

“Mary, Jesus, nature, and social justice”

by Rex Weyler

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Mary, Jesus, nature, and social justice

Human legend reflects real emotions and events. When we look below the surface and behind the metaphors of our stories, we discover shared human experience. Stories of Rama and Sita, Gilgamesh and Shamhat, or Jesus and Mary, for example, reveal a culture’s relationships among men and women, between individuals and society, and between society and nature. Stories that have survived regarding Mary and Jesus serve as a window into first century Mediterranean culture, and provide some clues to modern cultural identity.

In the earliest accounts of Jesus, two women disciples are named: Salome and Mary. Later accounts mention seven women, but they all name Mary Magdalene. The story of Mary and her scandalous relationship with a social reformer – “Yeshua” in Aramaic, our “Jesus” – echoes the beliefs and hopes of simple, but divinely inspired, peasants caught in the crossfire of history’s great empires.

The *Gospel of Mary* – discovered in Coptic and Greek scripts in Akhmim and Oxyrhynchus, Egypt – records a dialogue among disciples Mary, Andrew, Peter, and Levi. She calms her comrades’ fear of reprisals by urging them to find comfort in nature, for “Every nature, every modeled form, every creature, exists in and with each other.”

She recounts a conversation with Jesus and repeats his instructions to “find the light within,” adding a distinctive twist: “The seed of true humanity exists within you.” These references to the nature, the inter-relatedness of living things, and the “seed” of humanity reflect common peasant relationships with the cycles of death and rebirth.

A common first century public debate questioned whether spirit and matter were separate, opposing forces as Plato claimed, or whether spirit arose naturally from the earth and living things, as Thales and Aristotle suggest. Mary’s comments address this popular debate.

In the *Gospel of Thomas* we hear Jesus wonder: “If the flesh came into being from the spirit, that is a wonder, but if spirit came into being from the body, that is a wonder of wonders.” Plato’s “dualism,” separating spirit from nature served voracious empires and plagues society to this day, as we may witness from our environmental destruction. Mary and Jesus appear to come down on the side of nature.

“Lift up a stone, and you will find me there.”

Mary’s point of view also reflects millennia of feminine spirituality that remained alive in the first century. Later Roman Church “fathers” slandered Mary and purged her ideas from the record. The unknown author of the *Luke* gospel called her a “sinner” possessed by “devils.” In the sixth century, Pope Gregory accused her of “forbidden acts,” claiming she “coveted with earthly eyes.” These patriarchs did not like the idea that spirit could be found anywhere in nature. Such a notion undermined their monopoly of religion.

Fortunately, Mary’s gospel survived the purge and legends of her travels endured from Syria to Egypt, to Aksum (modern Ethiopia) and southern France. Modern tales of a sexual liaison with Jesus and a royal “bloodline,” miss the point. Mary’s gospel reveals to us a strong woman in her own right, a woman of confidence, leadership, courage, and loyalty. To her admirers, she represented the archetypal peasant queen, who would protect her people from a ruthless empire. Modern parallels might include Rosa Parks or Aung San Su Kyi.

Anointing

Only four stories appear in all four traditional gospels, and one of these is the anointing of Jesus by a woman. The four versions vary, but the common traits of this story include, an unnamed woman anointer, an alabaster jar of ointment, an indignant observer, and Jesus defending the woman for her loyalty. This woman is almost certainly Mary Magdalene.

What does this story tell us? What is this anointing about? Why an alabaster jar? And why would the woman need defending? The answers to these questions lie deep in cultural history.

Galilean peasants in the first century, still worshiped Asherah, the queen of heaven, associated with the star Venus, Isis in Egypt, Ishtar in Akkadia, or later “Eostre” the goddess of spring and the source of our word “Easter.”

Asherah leads the morning sun into the heavens on the spring equinox and therefore she is associated with planting grain, rebirth, and renewal. Her symbols include flocks of sheep, flowers, a tree of life, breasts, the womb, and horns, which represent phases of the moon. The lustre of the moon is portrayed in carvings of her by alabaster stone, and thus we begin to see how these symbols creep into the Jesus/Mary story. But there is more.

Asherah sends her daughter, Anath to earth to facilitate the annual rebirth in nature including the unification of male and female. Anath went into the underworld in the winter, but eventually, her lover Tammuz takes her place. Peasants performed these stories in annual spring festivals, during which the “people’s queen,” a young woman selected by a village, chooses a “king” who is ritually mocked and killed. The king – Tammuz, Attis, Osiris, Dionysus – must die so that life is restored.

In Canaan, this ritual humiliation of the “king” included a crown of brambles, a mock robe, and a reed scepter known as the “grain of Tammuz,” all symbolizing natural death and rebirth. These rites were considered an “abomination” in the book of Ezekiel, but in Galilee, peasant women would openly “weep for Tammuz” until his return and tip a drink onto the ground for Anath.

We find traces of these symbols and rituals in the story of Mary and Jesus: The unity of male and female, respect for nature, the anointing of a peasant shepherd king, the alabaster, the tears, a mock crown and sceptre, the resurrection of a sacrificial king, and a promised rebirth of life.

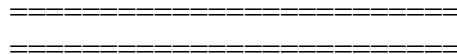
As we dig deeper, we find even more parallels. For example, women devotees of Asherah would share food with the poor by setting up “Asherah’s tables” at crossroads. Since Asherah (Venus) led the equinox sun into the constellation of Pisces at this time, we find images of fish with these meals. The tradition of Asherah’s tables appears in the Jesus and Mary story as the feeding of multitudes, bread and fish, the alms tables of the disciples, and Jesus’ instructions to “give to anyone who begs.”

We may also discover that the epithets associated with Jesus and Mary – “the Nazorean” and “the Magdalene” likely had nothing to do with hometowns. “Nazorean” comes from the Hebrew “Nazar” meaning to abstain or set apart. The first century Nazoreans were likely an ascetic sect “set apart” by religious purity.

Emperor Constantine’s mother originated the story of Mary’s “hometown” in the fourth century, but we have no evidence of a first century town in Galilee called Magdala. In Hebrew and Aramaic, a “mgdl” is a tower, and her epithet, “the Magdalene,” likely refers to her ritual role in the community, a “tower of the flock,” the “Magdal Eder” mentioned by the peasant prophet, Micah. The title refers to a peasant queen who defends her people and assures the annual rebirth of spring crops.

Jesus and Mary must have been a dynamic pair indeed. They appear to have honoured their peasant traditions, supported the poor and dispossessed, and delivered a message of modesty, respect for nature, self-awareness, and public generosity.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that these are precisely the messages we need to hear today, in the twenty-first century.



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