages 11 to 14 are missing. In GBC, the whole sublime ascent of the soul past the guardians of seven gates is recounted, while the texts of the Gospel of Mary resume at the third power

and are truncated. They converge again in a general sense towards the end with references to the chain of forgetfulness existing in time and Mary lapsing into silence 'for it was in silence that the Teacher had spoken to her.' In GBC, however, it is clear that Mary achieves gnosis, she sees the all and knows the truth of herself, the truth that is I am – this corresponds to a text the *Dialogue of the Saviour* where Mary is characterised as the 'woman who knew the all', becoming 'the completion of completions' – the very embodiment of feminine wisdom.

At this point, the texts report that the disciples did not understand what she had been saying. Both Andrew and Peter express disbelief, remarking that the ideas are too different from what they have known (GBC - 'strange and complicated ideas'), and Peter questions whether Jesus would have spoken privately to a woman about secrets they did not know ('did he really prefer her to us?') - and are they to turn around and listen to her? Mary weeps when she hears this, asking if Peter can seriously accuse her of lying. Levi comes to her defence, saying that Peter is treating her as an adversary. As the reader can appreciate, this episode goes to the heart not only of leadership roles with respect to women and men, but also of spiritual authority – who has the authority to teach and on what basis? The Church has constructed a male apostolic succession on the basis of belief, but here is Mary with a deeper insight – the one who really understands the inner meaning and who has experienced gnosis.

The more general point, treated by all the authors above, is a contrast between soteriology or salvation and sophiology representing gnosis and inner transformation. The first highlights the theological centrality of Jesus's crucifixion, which King sees as is 'tied directly to an ethics of sin and judgement.' For sophiology, the emphasis falls not on Jesus but on his teaching as a revelation of saving truth rather than the crucifixion as an atoning sacrifice by the Lamb of God. In my extensive textual commentary on GBC and the Gospel of John, I highlight the contrast between Jesus saying in John 'I am the way, the truth and the life' while in GBC he says that his words are the way, the truth and the life. The Lamb of God discourse present in John is entirely absent in GBC, suggesting that it is a later theological addition. King asks if spiritual authority should be grounded in prophetic experience rather than apostolic succession, contrasting the competing claims of Mary and Peter. Historically, Mary was side-lined and vilified, the letter and the law triumphed over the spirit. However, the Gospel of Mary along with those of Thomas, Philip, the Pistis Sophia and a number of other texts have restored the central position of Mary as the apostle to the apostles in a deeper sense than just being the first to witness the resurrection according to canonical sources. All this is also happening at a time of the resurgence of feminine wisdom and a renewed emphasis on intuitive ways of knowing. In this respect, Jean-Yves Leloup observes that 'the masculine mind tends to overlook visionary knowledge associated with the feminine principle.' Maybe we now have the 'ears to hear' so frequently referred to in these texts; Mary is one who sees beyond surface hearing and understands that 'Reality is both who we are, and what we must become.'

Cynthia Bourgeault characterises Mary as the woman at the heart of Christianity and she tries to steer a middle course in view of more sensational coverage in the books of Dan Brown and others. She points out that Christianity has taken its bearings from the monastic model of celibate renunciation, with its implication of sexual abstinence as the ideal, rather than a sacred state of unitive being; and the shadow of Christian sexuality and the feminine has been projected onto her. She also makes the point that 'unlike the canonical gospels that emphasise right belief as the basis for salvation, these wisdom Gospels emphasise right practice. They are transformation-minded.' She sees the relationship between Jesus and Mary as a fifth way of the heart, the path of conscious love involving kenosis or self-emptying, laying down oneself for the other, with both love in the service of inner transformation and inner transformation in the service of love. *In the bridal chamber of the heart, one is restored to fullness of being, to one's true Self (her understanding of salvation) moving from duality to participation, then to union and communion. This spiritual transformation, also symbolised by anointing, is the alchemy of love.* At the end of a chapter on France including a section on the Occitan culture that gave rise to the Cathars and courtly love, she remarks that 'the voice of Mary Magdalene has again spoken loud and clear, calling Christianity back into accountability for the love story at the heart of its theology and to a responsible visioning of human sexuality and feminine wisdom.' This corresponds to the affirmation of a partnership rather than dominator society, and it is easy to see how the mediaeval Catholic Church represented a classic dominator system threatened by the egalitarian structure of Catharism, where women initiates (parfaites) like Esclarmonde de Foix had equivalent status to men.

The recent book by Meggan Watterson is the most passionate and radical, referring to the feminist Gospel of Mary and the Christianity we haven't yet tried. Not only have we not yet tried this Christianity, it has in fact been buried, persecuted and burned at the stake over the centuries. Like the other authors, she laments the fact that in the fourth century 'Mary's status as the companion of Christ, the first to receive his teachings on how to perceive them from within the heart and how to become unified ourselves will all be lost for millennia.' Women's spiritual authority within the church has been 'hard-won, opposed or flat-out rejected from the 1st to the 21st-century' along with the body and sacred sexuality. She writes of Mary's sense of betrayal after entrusting the disciples with her secret teachings and being called a liar - then the outrage of being lied about for centuries. Commenting on the logic of fundamentalism, she writes: 'your God is so small, your God has such a fragile ego, he will send us all to hell if we don't believe in him...you've mistaken God for power. I think whoever the hell Jesus was, he was about love. I think Jesus was about a love that's the opposite of power.' This last phrase resonates through the book - a love that is the opposite of power, but which in fact represents real power in the sense of potency and the potential to transform.

Watterson reminds us of many forgotten stories involving prophetic women - Thecla and Paul, Perpetua shouting to people to love each other even as she was being dismembered, Marguerite Porete (burned at the stake in 1310) for her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls* where she writes: "I am God, says Love, for Love is God and

God is Love, and this Soul is God by the condition of Love.' Then Joan of Arc: 'I am not afraid. I was born for this.' Like the other women cited, Joan listens to the voice of angels, 'listening to the deep. Listening to what we hear from within us. We have never been taught to listen to the feminine, to turn inward, to trust that dulcet voice that knows itself completely.' She sums up the intent embodied in all the books reviewed here: 'what we have remembered is the other half of the story of Christ. We have remembered the love that can only come to life through us, from within. We have remembered her, the woman who knew Christ by heart.' (p. 197) It is a time to remember our ultimately undivided nature, to bring together masculine and feminine, light and dark, conscious and unconscious, human and divine, finite and infinite, merging the self with the soul, standing in and acting from this spiritual presence: a voice in the service of love.