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## The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene

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*From the Introduction to:*

### **The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle**

*by Karen L. King*

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**Excerpt from:**

*The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*

by Karen L. King (Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa, California, 2003), pp. 3-12

#### **Early Christianity & the Gospel of Mary**

Few people today are acquainted with the *Gospel of Mary*. Written early in the second century CE, it disappeared for over fifteen hundred years until a single, fragmentary copy in Coptic translation came to light in the late nineteenth century. Although details of the discovery itself are obscure, we do know that the fifth-century manuscript in which it was inscribed was purchased in Cairo by Carl Reinhardt and brought to Berlin in 1896. Two additional fragments in Greek have come to light in the twentieth century. Yet still no complete copy of the *Gospel of Mary* is known. Fewer than eight pages of the ancient papyrus text survive, which means that about half of the *Gospel of Mary* is lost to us, perhaps forever.

Yet these scant pages provide an intriguing glimpse into a kind of Christianity lost for almost fifteen hundred years. This astonishingly brief narrative

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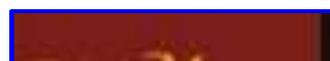
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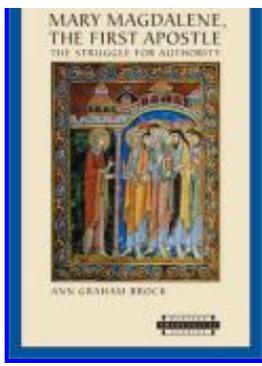
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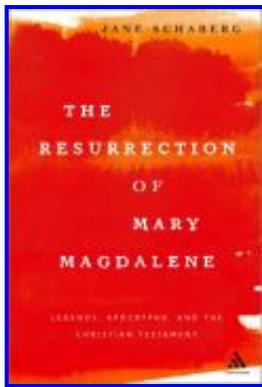
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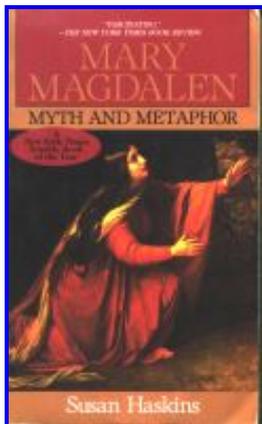




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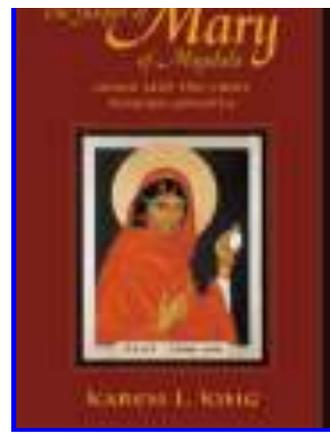
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presents a radical interpretation of Jesus' teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge; it rejects his suffering and death as the path to eternal life; it exposes the erroneous view that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute for what it is — a piece of theological fiction; it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership; it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power and a utopian vision of spiritual perfection; it challenges our rather romantic views about the harmony and unanimity of the first Christians; and it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority. All written in the name of a woman.

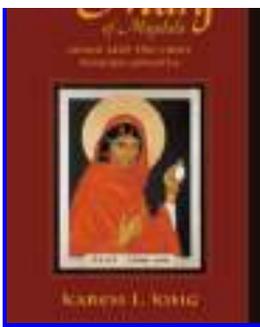


**This is the best authoritative edition available, and includes a superb commentary by Karen King.**  
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The story of the *Gospel of Mary* is a simple one. Since the first six pages are lost, the gospel opens in the middle of a scene portraying a discussion between the Savior and his disciples set after the resurrection. The Savior is answering their questions about the end of the material world and the nature of sin. He teaches them that at present all things, whether material or spiritual, are interwoven with each other. In the end, that will not be so. Each nature will return to its own root, its own original state and destiny. But meanwhile, the nature of sin is tied to the nature of life this mixed world. People sin because they do not recognize their own spiritual nature and, instead, love the lower nature that deceives them and leads to disease and death. Salvation is achieved by discovering within oneself the true spiritual nature of humanity and overcoming the deceptive entrapments of the bodily passions and the world. The Savior concludes this teaching with a warning against those who would delude the disciples into following some heroic leader or a set of rules and laws. Instead they are to seek the child of true Humanity within themselves and gain inward peace. After commissioning them to go forth and preach the gospel, the Savior departs.

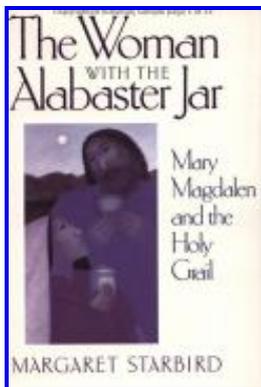
But the disciples do not go out joyfully to preach the gospel; instead controversy erupts. All the

disciples except Mary have failed to comprehend the Savior's teaching. Rather than seek peace within, they are distraught, frightened that if they



**An excellent new print edition of the Gospel of Mary of Magdala. This is the best authoritative edition available, and includes a superb commentary by Karen King.**

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within, they are distraught, frightened that if they follow his commission to preach the gospel, they might share his agonizing fate. Mary steps in and comforts them and, at Peter's, relates teaching unknown to them that she had received from the Savior in a vision. The Savior had explained to her the nature of prophecy and the rise of the soul to its final rest, describing how to win the battle against the wicked, illegitimate Powers that seek to keep the soul entrapped in the world and ignorant of its true spiritual nature.

But as she finishes her account, two of the disciples quite unexpectedly challenge her. Andrew objects that her teaching is strange and he refuses to believe that it came from the Savior. Peter goes further, denying that Jesus would ever have given this kind of advanced teaching to a woman, or that Jesus could possibly have preferred her to them. Apparently when he asked her to speak, Peter had not expected such elevated teaching, and now he questions her character, implying that she has lied about having received special teaching in order to increase her stature among the disciples. Severely taken aback, Mary begins to cry at Peter's accusation. Levi comes quickly to her defense, pointing out to Peter that he is a notorious hothead and now he is treating Mary as though she were the enemy. We should be ashamed of ourselves, he admonishes them all; instead of arguing among ourselves, we should go out and preach the gospel as the Savior commanded us.

The story ends here, but the controversy is far from resolved. Andrew and Peter at least, and likely the other fearful disciples as well, have not understood the Savior's teaching and are offended by Jesus' apparent preference of a woman over them. Their limited understanding and false pride make it impossible for them to comprehend the truth of the Savior's teaching. The reader must both wonder and worry what kind of gospel such proud and ignorant disciples will preach.

How are we to understand this story? It is at once reminiscent of the New Testament gospels and yet clearly different from them. The gospel's characters — the Savior, Mary, Peter, Andrew, and Levi — are familiar to those acquainted with the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*. So, too, is the theological language of gospel and kingdom, as well as such sayings of Jesus as "Those who seek will find" or "Anyone with two ears should listen." And the New Testament gospels and *Acts* repeatedly mention the appearance of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection. Yet it is also clear that the story of the *Gospel of Mary* differs in significant respects.

For example, after Jesus commissions the disciples they do not go out joyfully to preach the gospel, as they do in *Matthew*; instead they weep, fearing for their lives. Some of the teachings also seem

for their lives. Some of the teachings also seem shocking coming from Jesus, especially his assertion that there is no such thing as sin. Modern readers may well find themselves sympathizing with Andrew's assessment that "these teachings are strange ideas."

The *Gospel of Mary* was written when Christianity, still in its nascent stages, was made up of communities widely dispersed around the Eastern Mediterranean, communities which were often relatively isolated from one other and probably each small enough to meet in someone's home without attracting too much notice. Although writings appeared early — especially letters addressing the concerns of local churches, collections containing Jesus' sayings, and narratives interpreting his death and resurrection — oral practices dominated the lives of early Christians. Preaching, teaching, and rituals of table fellowship and baptism were the core of the Christian experience. What written documents they had served at most as supplemental guides to preaching and practice. Nor can we assume that the various churches all possessed the same documents; after all, these are the people who wrote the first Christian literature. Christoph Marksches suggests that we have lost 85% of Christian literature from the first two centuries — and that includes only the literature we know about. Surely there must be even more, for the discovery of texts like the *Gospel of Mary* came as a complete surprise. We have to be careful that we don't suppose it is possible to reconstruct the whole of early Christian history and practice out of the few surviving texts that remain. Our picture will always be partial — not only because so much is lost, but because early Christian practices were so little tied to durable writing.

Partly as a consequence of their independent development and differing situations, these churches sometimes diverged widely in their perspectives on essential elements of Christian belief and practice. Such basic issues as the content and meaning of Jesus' teachings, the nature of salvation, the value of prophetic authority, and the roles of women and slaves came under intense debate. Early Christians proposed and experimented with competing visions of ideal community.

It is important to remember, too, that these first Christians had no New Testament, no Nicene Creed or Apostles Creed, no commonly established church order or chain of authority, no church buildings, and indeed no single understanding of

Jesus. All of the elements we might consider to be essential to define Christianity did not yet exist. Far from being starting points, the Nicene creed and the New Testament were the end products of these debates and disputes; they represent the

these debates and disputes; they represent the distillation of experience and experimentation—and not a small amount of strife and struggle.

All early Christian literature bears traces of these controversies. The earliest surviving documents of Christianity, the letters of Paul show that considerable difference of opinion existed about such issues as circumcision and the Jewish food laws or the relative value of spiritual gifts. These and other such contentious issues as whether the resurrection was physical or spiritual were stimulating theological conversations and causing rifts within and among Christian groups. By the time of the *Gospel of Mary*, these discussions were becoming increasingly nuanced and more polarized.

History, as we know, is written by the winners. In the case of early Christianity, this has meant that many voices in these debates were silenced through repression or neglect. The *Gospel of Mary*, along with other newly discovered works from the earliest Christian period, increases our knowledge of the enormous diversity and dynamic character of the processes by which Christianity was shaped. The goal of this volume is to let twenty-first-century readers hear one of those voices — not in order to drown out the voices of canon and tradition, but in order that they might be heard with the greater clarity that comes with a broadened historical perspective. Whether or not the message of the *Gospel of Mary* should be embraced is a matter readers will decide for themselves.

### **Discovery and Publication**

Where did the *Gospel of Mary* come from?

Over a hundred years ago, in January of 1896, a seemingly insignificant event took place on the antiquities market in Cairo. A manuscript dealer, whose name history has forgotten, offered a papyrus book for sale to a German scholar named Dr. Carl Reinhardt. It eventually became clear that the book was a fifth-century CE papyrus codex, written in the Coptic language (see Box 1). Unbeknownst to either of them, it contained the *Gospel of Mary* along with three other previously unknown works, the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and the *Act of Peter*. This seemingly small event turned out to be of enormous significance.

Dr. Reinhardt could tell that the book was ancient, but he knew nothing more about the find than that the dealer was from Achmim in central Egypt. The dealer told him that a peasant had found the book in a niche of a wall, but that is impossible. The book's excellent condition, except for several pages missing from the *Gospel of Mary*, makes it entirely unlikely that it had spent the last fifteen hundred

unlikely that it had spent the last fifteen hundred years unnoticed in a wall niche. No book could have survived so long in the open air. It may be that the peasant or the dealer had come by it illegally and, hence, was evasive about the actual location of the find. Or it may have been only recently placed in the wall and accidentally found there. In any case, we still don't know anything specific about where it lay hidden all those centuries, although the first editor, Carl Schmidt, assumed that it had to have been found in the graveyards of Achmim or in the area surrounding the city.

Dr. Reinhardt purchased the book and took it to Berlin, where it was placed in the Egyptian Museum with the official title and catalogue number of Codex Berolinensis 8502. There it came into the hands of the Egyptologist Carl Schmidt, who set about producing a critical edition and German translation of what is now generally referred to as the Berlin Codex

From the beginning, the publication was plagued by difficulties. First of all, there is the problem of the missing pages. The first six pages, plus four additional pages from the middle of the work, are missing. This means that over half of the *Gospel of Mary* is completely lost. What happened to these pages? Carl Schmidt thought they must have been stolen or destroyed by whoever found the book. The manuscript itself was found protected inside its original leather and papyrus cover but by the time it reached Carl Schmidt in Berlin, the order of the pages had been considerably jumbled. It took Schmidt some time to realize that the book was nearly intact and must therefore have been found uninjured. In an uncharitable and perhaps even rancorous comment, Schmidt attributed the disorder of the pages to "greedy Arabs" who must also have either stolen or destroyed the missing pages, but to this day nothing is known about their fate. We can only hope that they lie protected somewhere and will one day resurface.

By 1912 Schmidt's edition was ready for publication and was sent to the Prießchen Press in Leipzig. But alas! The printer was nearing completion of the final sheets when a burst water pipe destroyed the entire edition. Soon thereafter Europe plunged into World War I. During the war and its aftermath, Schmidt was unable to go to Leipzig and salvage anything from the mess himself, but he did manage to resurrect the project. This time, however, his work was

thwarted by his own mortality. His death on April 17, 1938, caused further delay while the edition was retrieved from his estate and sent to press. At this point, another scholar was needed to see its publication through, a task that ultimately fell to Walter Till in 1941.

In the meantime, in 1917 a small third-century Greek fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* had been found in Egypt (Papyrus Rylands 463). Being parallel to part of the Coptic text, it added no new passages to the *Gospel of Mary*, but it did provide a few variants and additional evidence about the work's early date and its composition in Greek. Till incorporated this new evidence into his edition, and by 1943, the edition was again ready to go to press. But now World War II made publication impossible.

By the time the war was over, news had reached Berlin of a major manuscript discovery in Egypt near the village of Nag Hammadi. As chance would have it, copies of two of the other texts found within the Berlin Codex along with the *Gospel of Mary (Apocryphon of John and Sophia of Jesus Christ)* appeared among the new manuscripts. No new copies of *Gospel of Mary* were found at Nag Hammadi, but publication was delayed yet again as Till waited for information about the new manuscripts so that he could incorporate this new evidence into his edition of the Berlin Codex. But the wheels of scholarship grind slowly, and finally in exasperation, Till gave up. He confides to his readers:

In the course of the twelve years during which I have labored over the texts, I often made repeated changes here and there, and that will probably continue to be the case. But at some point a man must find the courage to let the manuscript leave one's hand, even if one is convinced that there is much that is still imperfect. That is unavoidable with all human endeavors.

At last in 1955, the first printed edition of the text of the *Gospel of Mary* finally appeared with a German translation.

Till was right, of course; scholars continue to make changes and add to the record. Of foremost importance was the discovery of yet another early third-century Greek fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* (Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525), which was published in 1983. With the addition of this fragment, we now have portions of three copies of the *Gospel of Mary* dating from antiquity: two Greek manuscripts from the early third century (P. Rylands 463 and P. Oxyrhynchus 3525) and one in Coptic from the fifth century (Codex Berolinensis 8525).

Because it is unusual for several copies from such early dates to have survived, the attestation of the *Gospel of Mary* as an early Christian work is unusually strong. Most early Christian literature that we know about has survived because the texts were copied and then recopied as the materials on which they were written wore out. In antiquity it was not necessary to burn books one

antiquity it was not necessary to burn books one wanted to suppress (although this was occasionally done); if they weren't recopied, they disappeared through neglect. As far as we know, the *Gospel of Mary* was never recopied after the fifth century; it may have been that the *Gospel of Mary* was actively suppressed, but it is also possible that it simply dropped out of circulation. Either way, whether its loss resulted from animosity or neglect, the recovery of the *Gospel of Mary*, in however fragmentary condition, is due in equal measure to phenomenal serendipity and extraordinary good fortune.

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### ***Dr. King's outline of the surviving manuscript fragments:***

#### **The Coptic Language**

Although the *Gospel of Mary* was originally composed in Greek, most of it survives only in Coptic translation. Coptic is the last stage of the Egyptian language and is still in liturgical use by Egyptian Christians, called Copts. The oldest known Egyptian language was written in hieroglyphs, always on stone or some other durable material. In addition, Egyptians also wrote on papyrus, and for this they used a different script called hieratic, employed almost solely for writing sacred literature. A third script, called demotic, was developed for everyday transactions like letter-writing and book-keeping. Each of these scripts is very cumbersome, utilizing different characters or signs to represent whole syllables, not just individual sounds as in English. Sometime during the late Roman period, probably around the second century CE, scribes started writing the Egyptian language in primarily Greek letters, but adding a few from demotic Egyptian. This process made writing Egyptian much simpler and more efficient. Since Coptic script was used almost exclusively by Christians in Egypt, we can assume that Egyptian Christians were the ones who translated and preserved the *Gospel of Mary*.

#### **The Berlin Codex**

The book Reinhardt bought in Cairo in 1896 turned out to be a fifth-century papyrus codex. Papyrus was the most common writing material of the day, but codices, the precursor of our book form, had come into use only a couple of centuries earlier,

primarily among Christians. The codex was made by cutting papyrus rolls into sheets, which then were stacked in a single pile, usually made up of at least 38 sheets. Folding the pile in half and sewing the sheets together produced a book of about 152 pages, which was finally placed inside a leather cover. The *Gospel of Mary* is a short work, taking up only the first 18 pages of a codex that itself is relatively small in size, having leaves that

measure on average only about 12.7 cm long and 10.5 cm wide.

### **Papyrus Rylands 463 (PRyl)**

This Greek fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* was acquired by the Rylands Library in Manchester, England, in 1917, and published in 1938 by C. H. Roberts. Like POxy 3525, it was found at Oxyrhynchus in northern Egypt, and dates to the early third century CE. It is a fragment from a codex—it has writing on both sides of the papyrus leaf—and exhibits a very clear literary script. It measures 8.7 cm wide by 10 cm long, although most fibers measure only 8.5 cm. The front of the fragment contains the conclusion of Mary's revelation and the beginning of the disciples' dispute over her teaching. After a short gap, the dispute continues on the other side of the fragment and ends with Levi leaving to announce the good news (*GMary* 9:29-10:4; 10:6-14). (See photos, pp. 1 and 35.)

### **Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525 (POxy)**

This tiny and severely damaged papyrus fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* in Greek was found during excavations of the town of Oxyrhynchus, along the Nile in lower (northern) Egypt. Published in 1983 by P. J. Parsons, it is now housed in the Ashmolean Library at Oxford. It dates to the early third century CE. The fragment has writing on only one side, indicating that it came from a roll, not a codex (book). Because it was written in a cursive Greek script usually reserved for such documentary papyri as business documents and letters rather than literary texts, Parsons suggested that it was the work of an amateur. What remains is a very fragmentary fragment indeed. It contains approximately twenty lines of writing, none of them complete. The papyrus measures 11.7 cm long and is 11.4 cm at its widest point, but the top half is only about 4 cm wide. The restoration is based largely on the parallel Coptic text. It contains the Savior's farewell, Mary's comforting of the other disciples, Peter's request to Mary to teach, and the beginning of her vision (*GMary* 4:11-7:3).

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