



The Gospel of Mary

A workshop by Tom Hall

The Author

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Preface

Lacking the incalculable benefits of modern knowledge, the ancients – who, like us, preferred almost any explanation to none at all – proposed some pretty arcane theories. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala (GMar) is based on one of these, a neo-platonic dualism of spirit and matter in which the soul is portrayed as a divine spark from on high that takes on the burdens of humanity when it joins with an earthly body, and then seeks to regain its home in the realm of perfection when that material shell returns to dust.

This workshop will consist of a brief overview of GMar's textual history, followed by an explication of its narrative portrayal of Jesus and Mary, and Mary's role as 'Disciple in Chief'. Most of the discussion will focus on the doctrine that Mary alone received from Jesus in a vision: namely that the soul must have knowledge (Greek *gnosis*, hence 'gnostic') of the challenges it will face in seeking to return to the realm of pure spirit – of the 'gatekeepers' who will try to bar its upward way and the correct answers it must give.

To be sure, the drama is a highly fanciful one, but it is one I have come to see as a considerably more fruitful metaphor than those found in the traditional salvation scenarios. However weird and metaphysical GMar may be on the surface, a moderate lens adjustment may be enough to give an assessment of the human condition not far from that offered by an objective secularist. Perhaps 'Soul' and 'Heaven' can continue to serve as useful metaphors if we remember that's what they are. So also in the case of 'God' – though that may be a little more difficult.

This presentation draws on *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* by Karen King, published by Polebridge Press 2003; bracketed numbers in the notes refer to pages in that book.

Background

The Gospel of Mary was written in Greek in c.125 and was one of about 25 non-canonical gospels. (The Old English *godspel* means 'good message' or 'good news'). But this was a different kind of gospel, neither biography (as with the four canonical gospels) nor a 'sayings' collection (e.g. Thomas, Q). Rather, it is a post-resurrection dialogue (as with 1

Apoc Jas, Dial Sav et al) – a genre that features special teaching, rebuking or comforting the disciples, and encouragement of preaching.

Why this form? It answers doctrinal or ethical questions (such as the modern “What would Jesus do?” or “What would Jesus say?”). Debates of this kind led to the Council of Nicea two centuries later, in 325. The canonical Luke-Acts is now thought to have been written at about the same time, as were the ‘Pastorals’: the non-Pauline Epistles 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus. A Coptic translation of GMar was made in the second or third century but the book was not copied after 5C. Was it suppressed? Had it simply lost appeal? Unfortunately 85% of early Christian literature was lost – as was GMar for 1500 years.

Today we have only a fragmentary copy (8 of the original 18 pages) in Coptic and two small Greek fragments. The one existing manuscript was bought in Egypt in 1896. After two World Wars, a burst water pipe in a scholar’s study, and discovery and inclusion of the Greek fragments, it was finally published in German in 1955 and in English in 1961.

Basic content

This text has been summarised as ‘a radical interpretation of Jesus’ teaching as a path to inner spiritual knowledge’. It rejects both crucifixion as redemptive sacrifice, and salvation as bodily resurrection. Mary Magdalene is no longer the rehabilitated sinner, nor merely the first to see the risen Jesus, but is the ‘Disciple-in-chief’ who best understands and exemplifies Jesus. She is no longer the ‘hijacked heroine’ who was defamed by Gregory the Great in 6C [p.151], but stands alone as ‘Apostle to the Apostles’ and exemplar of women’s leadership roles in early Xty [p.178].

GMar offers a Jesus seen through a Greek lens, that of Platonic mind-body dualism rather than Stoic ‘deal with it’ materialism. This was no doubt a reason for rejection. As turf wars and doctrinal clashes among Church Fathers spread, problems of canonicity arose. Which of growing number of gospels were acceptable? According to the ‘Three Bears’ criterion, an acceptable gospel must not be too Jewish (as, e.g., Ebionites, Nazoreans, Hebrews) nor too Greek (GThom, GMar) – a ‘just right’ portrait of Jesus was needed.

Clearly GMar is a work of fiction, and this raises questions of why these particular scenes, questions, portrayals, and doctrines were included. What were the agenda items of this writer, this community, this Christianity? Why, e. g., ask about nature of matter? Why ‘no such thing as sin’? Why ‘adultery’? What doctrine(s) are affirmed or denied? [p.50]; note the familiar ‘two good ears’ advice.

Why does Saviour leave? (Note the parallel to Luke 17:21, Thomas 113.) Why does he forbid further rules? Then a new dialogue: Mary and other disciples. How many different dialogues? Why the dialogue format? Note the issue of visions: the mind-body problem.

Tertullian and GMar agree that only the pure receive visions; a love of the material world dims spiritual acuity. But they disagree on human nature.

- Tertullian: A person consists of unified body and soul, “soul is sown in the womb together with flesh.”
- Mary: A human combines body, soul and mind. Mind is the divine element; it alone can direct soul to spiritual life.

- Tertullian: A polluted soul results in sinful actions by body; the only cure is faith in Christ leading to resurrection of body and soul.
- Mary: Soul must learn its true nature, turn away from body, recognize and strive to fulfill spiritual potential of true self, discover inner “child of true humanity” (cf. “inner Christ,” “That of God”).

Four missing pages later, Mary is describing the difficult task of the disembodied spirit in its attempt to ascend to its true home and find peace and rest in God: challenged by a series of Powers – gatekeepers, airport screeners – who seek to bar its ascent. Knowledge (Greek *gnosis*) is needed both to recognize one's spiritual nature and to answer these evil guardians. This is a common trope in ancient literature; cf. 2 Cor 12, Apollo [p. 72], “Seventh heaven.”

Clever writing: the challenged soul each time employs its knowledge and insight to turn the Power's indictment against it. Note that, at the end of this passage, “The soul replied ... silence” is very difficult. “In a world I was set loose” ... “exists in time,” (v. 28) is better read thus: “And while still a member of humanity I was set free by discovering the true nature of humanity and thus escaped the mortality of temporal life” (this edit was OK'd by Karen King).

Why does Mary fall silent? Are objections by Andrew and Peter credible? Why does the writer include them in his (obviously fictional) account?

Why does Mary weep instead of “pulling rank”? Note Levi's counter-attack; why Levi? What aim(s) can we infer from next-to-last verse? From the last?

Conclusion: concept of salvation in GMar

It is not hard to improve on Tertullian's 2C notion of physical resurrection of body and soul; even Paul's paradoxical contrivance of a spiritual body (*soma pneumatikori*) is more sensible. But we humans have long been addicted to the hope of immortality. Consider two verses from a rural 19th C cemetery in Glocester, RI, USA:

Weep not for me my dearest friend
 You soon will be with me
 And sleep in dust until the end
 And then we shall be free

How blest is our son that's bereft
 Of all that could burden his mind
 How easy the soul that has left
 This wearisome body behind

These sentiments are little changed from the antique dualism we find in GMar. And yet as superficially outlandish as that gospel's scenario surely is, it has a compelling analogue in human life – which is, after all, a journey similarly beset with challenging confrontations and one that always ends in endless rest. In short, this little salvation drama is hardly a literal account of anyone's after-death experience, but can be seen as a compelling mythic or poetic rendering of the human condition. For as we travel through life on our several journeys into an unknown future, we every day encounter a number of opportunities to choose the right deed over the wrong, to be benevolent rather than uncaring, to put the welfare of others ahead of offering self-serving justification for our own desires. I submit to you that we live our whole lives among the gatekeepers of heaven, and our spiritual health is measured by how we answer their challenges.

The Gospel of Mary

Pages 1-6 are missing.

“... Will m[a]tter then be utterly [destroyed or not?”

The Saviour replied, “Every nature, every modeled form, every creature, exists in and with each other. They will dissolve again into their own proper root. For the nature of matter is dissolved into what belongs to its nature. Anyone with two ears able to hear should listen!”

Then Peter said to him, “You have been explaining every topic to us; tell us one other thing. What is the sin of the world?”

The Saviour replied, “There is no such thing as sin; rather you yourselves are what produces sin when you act in accordance with the nature of adultery, which is called 'sin'. For this reason, the Good came among you, pursuing (the good) which belongs to every nature. It will set it within its root.”

Then he continued. He said, “This is why you get si[c]k and die: because [you love] what de[c]ei[ve]s [you]. [Anyone who] thinks should consider (these matters)!

“[Ma]tter gav[e] bi[r]th to a passion which has no Image because it derives from what is contrary to nature. A disturbing confusion then occurred in the whole body. That is why I told you, 'Become content at heart, while also remaining discontent and disobedient; indeed become contented and agreeable (only) in the presence of that other Image of nature.' Anyone with two ears capable of hearing should listen!”

When the Blessed One had said these things, he greeted them all. “Peace be with you!” he said. “Acquire my peace within yourselves!

“Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, 'Look over here!' or 'Look over there!' For the child of true Humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it.

“Go then, preac[h] the good news about the Realm. [Do] not lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it.” After he had said these things, he departed from them.

But they were distressed and wept greatly. “How are we going to go out to the rest of the world to announce the good news about the Realm of the child of true Humanity?” they said. “If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?”

Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all, addressing her brothers and sisters, “Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us true Human beings.”

When Mary had said these things, she turned their heart [to]ward the Good, and they began to deba[t]e about the wor[d]s of [the Saviour],

Peter said to Mary, "Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than all other women. Tell us the words of the Saviour that you remember, the things which you know that we don't because we haven't heard them."

Mary responded, "I will teach you about what is hidden from you." And she began to speak these words to them.

She said, "I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him, 'Lord, I saw you today in a vision.' He answered me, 'How wonderful you are for not wavering at seeing me! For where the mind is, there is the treasure.'

I said to him, 'So now, Lord, does a person who sees a vision see it <with> the soul <or> with the spirit?'

The Saviour answered, 'A person does not see with the soul or with the spirit. Rather the mind, which exists between these two, sees the vision an[d] that is w[hat...]f

(Pages 11-14 are missing.)

"...it.'

"And Desire said, 'I did not see you go down, yet now I see you go up. So why do you lie since you belong to me?'

"The soul answered, 'I saw *you*. You did not see me nor did you know me. You (mis)took the garment (I wore) for my (true) self. And you did not recognize me.'

"After it had said these things, it left rejoicing greatly.

"Again, it came to the third Power, which is called 'Ignorance'. [It] examined the soul closely, saying, 'Where are you going? You are bound by wickedness. Indeed you are bound! Do not judge!'

"And the soul said, 'Why do you judge me, since I have not passed judgement? I have been bound, but I have not bound (anything). They did not recognize me, but I have recognized that the universe is to be dissolved, both the things of earth and those of heaven.'

"When the soul had brought the third Power to naught, it went upward and saw the fourth Power. It had seven forms. The first form is darkness; the second is desire; the third is ignorance; the fourth is zeal for death; the fifth is the realm of the flesh; the sixth is the foolish wisdom of the flesh; the seventh is the wisdom of the wrathful person. These are the seven Powers of Wrath.

"They interrogated the soul, 'Where are you coming from, human-killer, and where are you going, space-conqueror?'

"The soul replied, saying, 'What binds me has been slain, and what surrounds me has been destroyed, and my desire has been brought to an end, and ignorance has died. 'In a [wor]ld, I was set loose from a world [an]d in a type, from a type which is above, and (from) the chain

of forgetfulness which exists in time. From this hour on, for the time of the due season of the aeon, I will receive rest i[n] silence.”

After Mary had said these things, she was silent, since it was up to this point that the Saviour had spoken to her.

Andrew responded, addressing the brothers and sisters, “Say what you will about the things she has said, but I do not believe that the S[a]vior said these things, f[or] indeed these teachings are strange ideas.”

Peter responded, bringing up similar concerns. He questioned them about the Saviour: “Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?”

Then [M]ary wept and said to Peter, “My brother Peter, what are you imagining? Do you think that I have thought up these things by myself in my heart or that I am telling lies about the Saviour?” Levi answered, speaking to Peter, “Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the Adversaries. For if the Saviour made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her? Assuredly the Saviour's knowledge of her is completely reliable. That is why he loved her more than us.

“Rather we should be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and announce the good news, not laying down any other rule or law that differs from what the Saviour said.”

After [he had said these] things, they started going out [to] teach and to preach.

[The Gos]pel according to Mary