

Stories of the Master

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The Mystery of Mary Magdalene

The women looked at each other and said, “What have we just seen? What are we seeing now? I don’t understand and they ran out of the tomb and back to the city to tell the disciples about the strange events. Mary Magdalene arrived first. She burst through the doors where the disciples were sleeping and said,

“Peter, John, all of you. Awaken! Something has happened at the tomb.”

“Whoa! Slow down Mary! What do you mean something has happened at the tomb? What are you talking about?”

“I went to the tomb early this morning with the other women to put more spices on the body. We went to give Jesus his proper burial and when we got there the stone was rolled away. Two men appeared to us and told us that Jesus wasn’t in the tomb anymore, something about him rising. We don’t understand. We don’t know what it means.”

Peter and John looked at each other. They frowned and said, “Are you sure? Are you sure you have not been dreaming? Are you OK, Mary?”

“Dreaming? No. We haven’t been asleep like you. We got up. We went to the tomb. We weren’t hiding in fear in a house. We went to do something about Jesus’ burial and when we got there I tell you the stone was rolled away. Two men, two angels appeared to us. Look, here come the other women now and they will tell you what I saw.”

But as the other women were approaching the house, breathless, Peter and John said, “Take us there Mary. Show us what has happened and the three of them ran back to the tomb” just as the other women arrived at the house. They were out of breath and when they caught their breath they said to the other disciples who were now all awake. “You won’t believe what has happened!”

Peter and John arrived at the tomb. It was just as Mary Magdalene had said. The stone was rolled away from the tomb entrance, and the Roman seal was broken. John went to the tomb’s entrance and hesitated but Peter walked straight in. He went to the ledge carved out of the side of the mountain and there he and John saw the linen cloth that had been used to bury Jesus. They saw the headpiece that had covered his head. They picked it up and the scent of spices filled the room even as they held the blood-stained garment.

Peter and John looked at Mary Magdalene who asked, “What does it mean Peter? What does it mean John? The angel said he had risen, but how? What does that mean?”

“Risen? The resurrection doesn’t happen until the last day on earth. I don’t know what this means,” and he held the burial garments to his face and breathed in their spices. And so, Peter and John walked back to the city puzzled and bewildered, confused and frightened, and not yet knowing what had happened to the body of Jesus.

But as they walked to the city, Mary stayed at tomb. Fear began to fill her heart. “What if this was just a cruel joke? What if the Romans took him to another place? What if the priests took his body somewhere else? What if someone else stole the body during the night? Then, we

Stories of the Master

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cannot not give him a proper burial and prepare him for the resurrection at the last day.” And then she burst into tears with renewed grief, shock, and confusion.

As she wept she heard voices in the tomb, and she looked in and the two men she had seen earlier appeared again and they said, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

And she said, “Because someone has taken away his body. Someone has taken away the body of my Lord and I don’t know where they have laid him. Please help me!” And as she began to cry again she noticed someone walking towards her and the person with a strong yet gentle voice said, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”

Mary was filled with anguish and many contradictory thoughts. She forgot about the angels she had seen. She forgot about what they had said. She was confused and troubled by all that had happened and she said, “Sir, please, I am looking for the body of my master that we buried here on Friday. If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take his body and give him a proper burial,” and then she heard the voice again, and this time it sounded so familiar and so lovely,

“Mary!”

Mary wiped her eyes, she looked up and focused on the face of the man who stood before her, and then she saw him – it was Jesus!

“Jesus, Master! It is true. You are alive!” She fell at his feet, grabbed his feet and legs and wrapped her arms around them as if she would never let them go and Jesus with a smile and a tender laugh said, “Mary, you don’t have to cling to me. You don’t have to hold on like this. I will never leave you. Rise. Go to my brothers and tell them I will soon go to my Father and their Father, to my God and their God.” Mary let go and from her knees she watched as Jesus and the other two shining ones walked away.

And once again, Mary ran back to Jerusalem. She found Peter and John. She gathered all the disciples and said, “Peter, John, all of you – I know what it all means. Jesus has been raised from the dead. I have seen him and I have talked with him! Jesus is alive!”

What would we give to relive this story! But I hope this is enough to cause us to wonder which joy was greater for Mary Magdalene – to find healing and release from seven evil spirits – or being the first to see the resurrected Jesus. I would think it to be the latter, but to be sure, we one day must ask her!

And with that imaginative retelling of the resurrection story, we have all the biblical information about Mary Magdalene! She was released from evil spirits by Jesus, she with many other women accompanied him on some of his journeys, she witnessed the crucifixion and burial, and she was the first to see the resurrected Jesus.

But if this is all, why do some say she was the wife of Jesus? Why do some say she was the apostle to the apostles? Why have some believed that a power play in the church by despotic men robbed her of her special role in the first centuries of the Christian Church?

Stories of the Master

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Many of these ideas come from a group of second and third century books which we commonly call Gnostic Gospels. Gnosticism was a religion that flourished in the second and third centuries after Christ and made a strong play to co-opt the original message of Jesus. These “Gospels” spoke of Jesus, the apostles, and Mary Magdalene and they claimed to give the original message that Jesus taught but which was suppressed by power hungry clerics in an organization that wielded ever-increasing influence in the Roman world.

For centuries, all we knew about these books was through Christian leaders such as Tertullian and Irenaeus as they wrote about the differences between the Christian faith and Gnosticism. Then, in 1945, a startling discovery was made in Nag Hammadi, Egypt¹ – dozens of ancient writings were found and among them were the Gnostic writings about which the Christian leaders wrote. Included in these ancient books were the Gnostic Gospels such as *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Philip*, and *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*.

In *The Gospel of Philip*, one paragraph has aroused the curiosity of many and led to the sensational claim that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were husband and wife. Here is what it says:

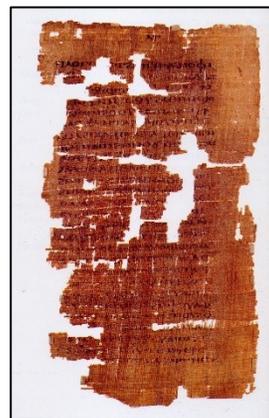
“And the companion of the . . . Mary Magdalene . . . her more than the disciples . . . kiss her . . . on her . . .”

Did you find that difficult to read? If so, it is because the . . . indicate breaks in the ancient and highly decayed manuscript. In the gaps, scholars can insert words knowing that there are a certain number of spaces where a word or words were originally written. Thus, they have guessed about some words we can use to fill in some of these gaps to make the manuscript a little more readable. Here is what they have proposed with a fair amount of certainty.

“And the companion of the . . . Mary Magdalene. . . [loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her . . .”

This helps some, but we still have holes in the manuscript and unless another one is found, we will never know what it originally said. Scholars have proposed these ideas.

The first pause seems to indicate the identity of Mary Magdalene’s companion or a title for her. The second pause identifies the person who loved her. Some believe this to be Jesus. Then it mentions this person kissing her often somewhere on her body. Her mouth? Some have conjectured that this passage indicates that Jesus is the companion who loved her more than all the other disciples and that



This is the first page of the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas* and illustrates decayed manuscripts with gaps.

¹ Nag Hammadi is a city in the southern part of Egypt. It is on the west bank of the Nile River and about 50 miles northwest of Luxor.

Stories of the Master

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he kissed her on her lips because she was his wife. That is certainly reading a lot into a manuscript full of holes!

Is this a valid reading? If so, was Jesus indeed married to Mary and was this information squashed by a male-dominated clergy who wanted to suppress the original teaching of Jesus and keep “women in their place”? To answer these questions, we must first understand more about *The Gospel of Philip* and the other Gnostic writings.

Whether one is a Christian or a Gnostic, everyone should agree that these two religions represented a different way of thinking. They were not sub-categories of one great religion. Gnostics believed Christianity to be false. Christians believed Gnosticism to be false. They were not variations of one great thought but different approaches to God and to life.

In Gnosticism, the ultimate God of all things was too pure to have anything to do with this world. He created lesser gods and one of them was an evil, inferior deity. This was the God of Israel that is presented in what we call the Old Testament. To rescue humanity from this evil god, one of the gods – the Christ spirit – indwelt the man Jesus who taught his disciples the way out of this evil world and the path back to bliss and union with the ultimate God. This Jesus gave a secret revelation to Mary Magdalene – the true Gospel that all people must receive. Jesus did not really rise from the dead physically but his soul ascended into heaven. But before it did, Jesus commissioned Mary to give this secret revelation to others. She was his supreme leader, his emissary to the other apostles and the chief spokesperson to the world.

There are several problems with this Gnostic story. Let’s list them.

First, they were written 100-200 years after the events in Israel took place. How did these writers know what happened? The Gospels were written within a generation or two of the events and many eyewitnesses still lived to corroborate the stories. Luke wrote his Gospel based upon eyewitness accounts.²

Second, the Gnostic Gospels reveal Greek dualist thinking which makes a sharp distinction between the physical and spiritual worlds. The physical world is inferior and evil. Humanity’s goal is to escape it and ascend through heavenly realms to reunite with the ultimate God. But the biblical story of Jesus has a different background and context. It is found within the narrative that begins with the creation of the world. The world is not an evil place. The creator is not an evil, inferior God. He is the ultimate God and is good. Physical things are not bad. Sin and rebellion have made things bad. God promised that he would send a Savior to restore all things on this

² “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus.” Luke 1:1-3

Stories of the Master

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planet. This restoration is called “the kingdom of God,” the message that Jesus prominently preached during his life.³

Third, the Gnostic gospels use symbolism in their writings to express spiritual truth. Thus, when they talk about Peter and Mary Magdalene, they are not really trying to give new historical information. Rather, they are using them as symbols to express spiritual ideas. Mary Magdalene symbolized wisdom. Jesus kissing her on the mouth – if that is indeed what the manuscript said – symbolized the impartation of secret knowledge to her. Karen King, the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard University and who is by no means an advocate of orthodox Christianity, nevertheless said in her book, *The Gospel of Mary Magdala* that “the imagery is about Mary being associated with Wisdom and that this spiritual connection stands behind the reference.... She probably does this because these kinds of texts often carry a symbolic or spiritual sense over a more literal one, as scholars often note.”⁴

King concludes that in *The Gospel of Philip* “Mary is seen as Wisdom in the text, making her mother of the angels, spiritual sister to the Savior, and His female counterpart. Nothing about this points to a real marriage.”⁵ We should note that Gnostic thought often had gods in pairs – a male and female god and goddess. Thus, there would be a tendency in Gnostic thinking to elevate Mary Magdalene alongside Jesus.

Another Gnostic writing, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, includes a story about her and the male apostles of Jesus. In it, Andrew and Peter are angry with her because she claims to have secret knowledge that Jesus revealed to her and not to them. She becomes upset because they will not believe her. Then, another disciple, Levi (possibly Matthew who is also called Levi in Scripture) rebukes them for treating her this way. He says that Mary has been chosen to be the apostle to give this secret knowledge to the world and Peter should respect that. After Jesus’ death, Mary saw him ascend into heavenly realms. But Jesus imparted secret information to her and set her up as the leader of his new religion.

These are the passages that have fed the grist mill of speculation that male leadership in the Church suppressed this viewpoint in a political power play. The story in *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* is supposedly telling a story of the suppression of female leadership in the Church in a symbolic way and that the true message of Jesus was suppressed by those who wielded power and influence with the backing of Roman emperors.

³ In a separate study, I have noted that “the kingdom of God” is the prominent theme of the Bible. In the ministry of Jesus recorded in the biblical Gospels, this phrase or one like it, is mentioned well over 100 times. Over 85% of the references are the words of Jesus indicating that it was his primary mission. The emphasis of the kingdom was not escaping the earth and ascending to spiritual realms. It was the opposite – heaven returning to earth – which is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Your kingdom *come*, your will be done *on earth* as it is done in heaven.”

⁴ Quoted in *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* by Darrel L. Bock, 23.

⁵ Bock, 23-24.

Stories of the Master

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However, when people believe that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus, the original leader of the apostolic church, the revealer of mysteries, and that this version of Christianity was suppressed by a powerful male-dominated clergy with the backing of the Roman emperor, they fail to consider the following:

1. These writings were created 100-200 years after the events took place.
2. These writings are based in a different way of viewing the world. They were more in line with Greek philosophy and religion than with the biblical story and the Hebrew way of thinking. This was to be expected in a Hellenistic world.
3. These writings were composed when Christianity was still not an official religion of the Roman Empire. In many places, followers of Jesus were still imprisoned and martyred for their faith – women as well as men.
4. These writings are highly symbolic and convey religious ideas about secret wisdom and salvation. They used biblical characters as the means to present their ideas. The fact that they would use Jesus, Peter, Mary, and others is an indication as to how widespread the stories of Jesus were in the ancient world. What better way to advance one's new religious ideas than to use this widespread knowledge of Jesus stories and give them a new meaning!
5. The books we know as the four Gospels were already widely accepted by churches throughout the Mediterranean world long before the Gnostic Gospels came along.

One can believe these things if they wish – that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus, that she was an official Apostle, that her message was suppressed. Many do. But hopefully you can see there is not much upon which to base these conclusions. None of these writings refer to Jesus and Mary Magdalene as husband and wife with quasi-divine offspring. The issues addressed were not male suppression of women in the first centuries of Christianity. Instead, the primary issue was which religion is the true religion. Is it Gnosticism or Christianity? Did revelation from God come through the apostles that Jesus chose, or through some other means? Is the goal of faith the emergence of the kingdom of God on earth as Jesus preached or an escape to some faraway spiritual realm disconnected to the tragic events taking place on earth?

Finally, one more passage about Mary Magdalene must be mentioned. It is a paragraph in the writings of the great Christian theologian and writer, Hippolytus⁶. It says this:

Lest the female apostles doubt the angels, Christ himself came to them so that the women would be apostles of Christ and by their obedience rectify the sin of ancient Eve . . . Christ

⁶ Hippolytus (170? -c.235) was the greatest theologian and writer during his life in the city of Rome. He was the last major theologian to use Greek rather than Latin. He was a commentator on biblical books, a chronicler of important dates including the proper dating of Easter, an apologist for Christianity, and an opponent of heresies. He was held in such high esteem that his followers erected the earliest Christian statue portrait after his death. A History of the Christian Church, Williston Walker, p. 70.

Stories of the Master

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showed himself to the (male) apostles and said to them: . . . ‘It is I who appeared to these women and I who wanted to send them to you as apostles.’⁷

Did you catch the direct statement identifying Mary Magdalene as the Apostle of the apostles? Neither did I! That was a 10th century statement – yes almost 1000 years – after the events!⁸

In this passage from the pen of Hippolytus, we find him identifying *all the women* who witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. This would have included Mary Magdalene. Hippolytus calls *all these women* “apostles” to the apostles. But he is not giving any of them, including Mary Magdalene, an official role as an Apostle. The word, “apostle,” in its basic form meant, “a sent one.” The New Testament frequently used the word “apostle” to identify people who were *sent* with a message. In the Bible, Jesus *sent* Mary to tell the Apostles that he had risen from the dead.

We should also know that Hippolytus made this statement in his commentary on the Old Testament book *Song of Songs*⁹ which Christian leaders often interpreted as an allegory of Christ and his bride, the Church – not Mary Magdalene. In his commentary, Hippolytus was showing how even though Eve was partly to blame for bringing sin into the world, Jesus brings restoration. He appeared first to women! They were his “sent ones – apostles” to the official Apostles.

And that’s it for information about Mary Magdalene. Dr. Darrell Bock said this: “In my office there are thirty-eight volumes of early church documents, each of several hundred pages, double columns, in small print. The fact that out of all of this material, only two texts can be brought forward (in the Gnostic *Gospels of Philip* and *Mary*) as even ancient candidates for the theory (about Mary Magdalene being Jesus’ wife) shows how utterly unlikely it is.”¹⁰

There really is no mystery to Mary Magdalene. The New Testament presents very little information about her because the New Testament is not about her. It is about Jesus!

We may speculate about her life and perhaps as more of her ancient village of Magdala is unearthed we may discover more historical and cultural information that will cast new light upon her. What was her upbringing like? Why was she possessed by seven evil spirits? What was it like for her to be freed from the evil spirits? Did she have family in Magdala? Were they followers of Jesus? How many journeys did Mary take with Jesus and other women? What did she do on those journeys? How wealthy was Mary and how much did she contribute to his ministry? What was it like to witness the horrors of the crucifixion? What joy and privilege did she feel to be the first to see the resurrected Jesus?

⁷ Quoted in Bock, *Breaking the DaVinci Code*, p. 20

⁸ The phrase referring to Mary Magdalene as the “Apostle of the apostles,” is attributed to Odo of Cluny in a tenth century sermon. <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/reames-middle-english-legends-of-women-saints-legend-of-mary-magdalen-introduction>

⁹ *Song of Songs* is a love song about a husband and wife. Many Jews and Christians were uncomfortable with its sensuous tones and they interpreted it as an allegory of God’s love for Israel or God’s love for the Church.

¹⁰ Bock, 27.

Stories of the Master

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These are the questions people should ask. And if they ask and seek for answers, the answers should lead to one question more – if the biblical stories are not primarily about Mary Magdalene, but about Jesus and his kingdom, what do he and his kingdom mean for me?