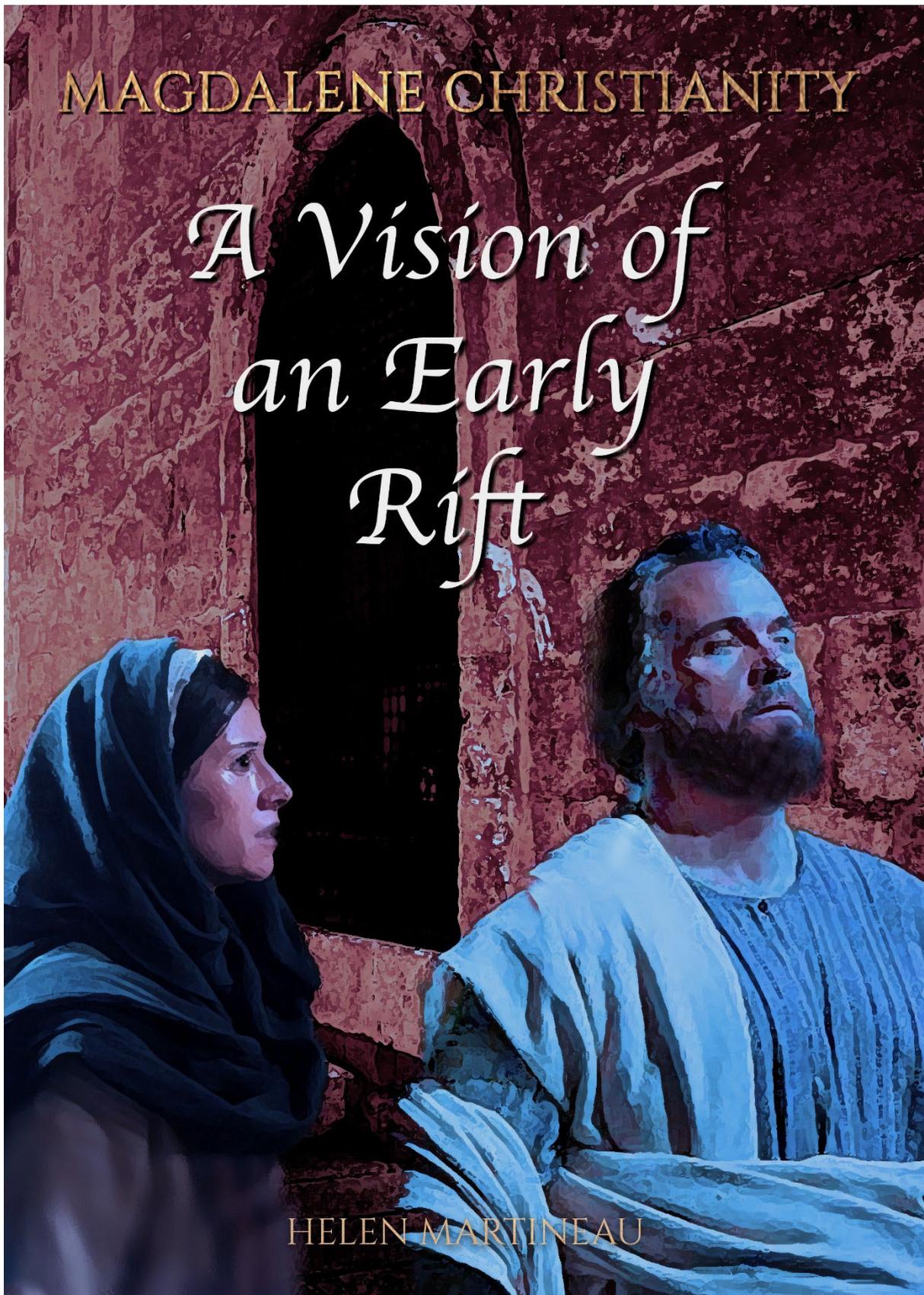


MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*A Vision of  
an Early  
Rift*



HELEN MARTINEAU

## A VISION OF AN EARLY RIFT

### **Mary, Peter, James and Paul - The seeds of what was to come**

Mary Magdalene's authority would be relegated by the western church, but I believe a rift concerning her role happened early, in the very first gatherings in Jerusalem. There are clues not followed up in conventional histories.

A gnostic version of Christianity became strong in the second century, despite efforts to suppress it. In works since discovered, such as the gospels found hidden at Nag Hammadi in 1945 that depict Mary Magdalene as the favoured disciple, Peter is her main critic. He really seems to resent her. And in the gnostic work *Pistis Sophia* (discovered in 1773) Peter complains that Mary talks too much so no one else can get a word in.

Although written at least a hundred years after the Christ event, were these writers drawing on memories of actual encounters? Did Peter really have animosity towards Mary Magdalene in the first community of the Way in Jerusalem?

### **When the personal threads into the universal**

It is often said that the imbalance between males and females is a result of society's structures. That's true to a certain extent but individuals are equally significant. I had this in mind when I explored the origins of the patriarchal church.

Yes, patriarchy was imposed from without because of the structure of Jewish, Greek and Roman society and this has dominated religion and our way of life. But finding the beginnings in personal conflict will help us understand the power of the individual to affect history. This is about us, then and now. Despite ourselves we are always enmeshed in a bigger story.

Sometimes a new thought might be triggered by events in your own life. In brief, there was a repeated repudiation (by a man) of my ideas because (drawing a sexual parallel) 'Men must be the leaders in Christianity because they plant the seed; women are just the ones who receive.'

Deficient and outdated as that thinking was, I found myself disturbed by the inherent judgement, and then in a meditation, words came to me with such an impact I could not put them aside. It seemed that Mary Magdalene was speaking person to person; I think to Peter. I set down her words below much as they emerged.

And I understood that there was a rift in those early days, which began with the stubborn man who in his heart still grieved over the impulsive unthinking mistakes that had limited him, but who cast this outward to limit another, a woman. Yes, that's human nature. Haven't we all avoided dealing with our 'stuff' at times by projecting it outwards. But oh, the collateral damage.

The personal impinges on the wider world. And often in our thoughts and deeds we live out universal archetypes. In the Magdalene's story it was about idols of a patriarchal God. And it was personal. Imbalance on both levels.

I came to call the words I experienced and my subsequent musing, *The Magdalene's Sorrow*.



### **The Magdalene's sorrow**

Why? Why do you turn from me?

Do you not remember, Simon Petros, your amazement that I was the first to see Jesus at the tomb, released from death, in his spiritualised form, and that he asked me to carry his message? I saw the unspoken question in your eyes. Why a woman? Yet this was an open query, then, seeking to comprehend something new, and strange.

Why do you insist now that I speak no more; that my voice be silenced in obedience to some law or other dragged from the books

of men without wisdom? Have you forgotten, Petros, that the teacher had no part in such ignorant rulings? That he asked us to be like him?

Today I spoke in the voice of womankind, rejoicing in Christ for whom there is only the individual, the human being. Male, female, Jew, foreigner, rich, poor, sick and healthy – the spirit does not perceive these things of the world, only the striving soul.

It grieves me that you are angry and insulted. Leave us, woman, you demanded. Stop yabbering. Step back. Men have the authority as it has always been and always will be. You can progress no further.

You did not hit me or touch me. Yet it was if you plunged a knife into my heart. Would you harm the feminine impulse carried on the Christ spirit?

Petros, I am a seer. You know this. And I see what will occur in your name if you twist that knife. I dare to teach even you, the strongest voice in this small community of believers.

Why did the teacher call you Petros the Rock – because rock is crystallised spirit. I have learned from the wise women the alchemical principle of transmutation, where the process of rarefaction leaves a part that is crystallized. The rarefied part is spirit. And your spiritual insight that he is the Christ, the divine anointed, was born of your rock-solid faith in him.

But faith must become knowing, Petros, otherwise what has been crystallized becomes immoveable.

Maybe you always looked down on the female disciples, maybe not. But Jesus the Christ has shattered the stone tablets of the old Law that so defined women as chattels. A new law birthed by the spirit of freedom is here.

Yet men will use the dross of your rock-bound thinking and build a fortress to suppress women forever. In your name they will create the Church of the Patriarchy.

They will leave your spirit behind. For in your heart you love the Christ and would enter the mystery. And when you open your heart, Petros, you will understand my pain, because three times you denied our teacher and suffered for it. I beg you, do not deny him again.

I am not a hindrance to you. But I will be to the edifice built on your name, on the dross of your name. I will be misunderstood and rejected, and women will suffer because of the untruths that are told

about me. This is the outcome of what you hold on to. But the Christ cannot be destroyed and one day this spirit will be rediscovered.

### **Tracking the rift in the first century. When did it start?**

Some months after my meditation I saw the movie *Mary Magdalene* directed by Garth Davis. Mary brings news that she has seen the Christ Jesus risen from the tomb, but Peter tells her to leave them because she weakens the group.

I think he did say something like that, and I have found clues to such a schism in the New Testament itself. The canonical gospel writers record women as the first to find the empty tomb and/or perceive the risen Christ. There's some variation in the telling with different women undergoing the encounter, although Mary Magdalene is in all four versions.

In Matthew she is with another Mary, and an angel tells them not to fear but to let the disciples know he is risen. Jesus himself then appears to them and he asks them to tell the disciples he will meet them in Galilee. The disciples must have listened because they did go to Galilee.



*White Angel from the Monastery of Milěsevo, Serbia:  
'He is not here; he is risen'*

In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene stays alone at the empty tomb and has a profound personal encounter with the risen Christ. She then takes his message to the disciples. We can assume they listened because she is

able to tell them what he said. From her story in this gospel, Mary Magdalene became known as the Apostle to the Apostles.

Women were known as having visionary ability, to be in touch with angels and in these two gospels their news is acceptable. But in Mark and Luke it is different.

In Mark an angel speaks to the women, but they are too afraid to say anything. Then the Christ appears to Mary Magdalene alone. She does tell the disciples and they refuse to believe her. Luke's gospel records that angels tell a group of women why the tomb is empty, but again they are not believed by the disciples. To them it's an 'idle tale'. This kind of reaction depicts the way it would be in a society where male opinion is valued far more than women's insight.

### **The 'master story' emerges**

The *Acts of the Apostles*, also by Luke, describes how disciples of Jesus would continue to meet in the upper room in Jerusalem. Luke names the eleven men remaining from 'the twelve', plus Jesus's mother, his brothers and the women (still lumped together). The group grew to about 120 people. After being rebuffed, Mary Magdalene might not have been among them. At the Feast of Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection, suddenly they all felt the powerful fire of the Holy Spirit enter them. Peter underwent such a dramatic transformation that from a rather ham-fisted individual he became an inspired apostle and preacher of the gospel.

Peter becomes the central character in *Acts* and Luke records his questioning of his previous fixed attitudes regarding customs and behaviour, his travels to other Christian groups, although nothing concerning the status of women. Then Peter's story moves into legend.

Luke's story in *Acts* became the official version of Christianity's beginning. It had the effect of over-riding other accounts. Cynthia Bourgeault calls it 'the master story', (in *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*). And it is one that has an overall masculine orientation.

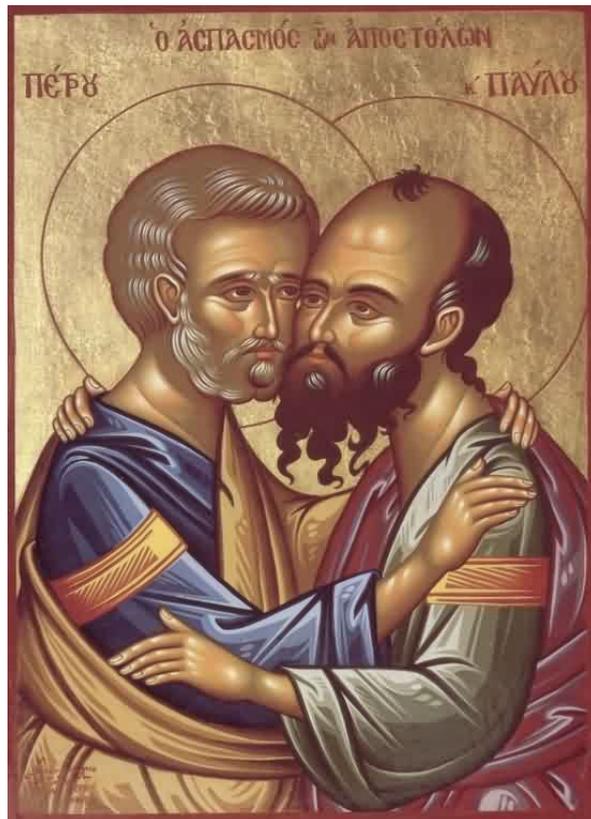
Did people in other groups also receive the Holy Spirit? Surely. There is one account of a first-hand experience by the author of John's gospel, the anonymous beloved disciple. We read in chapter 20 how the Christ appears among the disciples and 'breathes on' them, with words confirming that on the breath is the power of the Holy Spirit. This occurred on the very evening of Mary Magdalene's daybreak encounter with the risen Christ. She would have been one of those disciples. Who else? The disciples are not named. Thomas 'one of the twelve' is not present. But it is only assumed that the others were of 'the twelve'.

## Why does Paul leave out Mary?

In *Acts* we also read about Paul. A Jew and a Pharisee, he had never met Jesus, but he persecuted the embryonic Christian movement until his dramatic encounter with the Christ spirit on the road to Damascus (see *Acts* 9). He met with Peter and other Christians, but his mission would be as a major apostle to gentiles in the Greek world.

In his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:5-8) Paul writes about those to whom the risen Christ appeared. First is Peter (*Petros/Cephas*). Then the 'twelve', followed by others. He doesn't mention any of the women. Yet this was not because he dismissed their worth. In the groups he formed he had no issue at all with women as leaders. In this he followed the example of Jesus. Paul valued women's leadership and we know their names because he thanked them personally in his letters.

The omission of Mary Magdalene and the other female disciples led me into some serious questioning. Does Paul not know about them? He wrote this letter around 53 CE? That's a mere twenty years after the Christ event.



*An icon showing Peter and Paul embracing – the two apostles are often pictured together to indicate their status as twin pillars of the church, although they were more often in dispute before Paul went his own way*

The background information about the resurrection appearances must have come from someone he met. I would say when he visited the leaders of the community in Jerusalem – Peter, the main apostle there, and James the brother of Jesus who oversaw decision making (later described as its ‘bishop’ from *episkopos*, which means ‘overseer’). Paul met them at a time when formal structures were being established largely based on their Judaic background, something for which he no longer felt any affinity.

Somewhere between Jesus’s resurrection and Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Mary Magdalene’s amazing experience had been abandoned by this Jerusalem community – or at least by the leaders. And when Paul departed Jerusalem to spread a message of ‘Christ in you’ he didn’t know about the Magdalene.

The New Testament gospels are looking back to the events around the life of Christ Jesus. *Acts* covers some early apostles, especially Peter and Paul, and one Christian group in Jerusalem in the first years after the resurrection. Peter would move on, and until James was killed, this community would continue under his leadership with the Christ message of freedom subsumed within old religious norms.

This dominant ‘master’ narrative is silent about Mary Magdalene. She vanishes and reappears as the ideal disciple in the gnostic versions of the Christ mystery. There Peter is declared ‘guilty’ as Mary’s main antagonist – as if these writers are recalling her actual experience.

Yet we need to remember that Peter left his work as a fisherman to become a committed disciple of Jesus Christ. And as his understanding of the true mystery unfolded it is probable that he did follow the spiritual task as given by the risen Christ to ‘Feed my sheep,’ and, ‘Tend my lambs,’ (Gospel of John, chapter 21). Peter journeyed to various Christian communities, and according to legend and tradition he died in Rome. And it may be that as an old man who having suffered and learned much, he lovingly tended and nourished the often-persecuted Christ followers, whoever they were and wherever he went.

The Patriarchal Petrine church created in his name came centuries after his death.

Meanwhile I can imagine that the resurrection experiences of the female disciples would be a teaching point for early Christians who did want to reflect on the inclusiveness of their master.