

25. Leloup, Jean-Yves, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene: Coptic Translation and Commentary by Jean-Yves Leloup; English Translation and Notes by Joseph Rowe; Preface by Jacob Needleman* (Inner Traditions 2002)

This Gospel is a big disappointment to me, I could have written it. It takes some hints from the canonical Gospels and from the Gospel of Thomas which is also an early document, and seems to be informed by the later Gospel of Phillip. It reconstructs a very active apostolic role for Mary Magdalene whom Jesus undeniably loved either more, or at least differently from the other apostles. (See my comments on the book "The Woman with the Alabaster Jar" elsewhere on this website if this is of interest to you.)

After the crucifixion this Mary gives the despairing apostles courage, and shares with them what Jesus confided in her after his death when she saw him and conversed with him in vision. After this encouragement and spiritual enlightenment from Jesus through Mary, they are ready to go out and convert the world.

The fact that most Gnostics thought there was no physical resurrection, that it was a spiritual enlivenment rather than a rehabilitation of a formerly dead body, is reflected in this story since the appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene is in vision, not in body. This is the appearance mentioned in a Gospel, which makes her the first witness to the resurrection and confirms her status as a special or favorite apostle, and caused this Gospel of Mary to have some claim to legitimacy. The church itself was heavily divided on the resurrection issue for a long time because of Paul's saying that flesh and blood do not inherit the Kingdom. But the Gnostics took it one step further and declared that your spiritual awakening in this life, in response to hearing the truth they proclaimed, was in fact the resurrection! That is why Christ's promise

was that his followers would not die, they are resurrected into an eternal spiritual life that continues uninterrupted by the sloughing off of the body.

She asked Jesus if she was experiencing this vision in her soul or spirit, and he answered that it was in her "nous" which mediates between those two. Leloup goes to some great lengths to discuss this on his pages 119 through 128, because it is a different use of the word nous than in the Platonic philosophical system where the word is employed to mean the spirit of a person that is encased in a soma (body) and a psyche (soul). Here it is a spiritual part of a human that mediates between the Holy Spirit and the soul. Leloup likens it to the 'creative imagination' idea that Henry Corbin uses to explain the experiences of mystics and saints (p. 126). I mention it here because, as Leloup rightly notes, this is not the sort of question we are used to from Christ's disciples. And the answer is a long way from the claimed physical presence of Christ after his resurrection in the Gospels, where Thomas touches his wounds and he eats with them, even though he walks through walls.

So, that was an interesting and surprising note, but beyond that 'nous' business the book was a disappointment. What was wrong with it? I would be enthused about the whole book if it were a genuine piece of early Christian origin. But it is a late production and contains as the great secret teachings of Jesus after his resurrection the typical detailed description of the steps of the soul's progress that are such a commonplace, and to me boring, feature of much of Gnostic writ. It is the same commonplace and boring dribble one finds in modern New Age (=old Gnostic) materials and even the Jewish Kabbalah (=Gnostic) regarding the detailed structure of the after-life which is of course concurrent with our lives and our pre-life lives as well. When structures and angelic beings of the afterlife are presented in some detail,

even as obvious symbols of deeper spiritual truths, I lose interest. Sorry, when words are being multiplied to convey pieces of insights into what is inherently ineffable, I get out of the way.

As mentioned in item # 21 by Hedrick, the Gnostic works can be classified somewhat by what apostles they mention. In this case it is Mary Magdalene, of course, and Andrew and Peter and Levi who are named and given dialogue, but all the others are also said to be present. Andrew and Peter are foils representing all Christians who question Gnostic claims to special knowledge. Andrew says (p. 158):

As for me, I do not believe that the teacher would speak like this. These ideas are too different from those we have known.

Whereas Andrew is assigned simple unbelief, Peter is assigned a harsher criticism, one he is also assigned in other Gnostic works, bringing in some misogynic criticisms of Mary (p. 162):

How is it possible that the teacher talked in this manner with a woman about secrets of which we ourselves are ignorant? Must we change our customs, and listen to this woman? Did he really choose her and prefer her to us?

This of course represents what many Jewish-Christians/Christians would be asking themselves. The custom and clearly the whole thrust of the majority of the Old Testament was that men are spiritually accountable to God and women were spiritually accountable to the male guardians placed over them: father, elder brother, husband, etc.

Andrew was answered indirectly, but Peter's more personal attack on Mary as a woman was answered directly by Mary and Levi. Mary wept and called on "My brother Peter" (p. 165) to stop and think: would she make this up and tell lies about "our teacher?" This is a direct emotional appeal to the reader. Then Levi stood and accosted Peter (p. 168):

Peter, you have always been hot tempered, and now we see you repudiating a woman, just as our adversaries do. Yet if the Teacher held her worthy, who are you to reject her? Surely the teacher knew her very well, for he loved her more than us.

This response is interesting in that it pits the orthodox Christians against these apostles as their adversaries. Levi goes on to admonish they do as Mary has indicated the teacher wanted them to do, and let the Teacher "take root in" them . . . "without trying to lay down any rules and laws other than those he witnessed" (pp. 172-173). Then follow the last two lines that, to me, indirectly answer those who may have been sympathetic to Andrews doubt as well as peter's more pointed complaint (p. 173):

When Levi had said these words, they all went forth to spread the gospel.

To me this is a masterful line because all of the apostles put aside their doubts and objections and went forth and did what every Christian reader of this tract knows they did. Thus the fact that they are Christians because of the work of the apostles and those they appointed to also minister and teach is the fact that proves that these claims are correct! Subtly understated but making the point just fine: you can have your doubts, but you can't dispute the outcome as stated here. It is also a big slap at the orthodox church which is being confronted by this dialogue: we have the

knowledge the Teacher left after his return from the dead,
you do not, thus we are the true Christians, not you!