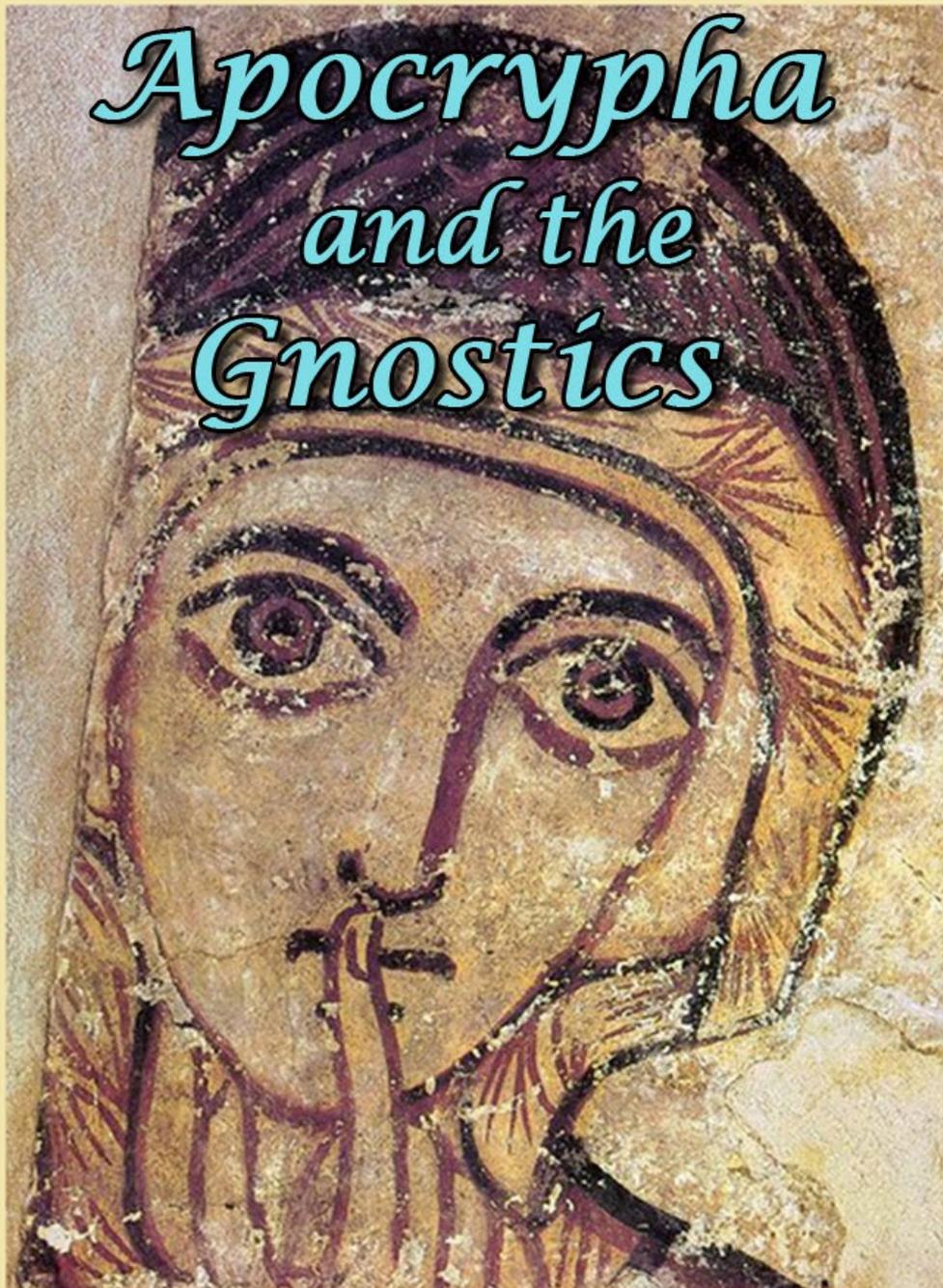


MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY



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APOCRYPHA AND THE GNOSTICS

Long-lost writings

Dedicated research into early Christianity has been enhanced by discoveries of long-lost texts. After two millennia many of these documents are in poor condition. Although sometimes badly damaged and difficult to translate, they have enriched understanding of the period's metaphysics and have influenced scholars to rethink the diversity among early Christians as the church was developing.

In the main we knew about these writings from church fathers' arguments against them until 1945 with the discovery stuffed in an urn in a cave near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. It was a Coptic language library of papyrus codices (books), which had been hidden around the year 400. Most of the texts came under the broad designation 'gnostic'.

Although forensic analysis indicates that the majority were written at the earliest in the second century, to discover the feminine mystery we can investigate those that offer views of Mary Magdalene which acknowledge her high status.



Some of the papyrus codices making up the 'Nag Hammadi Library'

The church fathers versus Gnostic Christians

Diverse gnostic philosophies had been around for a while. There was never a singular belief structure, although there were common threads in

the philosophical approaches that became known generally as 'Gnosticism'. Usually this involved an elaborate cosmology and a path to higher knowledge or *gnosis* involving Sophia, divine feminine wisdom. In Egypt especially the teaching emerged from a wisdom tradition of gradual enlightenment involving higher knowledge, and right practice and discipline.

In the story of fallen Sophia, there was an effort to explain our troubled human existence. For example, in *Pistis Sophia* and the *Apocryphon of John* Sophia rebels against her divine family. The part of her that is desire, called Achamoth, separates and attempts a creation on her own, or with the help of a being called the demiurge. She descends into this misshapen material world and must be returned to her light-filled state – as a kind of prodigal daughter. To remind her of her home and to help her find the way back she receives a spark of divine light. The implication is that on the path of gnosis a seeker can also find this divine spark within the soul and return to the primal state of purity.

Gnostic Christianity drew on certain of the gospel teachings. A purpose behind the writings was to expound gnostic philosophy of gradual ascent through the spiritual levels or aeons towards the divine in a Christian context. But they do not deal with the living Jesus or events in his life. Rather they appear as post-resurrection teachings by the Saviour. Some of the rediscovered documents have the same cast of disciples as the gospels of the New Testament. But Mary Magdalene is a favoured disciple with more understanding than the foolish males.

The Virgin Mary was readily aligned with divine Sophia. Mary the Magdalene, who was burdened and freed from seven demons was an ideal earthly representation of fallen Sophia. Through gnosis of the divine and union with the Saviour she returns to her divine home, or in human terms to wholeness. Mary found her place in Christian Gnosticism as the transformed one through whom Wisdom spoke.

It's difficult to unravel the profound and complex gnostic philosophies because so little evidence remains. In part this is simply an outcome of passing time, but also because of antagonism. Although many contrasting ideas might come from a place of profound metaphysical comprehension, this was the age of the intellectual soul and rightness of understanding and belief was as dear as life itself.

In passionate discourses by the early church fathers, we find opposition to a range of gnostic concepts and beliefs, but especially those seeming to contradict the incarnational core of the Christ mystery – that a wholly non-material force, whose essence was divine love, incarnated in Jesus the anointed human being, and that this spiritual power of divine love,

through his death flowed into the whole world, and became a potential in humanity.

There were Docetists and Marcionites who declared that Jesus was never a physical human being and so didn't suffer or die on the cross. An enormously influential second century movement, Valentinianism, was condemned by Irenaeus for its doctrine of a clear distinction between the divine and earthly Jesus and what they experienced. The Gospel of Philip belongs to Valentinianism. The only surviving copy was found at Nag Hammadi.

Another form of Gnosticism refuted the idea of any kind of divine intervention. Jesus was human only, although a powerful guide. His 'death' and 'resurrection' were metaphors for his initiation and ascent to gnosis. This idea of personal unfolding would long continue outside the church. It is there today even if belief in the existence of spiritual realms has faded. But in the early Christian centuries gnostic believers were seen to be elitist, with the path to higher knowledge only for the few. The church fathers wanted converts and plenty of them.

Later as the church grew in strength any whiff of gnostic teaching was fiercely opposed by the church establishment bent on uniformity. The accusation 'gnostic' was a reason for documents to be hunted down and destroyed. Fear that this would happen is most likely why the community at Nag Hammadi hid their library.

Women are not worthy of life?

For the earliest church fathers who railed against gnostic ideas, female authority was not a major issue. That would come later. And the role of women as equal contributors was acknowledged in early Christian groups. Yet the Gospel of Thomas an early, first century work in the Coptic language apparently contradicts this. It consists mainly of sayings by Jesus – many similar are found in the canonical gospels. Although not gnostic, it was valued and hidden with the Nag Hammadi library.

The usual translation of one saying has been called upon to pinpoint ideas about the inferiority of women.

Simon Peter said to them: 'Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life.'

Jesus said: 'Look, I will draw her in so as to make her male, so that she too may become a living male spirit, similar to you. (But I say to you): 'Every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'

— Gospel of Thomas: Logia (saying) 114

We have an unwholesome male bias instigated by problematic Peter. On the surface it appears that Jesus's response is equally chauvinistic. Amazingly some men still think this way, especially in public institutions and corporations. Be like us then you might be accepted into our company.

But Jean-Yves Leloup writes that 'male' is an incorrect translation. Coptic uses the Greek alphabet, and the word is not derived from *andros*, 'man' (a male), but from *anthropos* 'man' in the sense of human being. Replace man/male with 'human' and this text points to a profound and inclusive Christian teaching – that we have the potential to reach our true spirit-filled humanity, which is beyond all opposites, as described previously in Thomas:

When you make the two into one ... and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom].

— Gospel of Thomas: Logia 22

I believe Thomas also validates the lack of gender bias among most of the first Christians.

Gnostic Mary Magdalene as teacher

The surviving gnostic texts indicate a full valuing of the feminine. In the Gospel of Philip, the Saviour makes clear that Mary Magdalene is favoured because she is more spiritually evolved, further in the light, than the other disciples:

They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?' The Saviour answered and said to them, 'Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in the darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness.'

The Gospel of Mary, a much damaged fifth century codex in the Coptic language, came to light in 1896 (a Greek original may have been written in the second century). Interest in it revived after the Nag Hammadi discoveries. This is the only gospel written in the name of a woman, although it is about not *by* Mary, i.e. it's a third person narrative. Along with other fragments since discovered it depicts her as closest to Jesus and the recipient of his deeper knowledge, in contrast to the ignorant male disciples. Peter, supposedly the leader of the disciples, is Mary's main adversary although Levi defends her.

She teaches the disciples:

I will now speak to you of that which has not been given to you to hear. I had a vision of the teacher, and I said to him: 'Lord, I see you now in this vision.'

And he answered: 'You are blessed, for the sight of me does not disturb you. There where is the nous, lies the treasure.'

— Translation from *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* by Jean-Yves LeLoup



'Lord, I see you now in a vision.'

Cynthia Bourgeault describes *nous* as 'a kind of mystical inter-tidal zone in which divine spirit and human spirit are completely interpenetrating'. *Nous* is also sometimes called 'the eye of the heart' or 'the heart position of the mind'. Mary's visionary experience takes her to a place that ordinary thoughts and feelings cannot penetrate. From the spirit, which doesn't die, much would have been revealed to disciples who did have spiritual perception, certainly to Mary.

LeLoup's commentary on the Gospel of Mary points out that this 'way' is an interior and individual path and not connected with a church or organized religion.

In texts like these the Magdalene, if she was ever 'fallen' has risen through deeper knowledge to become aligned with Sophia, feminine heavenly Wisdom.

Feminist writers have built on these texts to restore Mary Magdalene's status. Jane Schaberg neatly sums up what we learn about her from the apocryphal gospels.

1. Mary is prominent among the followers of Jesus;
2. she exists as a character, as a memory, in a textual world of androcentric language and patriarchal ideology;
3. she speaks boldly;
4. she plays a leadership role vis-à-vis the male disciples;
5. she is a visionary;
6. she is praised for her superior understanding;
7. she is identified as the intimate companion of Jesus;
8. she is opposed by or in open conflict with one or more of the male disciples;
9. she is defended by Jesus.

—Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 129.

A Magdalene of the mind

Gnosticism is imbued with Greek aesthetics which stem from Classical Greek philosophy. Covering a vast range of thought from ethics and the nature of the ideal to the theory of knowledge, the writings of Plato and Aristotle have profoundly influenced Western thinking. But the origin in a male mind-based culture of debating and discussing ideas involved a mentality removed from 'life on the street'.

Gnostic Mary Magdalene is an idea and philosophical mouthpiece rather than a biographical portrait of a woman, as Jane Schaberg acknowledges in her point 2. The gnostic writings do not provide information about the woman called Mary as she lived in the first century, except by inference that she was more significant than the synoptic gospels allow.

Harvard professor Karen King has worked intensively on deciphering the pages of the Gospel of Mary. She writes appreciatively of the gnostic view of an inner path and of what it tells her about Mary Magdalene:

It exposes the erroneous view that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute for what it is – a piece of theological fiction; it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership.

—Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*

I'm not sure that it does empirically. Mary's gnostic gospel encounters with the Saviour are not taking place in the world of time and space. In the Gospel of Mary, she sees him 'in a vision'. It's an encounter from beyond the grave. Despite pages 1-6 and 11-14 being missing, the gospel offers beautiful insights into the deeper teaching of Jesus to Mary, not in the flesh but spirit to spirit.

But gnostic Mary is consistent, like a well-rounded character in a novel, and so the writings have an internal truth. That's the reason why I think these works were built up from genuine memories of the living disciple and apostle as a woman of real authority. That is how they help to fill in gaps in the New Testament.

These apocryphal works have come to the fore at a time of serious need to reclaim the authority of the feminine spiritually, psychologically and materially. Meanwhile without a clear-headed appraisal, the gnostic discoveries at Nag Hammadi and elsewhere have opened up a hyper-market of claims about the physical Mary Magdalene.

FURTHER READING:

Jean-Yves LeLoup, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*
Jane Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*
Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*