

Who Was Mary of Magdala?

Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
July 14, 2024

Invitation to Worship: (from The Gospel of Mary)

Be on guard so that no one deceives you by saying, “Look over here!” or “Look over there!”

For the child of true Humanity exists within you.

Follow it!

Those who search for it will find it.

Ancient Witness: Gospel of Mary 10:1-14

Andrew responded, addressing the brothers and sisters, “Say what you will about the things she has said, but I do not believe that the Savior said these things, for indeed these teachings are strange ideas.”

Peter responded, bringing up similar concerns. He questioned them about the Savior: “Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?”

Then Mary wept and said to Peter, “My brother, Peter, what are you imagining? Do you think that I have thought up these things by myself in my heart or that I am telling lies about the Savior?”

Levi answered, speaking to Peter, “Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the Adversaries. For if the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her? Assuredly the Savior’s knowledge of her is completely reliable. This is why he loved her more than us.

“Rather we should be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and announce the good news, not laying down any other rule or law that differs from what the Savior said.”

After he had said these things, they started going out to teach and to preach.

The Gospel of Mary, first written probably in the early second century, disappeared for over 1,500 years, until a fifth century manuscript of this Gospel came up for sale in Cairo, Egypt in 1896. No one even knew it existed, and it surprised everybody! This Coptic papyrus is known as the Berlin Codex (Codex means that it is in book form, not rolled up). Another Greek papyrus of a very early third century fragment, was discovered in 1917. Scholar Carl Schmidt planned to publish a German translation but a burst water pipe destroyed the entire edition. Soon after that World War I prevented Schmidt from restarting the project. Schmidt died, however, and then World War II made work on the publication impossible. It wasn’t until 1955 that the first printed edition and German translation appeared. Another papyrus was discovered in 1983, another very old third century Greek fragment, supporting the authenticity of the text.

Just like the Gospels we know in the New Testament, the Gospel of Mary is named for her not because she wrote it, but because it emerged from a community that recognized her authority.

Just like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John didn't actually write their gospels, but people wrote them in their names.

It's important to remember that those first two centuries after Jesus was a period of great diversity. There were communities scattered around the Eastern Mediterranean that were isolated from each other. Teachings were passed along orally at first, and writings emerged to supplement the preaching, reflecting the character and concerns of that local congregation. Most of the writings (85%) have been lost.

The Gospel of Mary reflects a time and place where she was regarded as an apostle, commissioned by Jesus to go forth and preach the gospel where the tradition of just the 12 men was not yet established. When Jesus died, he didn't leave behind a connected church that has a clear organizational structure. The hierarchical, male, patriarchal leadership evolved slowly over time.

So there was a lot of experimentation and diversity. In some congregations, men and women shared leadership according to the different gifts of the Spirit, such as prophecy, teaching, healing and the like. Other congregations were headed by elders, bishops and deacons. Some had formal offices; some did not. The Gospel of Mary was written when it wasn't clear what direction church organization would take.

During the time of Jesus, we have very reason to believe that according to his teaching and practice, women were empowered as fully equal. We can see this reflected in Paul's letters, which were written first (50-60 CE). By the time the gospel were being written, this equality started to be eroded. And we see an emphasis upon the authority of just the 12 who were all males. And by the 4th century, male dominance made a complete comeback, unfortunately. The church was led into this by the church "Fathers." In the early 4th century, the Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity and recognized a group of male bishops as leaders of the church and sanctioned a power structure that would govern Christianity for centuries to come. This male leadership was passed down through apostolic succession, claiming that authority is traced back to Jesus' original male followers through physical contact.

But the Gospel of Mary challenged all of this. As Karen King writes, "Authority is vested not in a male hierarchy, but in the leadership of men and women who have attained strength of character and spiritual maturity."

So a particular kind of Christianity took over in the 4th century. The books of the Bible became fixed and the creed was created. The Nicene creed emphasized that salvation came through the virgin birth, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. (The creed skips from the birth to death, and everything about the life and teaching is completely missing.) Now, there were other forms of Christianity that focused on Jesus' teaching as bringing salvation, and the Gospel of Mary was one of those. For Mary, salvation is achieved by seeking and discovering the child of true Humanity within oneself.

And so it's not surprising that the Gospel of Mary was not included in the approved books of the Bible, since it presented a different view of salvation, and it challenged the male domination and apostolic succession.

The portrait of Mary we receive in her gospel is that she has great spiritual maturity and wisdom that we see in her calm, steadfast behavior. Now, she could claim apostolic succession. Even in the New Testament she is shown physically with Jesus, experiencing his teaching and actions. She was at the crucifixion, was the first witness of the resurrection, and was commissioned by the risen Jesus to proclaim this to others. Her credentials were impeccable. But Mary says what really matters and gives authority to preach and lead is spiritual character. This is what elevates her status. It is a gospel not of external laws but a gospel that is internalized.

And we see this unfold in this morning's passage. Two of the disciples, Andrew and Peter, challenge Mary's teaching and her account of how the risen Jesus appeared to her again to give her advanced spiritual teaching. She had just comforted them, because they were losing their nerve, afraid that they would be killed as Jesus was killed. She is the one who demonstrates courage, understanding and faith. But Peter and Andrew find it to be too much to take from a woman and were jealous. Mary is hurt by this and weeps, saying, "Do you think I'm just making this up? That I'm telling lies about the Savior?"

Levi comes to her defense saying, "Look Peter, you have always been a hothead! You're acting like those powers that conspired against Jesus. There's a reason why Jesus loved her more than us and trusted her. We should be ashamed!" And then the Gospel closes with the injunction: "May we clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, announce the good news, and not lay down any rule or law beyond what Jesus said so you won't be dominated by it."

But sure enough, through creeds and councils, the church did start laying down laws of celibacy, male dominance and theological interpretation—excluding and dominating their sisters and brothers for centuries. So no wonder there was a campaign to discredit and diminish Mary, this powerful woman of substance and great wisdom, the "apostle to the apostles," who had the means to financially support Jesus' movement.

This effort to bring Mary down culminated in the 6th century when Pope Gregory gave a series of sermons in which he identified the woman with the alabaster jar who anointed Jesus—the repentant prostitute, the woman with the "bad name," who had ill-repute—with Mary Magdalene. She was also conflated with other anonymous women, such as the one caught in adultery, and with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. New Testament scholars and historians conclude that Mary was never a prostitute, but for centuries priest and laypersons only knew Pope Gregory's version of Mary. As James Carroll wrote,

The men of the church who benefited from the recasting [of Mary], forever spared the presence of females in their sanctuaries, would not know that this is what happened... What most drove the anti-sexual sexualizing of Mary Magdalene was the male need to dominate women.

And we can still see these efforts to dominate and exclude within Christianity today. This is essential what fundamentalism has been about. It is about silencing individuals' expression of thought and faith. There are those who claim to be the "real Christians."

It is not surprising, then, that fundamentalism, which seeks to control society, control scientific teaching and control the lives and bodies of others, would worship a controlling God. It is said that our image of God creates us. So a God who controls will produce people who control others. A violent, killer God will produce violent killers. In the Gospel of Mary, God is not a judge or a wrathful ruler, but simply referred to as "the Good."

Two years ago, there was a Pride event for gay, lesbian, transgender and gender nonconforming people in Idaho, not far from where we lived. It was a beautiful event of gentle, loving people. But it was reported that right-wing extremist, Christian nationalists targeted this event with violence and intimidation. Police arrested 31 Patriot Front members with a truck full of weapons to stop a violent clash with peaceful Pride event participants. There were also other extremists in full military gear with assault weapons who walked through the crowd of families and children at the event. Clearly the intent was to terrify, intimidate and threaten the people at the gathering. The intent is to control. There is nothing Christian about these violent extremists, but they appeal to a violent, vengeful, controlling God of their own making.

George Bernard Shaw once quipped, "In the beginning God created humankind, and we've been returning the favor ever since." We often project onto God our needs and insecurities. So, if we want to dominate and control others because of our own fear and insecurity, then we will create a dominating and controlling God. As Anne Lamott said, "If God hates all the same people you do, you can safely assume that you've created God in your own image."

Friends, may we embrace and celebrate the incredible diversity today in Christianity, and among all people of faith. May we claim our authority that comes not from power or laws from from within, from the content of our character. And may we challenge domination and violence and be guided by love, growing in our wisdom and spiritual character as we follow Jesus, our teacher. Amen.

Further Reading:

The Gospel of Mary of Magdala, by Karen L. King, Polebridge Press, 2003

"Who Was Mary Magdalene?" by James Carroll, Smithsonian Magazine June, 2006

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-mary-magdalene-119565482/>