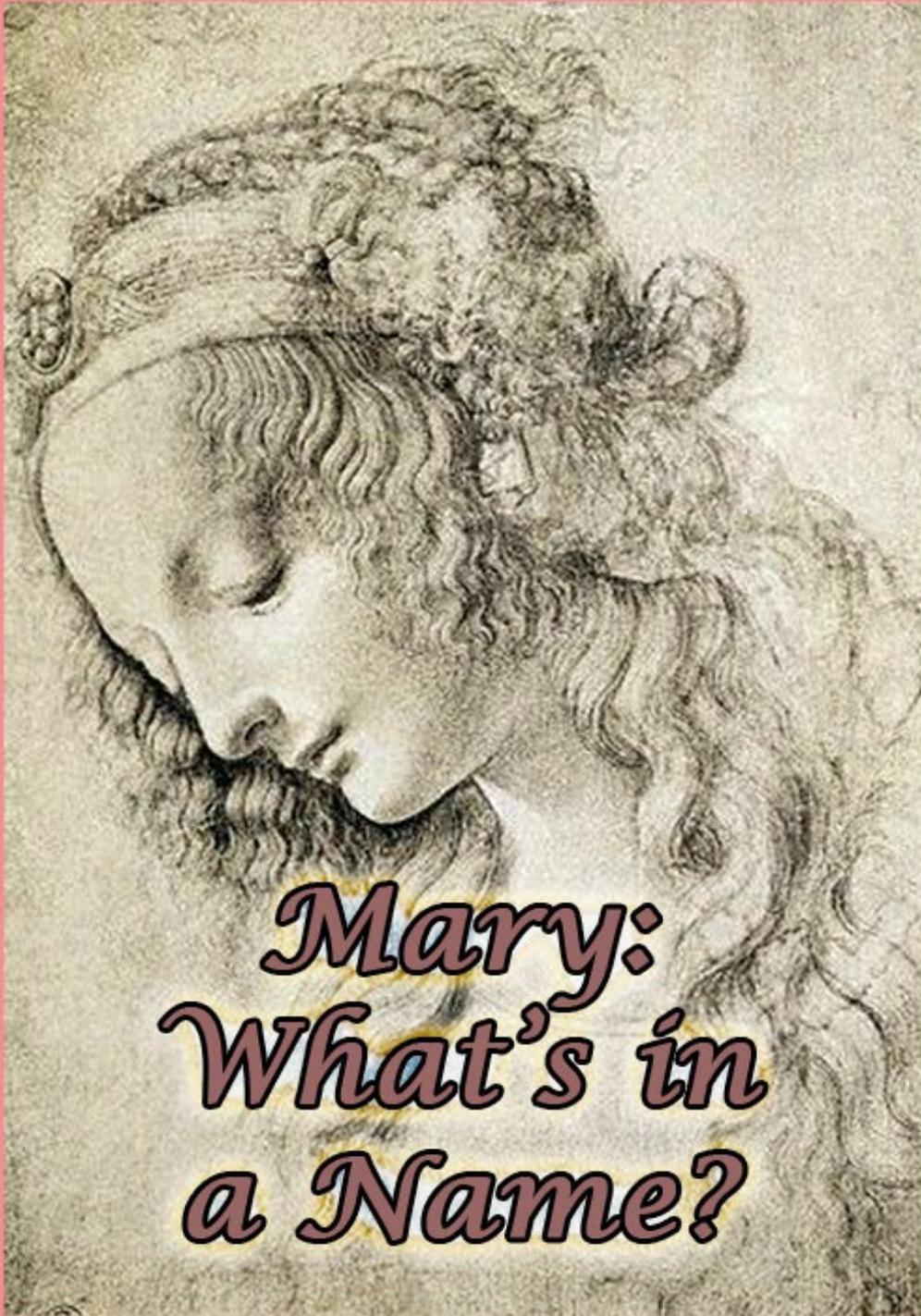


MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY



HELEN MARTINEAU

MARY: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

A key to her spiritual significance

Names have power; names signify a destiny and purpose; they declare who we are. We cannot dismiss the significance of a name despite 'Mary' being one of the most common girls' names in first century Palestine. The wealth of names available to modern parents didn't exist. Girls' names were not given too much thought, except that the name needed to be found within a tribe or family. Closely related women could have the same name, plus the indicator of who they belonged to, or more rarely of certain individual characteristics.

In Greek 'Mary' is Maria; in Aramaic it is Mariam or Mariamne, which in turn is derived from the Hebrew Miryam, a name with a solid biblical story behind it. It was the name of the sister of Moses. Because she spent much of her life in Egypt within Egyptian culture, the most likely origin of the name is Egyptian, from *mry* which means 'loved', and *mryt* 'loved one'. Miryam was a prophetess and leader of the women on their journey out of that land. Although there is much legendary material in the book of the Exodus, the names given are a key to the characters' spiritual significance, and she was beloved of gods and humans.



Miryam the prophetess leading the women in song and dance

In the gospels three important Marys stood by the cross while Jesus died: Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. Three women with the same name witnessing this dramatic event, the foundation of the Christian mystery, asks for a metaphysical and esoteric interpretation.

Symbolically the feminine stands for the soul. And here we have three Marys who express love through three aspects of the purified astral body harmonised in the soul. Mary Magdalene is the transformed sentient soul that has moved beyond physical sense perception, and has developed the higher senses that enable true spiritual perception. Almost nothing is known about Mary the wife of Clopas, but symbolically a man represents the mind, so stating her 'wifeness' indicates the purified intellectual or mind aspect of the soul. And Mother Mary, she is the expression of pure wisdom – 'the pure chaste Virgin Sophia' in the words of Rudolf Steiner. That's why the Gospel of John only speaks of 'the mother of Jesus' rather than her earthly name Mary.

The Beloved Disciple

In John's gospel a lone male disciple stands at the cross with the women – the anonymous beloved disciple of John 19:25-27. He was to be 'outed' as Lazarus of Bethany and John the elder at Ephesus who wrote the gospel there.

The name John, Greek *Ioannes*, derives from the Hebrew *Jehochanan*, 'Yaweh shows favour'. If we look at the gospel as a record of the initiatory path of the author, then the spiritual 'I' has found favour within his being and so a higher love awakens. The Greeks used different words for expressions of love – *agape* is used here. This is love on a spiritual level and through this the author does become the beloved disciple, with 'John' as his initiatory name.

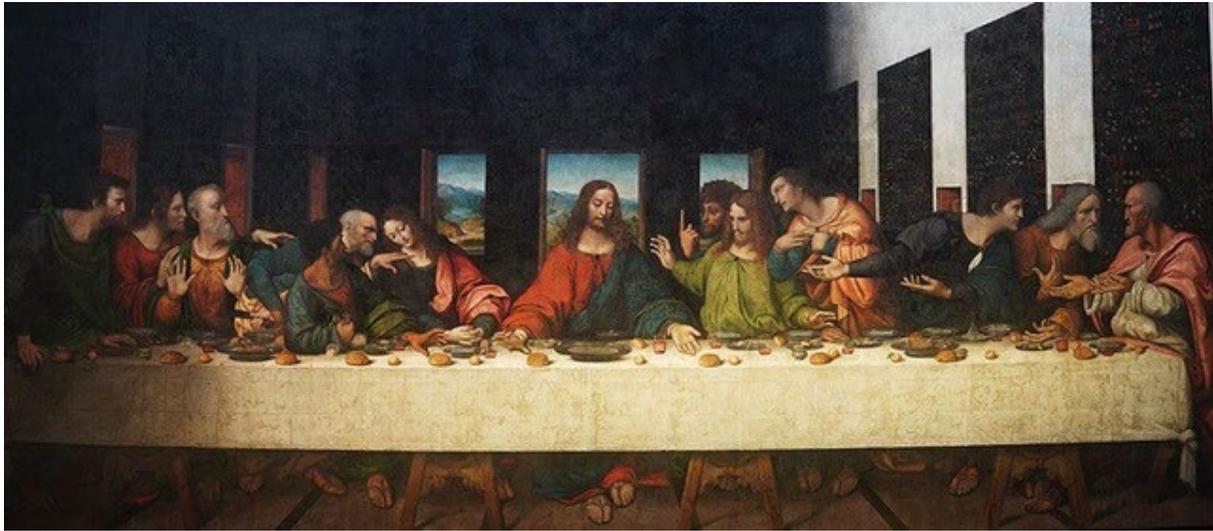
Some commentators conclude that Mary Magdalene, the loved one, is the beloved disciple. Others that she wrote the gospel. This despite her appearing together with the beloved disciple in John 20:2. Yet I will be showing how the gospel does follow Mary's initiatory story. She awakens to *agape* and it may be that she received her initiatory name 'Magdalene' in that awakening.

The conundrum points to something much deeper. I'll explore this through an intriguing painting.

Leonardo da Vinci and the Last Supper

Despite its serious deterioration, which started soon after it was completed because of the artist's experimental techniques, Leonardo's mural of the

Last Supper in the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan is one of the world's most famous artworks.



Digital reconstruction of Leonardo's 'Last Supper' (1495-1498)

Dan Brown, author of *The da Vinci Code* popularised the notion that Leonardo was 'making a point' about Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus by controversially depicting her beside him, on his right. Brown's aim was to back up his argument that they were married. Speculation about this character tells us nothing about whether Mary Magdalene was wife or lover of Jesus. But it does speak to another reality concerning esoteric Christianity.

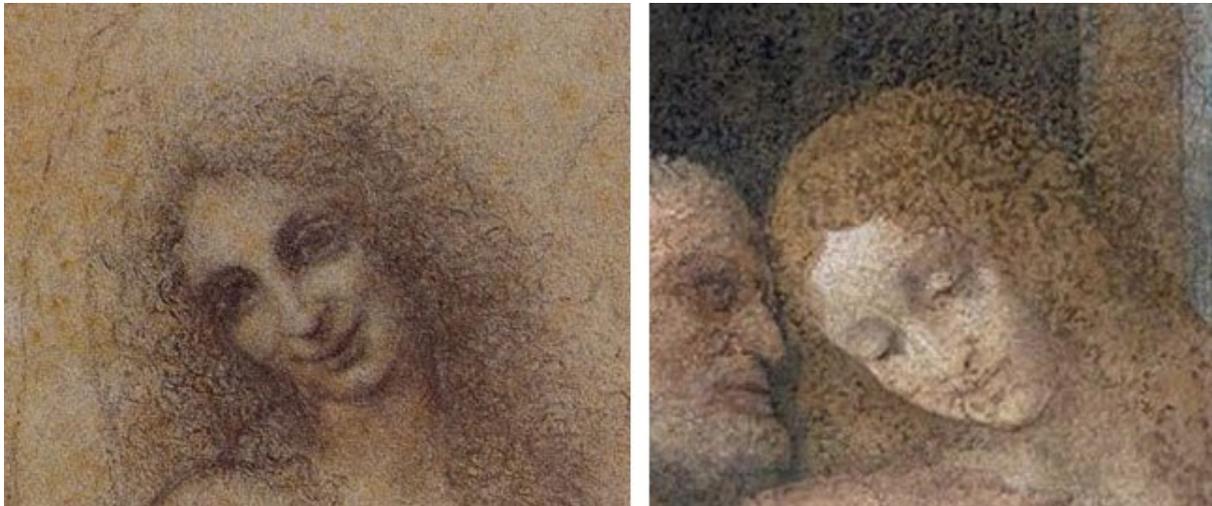
The Renaissance Artist

In the Renaissance painters followed conventions to enable the disciples to be recognised easily. The beloved disciple, by now called John, was typically depicted as young, long haired and beardless and Leonardo followed that convention. Still, there has been ongoing debate surrounding the artist's depiction of this figure.

He chose to show the moment when Jesus declared that one of the disciples would betray him. Leonardo was a humanist who did away with the halos around the saints' heads to bring the viewer closer to the disciples and their different responses. A master of using design, movement and facial expression to create drama and psychological truth, he eliminated unnecessary surroundings and placed the twelve disciples in triangles, three bodies in each, dynamically leaning and reaching across one another around the still figure of Christ.

He was also a great artist and had the ability to convey the beloved disciple's purity of love through the grace and beauty and relative stillness of his portrait. Compared with other lesser works I think he achieved this.

But did he paint a man or woman? Is this John or Mary? The figure looks close to Leonardo's females, yet in those days male youths were admired for their soft rather girlish features and abundant long hair. Leonardo brought a ten-year-old boy Salai into his household and trained him as his apprentice. Salai, despite being a challenging personality, remained for twenty-five years. It is thought he may have been Leonardo's lover. Leonardo's drawing of Salai, the androgynous-looking youth, is believed to be the model for his John the Baptist (in the Louvre, Paris) and possibly for John in his Last Supper. It does open questions.



Drawing of Salai and John the Beloved in Leonardo's 'The Last Supper' (made a bit clearer after minor restoration)

Leonardo plants a message in the painting

If Leonardo did intend to depict a woman, he was taking a risk by confronting the church authorities: a woman present at Jesus's last meal with the disciples? That's blasphemy! People were burned at the stake for this. Still, Leonardo was known to like 'playing games'.

By the sixteenth century the Catholic church had enormous power. It was dangerous not to conform to its rigid doctrines covering all aspects of existence, even for an artist protected by Medici patronage. At the same time this was an age of daring exploration into all fields of endeavour. Contemporary philosophers saw themselves living in a time of rediscovery and reinterpretation of long-neglected, ancient esoteric knowledge – hence the name Renaissance, 'rebirth'.

And along with the sense of renewal, self-aware humanism emerged. In the arts, myths and biblical stories were interpreted as allegories about human nature with the human being rather than God at the centre of existence. Yet through all this, for most people the sacred resonated as real and everywhere evident, unlike in our secular culture.

Leonardo was a prime example of *homo universalis*, or the 'Renaissance man'. This extraordinary polymath had his creative fingers in every pie from inventing futuristic flying machines to forensic mastery of human bodies and feelings in his art. He was also a visionary with esoteric knowledge. And in his Last Supper only Jesus and the beloved disciple are not shown in extreme consternation, as if they know something the others do not.

Here's a possibility: that in his painting Leonardo replaced the male beloved with a figure that *could* be female as a kind of wake-up call to those who were able to 'read' the message, because he understood the masculine and feminine on the deep soul level and recognised that such polarities need to unite and harmonise if the human spirit, the I AM, is to come alive in the soul. He pointed to the real purpose of the new humanism. Beyond the egocentric elevation of the individual man and his aspirations was a search for the fully realised human being.

In that sense Leonardo was portraying the beloved disciple as both Mary and John. The beautiful portrait speaks to me of inner union of masculine and feminine. Symbolically 'he' is the mind that learns to see and experience the mighty spirit of love as his real self and so becomes the beloved. And through love, which is her name, her soul essence, 'she' first sees and will come to know beloved as her living spirit.

As well, the secret in Leonardo's masterpiece speaks of two disciples, a male and a female, Mary the Magdalene and Lazarus-John, who did walk the Way of initiation into the mystery of the Christos. In the male dominated worlds of the first and the fifteenth centuries – and ours – here is a message of equality born of universal love.

