

THE GOSPEL OF MARY MAGDALENE

(BG 8502.1)

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The extant text of *The Gospel of Mary* can easily be divided into two parts. The first section (7,1-9,24) describes the dialogue between the (risen) Savior and the disciples. He answers their questions concerning matter and sin. Relying on an exegesis of Romans 7, as Anne Pasquier has shown, **the Savior argues, in effect, that sin is not a moral category, but a cosmological one; it is due to the improper mixing of the material and the spiritual.** In the end all things will be resolved into their proper root. After finishing his discourse, the Savior gives them a final greeting, admonishes them to beware of any who may try to lead them astray and commissions them to go and preach the gospel of the kingdom. After he departs, however, the disciples are grieved and in considerable doubt and consternation. Mary Magdalene comforts them and turns their hearts toward the Good and a consideration of the Savior's words.

The second section of the text (10,1-23; 15,1-19,2) contains a description by Mary of special revelation given to her by the Savior. At Peter's request, she tells the disciples about things that were hidden from them. The basis for her knowledge is a vision of the Lord and a private dialogue with him. Unfortunately four pages of the text are missing here so that only the beginning and end of Mary's revelation are extant.

The revelation is in the form of a dialogue. The first question Mary asks the Savior is how one sees a vision. The Savior replies that the soul sees through the mind which is between the soul and the spirit. At this point the text breaks off. When the text resumes at 15,1, Mary is in the midst of describing the Savior's revelation concerning the rise of the soul past the four powers. The four powers are most probably to be identified as essential expressions of the four material elements. The enlightened soul, now free of their bonds, rises past the four powers, overpowering them with her gnosis, and attains eternal, silent rest.

After Mary finishes recounting her vision to the disciples, Andrew and then Peter challenge her on two grounds. First of all, Andrew says, these teachings are strange. Secondly, Peter questions, would the Savior really have told such things to a woman and kept them from the male disciples. Levi admonishes Peter for contending with the woman as against the adversaries and acknowledges that the Savior loved her more than the other disciples. He entreats them to be ashamed, to put on the perfect man, and to go forth and preach as the Savior had instructed them to do. They immediately go forth to preach and the text ends.

The confrontation of Mary with Peter, a scenario also found in *The Gospel of Thomas*, *Pistis Sophia*, and *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, reflects some of the tensions in second-century Christianity. Peter and Andrew represent orthodox positions that deny the validity of esoteric revelation and reject the authority of women to teach. *The Gospel of Mary* attacks both of these positions head-on through its portrayal of Mary Magdalene. **She is the Savior's beloved, possessed of knowledge and teaching superior to that of the public apostolic tradition.** Her superiority is based on vision and private revelation and is demonstrated in her capacity to strengthen the wavering disciples and turn them toward the Good.

The text belongs to the genre of the gnostic dialogue. It has, however, also been classified as an apocalypse due to several characteristics it shares with other texts of that genre: revelation dialogue, vision, an abbreviated cosmogony, a description of otherworldly regions and the rise of the soul (though there is no heavenly journey as such), final instructions, and a short narrative conclusion. The difficulty in determining

genre is due in part to the fact that the text has undergone secondary redaction. Most scholars agree that the two parts of the text described above were originally separate pieces (oral or written) that were artificially combined to form the present whole. The role of Mary at the end of the first section and the altercation among the disciples at the end provide the narrative connection.

The Gospel of Mary was originally written in Greek some time in the second century. Unfortunately the two extant copies of *The Gospel of Mary* are extremely fragmentary. The earliest text comprises only a single, fragmentary leaf written in Greek, dated to the early third century (P. Rylands 111463 [22:16,1-19,4]). A longer portion of the text is extant in an early fifth-century Coptic codex (P. Berolinensis 8502,1), though considerable portions of the text are missing there too. Of eighteen pages, only eight are extant (7-10 and 15-19,5). Though the text of the Greek fragment varies considerably from the Coptic version, it parallels the Coptic pages 17,5-21 and 18,5-19,5 and hence does not provide any new material.

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BG 7, 1-19, 5

[. ..] (pp. 1-6 missing) will matter then be [destroyed] or not?" **The Savior said, "All natures, all formations, all creatures exist in and with one another, and they will be resolved again into their own roots.** For the nature of matter is resolved into the (roots) of its nature alone. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Peter said to him, "Since you have explained everything to us, tell us this also: What is the sin of the world?" , The Savior said, " There is no sin, but it is you who make sin when you do the things that are like the nature of adultery, which is called 'sin.' That is why the Good came into your midst, to the (essence) of every nature, in order to restore it to its root." Then he continued and said, "That is why you' [become sick] and die, for [. ..] of the one who [. ..He who] , understands, let him understand. [Matter gave birth to] a passion that has no equal, which proceeded from (something) contrary to nature. Then there arise a disturbance in the whole body. That is why I said to you, 'Be of good courage,' and if you are discouraged (be) encouraged in the presence of the different forms of nature. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'

When the blessed one had said this, he greeted them all, saying, "Peace be with you. Receive my peace to yourselves. Beware that no one lead you astray, saying, 'Lo here!' or 'Lo' there!' For the Son of Man is within you. Follow after him! Those who seek him will find him. Go then and preach the gospel of the kingdom. Do not lay down any rules beyond what I appointed for you, and do not give a law like the lawgiver lest you be constrained by it." When he had said this, he departed.

But they were grieved. They wept greatly, saying, "How shall we go to the gentiles and preach the gospel of the kingdom of the Son of Man? If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?" Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren, "Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for his grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us into men." When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the [Savior].

Peter said to Mary, 'Sister, I we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember - which you know (but) we do not, nor have we heard them.'" Mary answered and said, "What is hidden from you will proclaim to you." And she began to speak to them these words: "I," she said, " I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him, 'Lord, I saw you today in a vision.' He answered and said to me, 'Blessed are you, that you did not waver at the sight of me. For where the mind

is, there is the treasure. 'I said to him, 'Lord, now does he who sees the vision see it (through) the soul (or) through the spirit?' The Savior answered and said. 'He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but the mind which [is] between the two - that is [what] sees the vision and it is [. ..]'. (pp. 11-14 missing)

"[. ..] it. And desire that, 'I did not see you descending, but now I see you ascending. Why do you lie, since you belong to me?' The soul answered and said, 'I saw you. You did not see me nor recognize me. I served you as a garment, and you did not know me.' When it had said this, it went away rejoicing greatly.

"Again it came to the third power, which is called ignorance. [It (the power)] questioned the soul saying, 'Where are you going? In wickedness are you bound. But you are bound; do not judge!' And the soul said, 'why do you judge me although I have not judged? I was bound though I have not bound. I was not recognized. But I have recognized that the All is being dissolved, both the earthly (things) and the heavenly.'

When the soul had overcome the third power, it went upwards and saw the fourth power, (which) took seven forms. The first form is darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth is the excitement of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the sixth is the foolish wisdom of flesh, the seventh is the wrathful wisdom. These are the seven [powers] of wrath. They ask the soul, 'Whence do you come, slayer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space?' The soul answered and said, 'What binds me has been slain, and what surrounds me has been overcome, and my desire has been ended, and ignorance has died. In a [world] I was released from a world, [and] in a type from a heavenly type, and (from) the fetter of oblivion which is transient. From this time on will I attain to the rest of the time, of the season, of the aeon, in silence.'

When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Savior had spoken with her. But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, "Say what you (wish to) say I about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas." Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior: "Did he really speak with a woman without our knowledge (and) not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"

Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?" Levi answered and said to Peter, "Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us. Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect man and acquire him for ourselves as he commanded us, and preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said. When [...] and they began to go forth [to] proclaim and to preach.

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