

## L'Évangile selon Marie (BG 1)

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Modern scholarship has made it increasingly apparent that there were profound divisions between various groups of Christians from the religion's earliest period. While the theological aspect of these differences has received a great deal of attention, the social ramifications have been less thoroughly examined, partly due to lack of evidence. The *Gospel of Mary* is one of the few texts that shed light on the relations between men and women in the early Christian communities, as well as giving evidence of a sophisticated and fascinating understanding of the true nature of reality. As with many other gnostic texts, it is based around a post-resurrection revelation discourse of Jesus.

Our principal source for the *Gospel of Mary* is Berlin papyrus 8502 (BG 8502), acquired in Cairo in 1896 and dated to the start of the fifth century A.D. It is the first text in BG 8502, which also contains the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, works found in the Nag Hammadi collection as well, and the *Acts of Peter*. The sections of the text that we possess are quite well preserved, but pages 1-6 and 11-14 are missing entirely. The text is in Sahidique, a dialect of Coptic, although the language of composition would have been Greek. No copy of the *Gospel of Mary* was found in the Nag Hammadi collection: our only other attestation for it is in a fragment of a Greek papyrus known as papyrus Rylands 463 (Ryl. 463), which corresponds to p. 17,5-21 and 18,5-19,5 of BG 8502. This papyrus is dated to the third century AD: the first redaction of the *Gospel of Mary* would have been in the second century AD, although Professor Pasquier argues that the original text was at some point substantially expanded by the inclusion of Mary's secret revelation.

The first six pages of the text being unfortunately missing, the story as we have it begins in the middle of a question of an unnamed disciple to the risen Saviour concerning the ultimate fate of matter. The Saviour responds to this question and to a related one by Peter (7,10) concerning the nature of the world's sin, by explaining that there is no sin inherent with the world, or matter, but that sin enters through its improper association with spirit, and that the role of the Good is to separate these elements (7,13-8,12). The Saviour then issues some last words of encouragement and of warning—reminiscent of, but quite different from, parallel post-Resurrection appearances preserved in the New *Testament*—and disappears (8,14-9,5). Most of the disciples are cast into despair, but Mary comforts and encourages them (9,6-23). While they are discussing the words of Jesus, Peter asks Mary whether, since she is the one who Jesus loved more than all other women, the Saviour had told her anything that he had not told the other disciples (10,1-6). Mary responds by describing to them a vision she has had, wherein Jesus appeared to her and revealed hidden truths to her (10,8-17,8). Sadly, many of these truths remain hidden to this day, as our text lacks pages 11-14. However, what remains allows us to determine that the revelation starts with some discussion of the different functions of the three parts of the soul (*pneuma*, *nous*, and *psyche*) in the activity of prophecy (10,17-23). After the missing pages, the text resumes in the middle of a discussion of the stages of ascent of the soul through the four heavens, and the responses it gives to each of the Powers that guard the various heavens, ending with the victorious soul attaining the level of Silence and Repose, its true goal (15,1-17,7).

At this point Mary's revelation is aggressively challenged by Andrew, on the basis of its alleged lack of similarity to other teachings of Jesus (17,10-15). Peter also responds angrily, by denying that Jesus would have given secret revelations to a woman in preference to the male disciples (17,18-22). Tearfully, Mary defends herself against Peter's allegation that she is lying (18,1-5). Levi takes her side, pointing out Peter's hot-headed nature and the fact that the Saviour has given ample proofs of his love for Mary (18,6-15). He then urges that they stop arguing and get back to their real jobs, namely self-perfection and the proclamation of the gospel (18,15-21). On this note, some or all of the disciples

depart in order to begin their missionary work (19,1-2).

In her introduction and commentary, Professor Pasquier discusses the text both as an example of Gnostic thought and as evidence of tensions between different groups of Christians in the early stages of Christianity. In particular she analyses the underlying historical reality of which the dispute between Mary and Peter gives evidence. In terms of its Gnosticism, she discusses its preoccupation with the themes of the differences between the two levels of reality, the material and the spiritual, and the implications and travails of movement between them, whether it be the original descent of the soul from its natural state (i.e. 7,3-8,10), or its final triumphant ascent (i.e. 15,1-17,7). Her discussion is informative and nuanced, bringing out the ontological and mythological ramifications of the author's themes. She also thoroughly contextualizes the work, showing its links with other gnostic thought and the New Testament, in particular Paul's letter to the Romans.

On another level, by tracing the tradition of conflict between Peter and Mary through other gnostic texts, Professor Pasquier shows that the two figures are meant to represent different ecclesiastical traditions. One, represented by Peter (and, here, Andrew), developed into what we now call "orthodoxy," and is characterized here by its exotericism, its denial of the authority of visionary revelation, and its restrictions on the participation of women. The other, represented by Mary (and, here, Levi), stressed esotericism, an open and ongoing process of revelation, and the potential equality of women with men. These differences were also manifested theologically: Pasquier discusses the possibility of a belief in the androgynous nature of God as one justification for gnostic inclusiveness.

In addition to the Coptic text and a French translation given in parallel columns, the volume includes Professor Pasquier's introduction and extensive commentary, a bibliography, four appendices treating in greater detail key images from the text, and both Coptic and Graeco-Coptic indices.