

The Gospel of Mary

Mary of Magdala has been much maligned by church scholars across the centuries. This was brought about by a theological shift which occurred from the third century, when Hippolytus of Rome designated Mary as the ‘apostle to the apostles’ to the sixth century, when Gregory the Great presented her as a redeemed whore. There is no evidence to support Gregory’s claim. Rather, when the New Testament Gospel texts are read through twenty-first century eyes, then Mary emerges as a strong and intelligent woman who was an active member of the historical Jesus’ revolutionary community.

In support of this conclusion, we can make reference to a second century CE papyrus that was entitled *The Gospel of Mary*. This text was written when the early Christian communities were widely dispersed around the Eastern Mediterranean. These communities were often isolated from one another and under threat of persecution and would have had no New Testament and no Nicene or Apostles Creeds to articulate Christian doctrine. Most significantly, the early Church would have had no accepted chain of authority or one single understanding of Jesus. *The Gospel of Mary* disappeared for over fifteen hundred years until a single, fragmentary copy in Coptic translation came to light in the late nineteenth century. Carl Reinhardt purchased this manuscript in Cairo and brought it to Berlin in 1896. Here it was placed in the Egyptian Museum with the official title and catalogue number *Codex Berolinensis 8502*. The Egyptologist Carl Schmidt then produced a critical German translation that is now generally known as the *Berlin Codex*. However, two additional fragments in Greek came to light in the twentieth century. These are the early third century *Papyrus Rylands 463* and the *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525*. Although fewer than eight pages of the ancient papyrus text survive, nevertheless, these scant fragments provide us with an intriguing insight into one part, most probably Gnostic, of the early Church and Mary’s part in it. In effect, the Gospel presents a radical interpretation of Jesus’ teaching as a path to inner spiritual knowledge. Written in the context of the grief suffered by the disciples after Jesus’ death, *The Gospel of Mary* is a response to Jesus’ charge that they go forth and preach the Kingdom of God. Sadly, the first six pages of the Gospel are lost but the remaining text begins with a discussion between Jesus and his disciples after the Resurrection. Essentially, the discussion concerns the end of the material world and the nature of sin. The text states that in the present time all things whether material or spiritual are inter-linked but that at the end of time this will be changed because each nature will return to its own original state. Furthermore, the nature of sin is linked to the lack of acknowledgement of the spiritual life. The narrative ends with a warning against the disciples following false leaders or false laws. Instead, and in order to achieve inward peace, they should seek the childlike humanity within themselves.

We know from the New Testament Gospels that Jesus’ commission to his disciples was to go forth to preach his truth. However, the disciples were in a precarious situation and in fear of the same agonising death as Jesus, if they were to follow this commission. It is within this context that we can make reference to the words attributed to Mary Magdalene in *The Gospel of Mary*. These are words of profound comfort when she says to them, ‘...do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for His grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather, let us praise His greatness, for He has prepared us and made us into Men’. Furthermore, Mary goes on to relate to them the words Jesus has spoken to her in a vision. This is with respect to the nature of prophecy and the way in which the soul may rise to eternal rest. Clearly, Mary feels blessed at the sight of Jesus in the vision and asks, ‘Lord how does he who sees the vision see it, through the soul or through the spirit?’ Jesus responds, ‘He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but through the mind which is between the two’. So then, it would seem that Jesus has chosen to speak to Mary because he knows that she has the

intellectual capacity to understand what he is about to tell her. It is infuriating that at this point the text breaks off and the following four pages are missing. However, some scholars argue that this exchange between Mary and Jesus challenges church authority because it is only Peter who is representative of the orthodox teaching.

Indeed, what follows after Mary's dialogue with Jesus is all too predictable because Andrew flatly refuses to believe her. Again, Peter charges in feet first and denies that Jesus could possibly have given such advanced theological teaching to a woman! Indeed, in Peter's mind, Jesus could not possibly prefer Mary to his male disciples. The implication here is that Mary has lied in order to increase her authority within the group and this results in her bursting into tears. However, Levi now defends Mary by accusing Peter of being a hothead and of treating her as an enemy. The words attributed to Levi are as follows: 'But the Saviour made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why

He loved her more than us. Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect Man, and separate as He commanded us and preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Saviour said. And when they heard this they began to go forth to proclaim and to preach.'

Here the text of *The Gospel of Mary* ends but what are we to make of Mary's words '...for He has prepared us and made us into Men'? Does she mean that she has been made into a man through Jesus' words? This is an interesting point because the ultimate aim of the Gnostic was to eliminate sexual difference. Indeed, equal part in ecclesial practice and discussion were apportioned to both sexes. In effect, this meant that women had to lose their femaleness in order to be subsumed into the larger male group, whose actual sex was no longer significant. At the same time, the Gnostics used the words male and female in correlation with the words good and evil. Inevitably, we should conclude that they most likely associated women with sexuality and sin. Even when Mary is reaching out to comfort the disciples, Levi echoes her words by calling the disciples to '... put on



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the perfect Man...'. However, it is perhaps *The Gospel of Thomas* that is most insightful on this point because here, Peter, in usual patriarchal mode says, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life'. In response Jesus says, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males'. He then adds, 'For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of God'. So then, there is a correlation here between the male and spiritual mode and in adopting such spirituality Mary has the possibility to achieve greater spiritual heights.

Clearly then, *The Gospel of Mary* exposes the erroneous theological interpretation of Mary by Gregory the Great. Rather, if this codex indeed originates from the Gnostic church, then Mary's relationship with Jesus presents a most convincing argument for the legitimacy of female leadership in the early Church. Indeed, the fragments offer a sharp critique of illegitimate power and a utopian vision of spiritual perfection through female eyes.

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