

## In the Beginning was the Word... But whose?

Whoever said truth is stranger than fiction never met some of the writers and editors of the Bible. And it will take more than a retraction from the Vatican to get to the bottom of a long festering debate.

*September 13, 2006*

**P**ope Gregory the First deserves credit. In A.D. 591, the pontiff pulled off one of western civilization's greatest swindles when he announced that Mary Magdalene was the much-debated woman referred to in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter Four. For that reason, the Pope argued, her connection to Jesus amounted to nothing more than a repentant prostitute.

You see, back in the Medieval Ages, there was some debate – actually, lots of debate – about the notoriety and/or contributions of several female players in the New Testament. A few of them happened to be named Mary, and most theologians today concur that Mary Magdalene was indeed the closest Mary to Jesus of Nazareth, not counting his mother.

Yet many Christians also believed that Magdalene was a royal descendant of the Tribe of Benjamin, and that she and Jesus enjoyed an intimate relationship, possibly even marriage. In fact, this key female figure in theology may have been pivotal to the fact that Christianity developed at all,



*The Holy Grail* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

playing the role of both financier and preacher.

As for the prospect that these two consenting adults bore one or more children, all that's really known (or rather, conjectured) is that some time after Jesus was executed by the Romans for sedition, Mary Magdalene left the jurisdiction. She may have taken up residence in cosmopolitan Alexandria (in Egypt), and perhaps a dozen years later, sailed across the Mediterranean into Europe. On this second relocation, she is alleged by some to have brought along a 12-year-old girl with her.

This suggestion regarding a potential line of descendants to Jesus would naturally cast doubt on the need for a Vatican-controlled church hierarchy. Of equal concern to the papacy between the second and fourteenth centuries were different versions of the faith itself that were being batted around – particularly those that empowered the feminine gender as a spiritual force to reckon with. At one point, things would get so ugly that in the south of France, many couples were foregoing marriage altogether because by partak-

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ing of the priest-controlled sacrament, they were legitimizing the authority of a group of men who were after all, running the church by fiat.

Hence, the persecution of the so-called heretics, a grisly chapter that began under the Roman emperor Theodisius. Heretics were people who didn't kow-tow to the official line of the church, which included the position that Jesus had remained celibate to the last breath he

drew at Calvary. In time, the Vatican would commission three Inquisitions and remove an estimated nine million disbelievers permanently from the debate. Among those casualties was the local village herbalist, the loss of which in itself would had far-reaching repercussions on women's physical and emotional health in the centuries that followed.

So now taking Pope Gregory's remarks in their historical context, events fall rather snugly, if disturbingly into place. While the Vatican conceded in 1969 that his Homily 33 had no basis in fact, the Holy See didn't exactly launch an all points bulletin to get the word out planet-wide. In short, had not Dan Brown published *The Da Vinci Code* a few years back, probably no one outside theological circles would know that the Church had shamelessly engaged in political spin control at the expense of a woman's reputation. Not just any woman, either, but the one who may have underwritten the entire faith.

And not than anyone has, but one could also make the argument that if the Vatican hadn't created such a fuss about the celibacy of Jesus, probably none of the molestations of children in the United States would ever have happened. Priests could have married, had a sex life and gotten on with the business of ministering to their congregations.

Equally troubling about the buzz surrounding *The DaVinci*

Just as that other femme fatale of biblical note, "Eve", bore principle responsibility for the Original Sin and the expulsion of humans from Paradise, Mary Magdalene has for the past 1,400 years offered a convenient coat hanger on which many a Christian culture has hung its collective frustration with all that is wrong with the world.

"For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man," we are informed in the first Corinthians, 11:3,7,9. "Let the women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience, so saith the law. And if they learn anything, let



Many think Mary Magdalene sits to the left of Jesus in DaVinci's Last Supper.

*Code* is that the focus of most present-day speculation has centered almost exclusively on possible activity inside Mary Magdalene's womb, rather than on who this apostle was in her own right.

"When Mary Magdalene first set foot on the stage," author Susan Haskins writes, "she emerged there as a worldly character, one who vaunted her sexuality, and adopted language and fashions of her time to represent in her life the figure of Everywoman."

Haskins goes on to explain that this venerable icon of Christianity had the screws put to her well after she was in any position to fight back. Mary Magdalene, in essence, "became part of what is now called the forgotten history of women."

them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church."

Was this really a lesson we learned from the Son of God? If it was, then why does Leonardo Da Vinci have Mary Magdalene sitting there right beside Jesus at The Last Supper, as many historians and art critics suggest. And amidst the scramble to get to the bottom of Mary Magdalene's reproductive history, if any, one cannot help but marvel at the resilience of so many Christians who adamantly clung to spiritual beliefs that would lead to their untimely demise, fastened to a burning stake.

Growing evidence also suggests that the Genesis story about Adam and Eve was itself a total

fabrication. This time the culprits were Levite priests laying the groundwork for the new Hebrew faith. It seems the older, Goddess based religions of the Near East had proven a tough act to follow, especially given their 25,000 year head start. Therefore, putting Woman (writ large) securely in her place amounted to job number one on the Levites' agenda.

## Before the Deluge

In the mid 1970's, Berkeley-based art historian Merlin Stone sparked her own mini-DaVinci Code craze with the publication of her book *When God was a Woman*. Unlike the Dan Brown novel, Stone's work is nonfiction. It traces her attempt to sort out the archaeological puzzle surrounding the Neolithic Age, an epoch dating back some ten thousand years, when advanced civilizations were already populating the earth.

In her introduction, Stone doesn't mince words about what she was up to when she undertook her forensic expedition. "If we are ever to fully understand how and why man gained the image of the one who accomplishes the greatest and most important deeds while woman was relegated to the role of ever-patient helper, and subsequently assured that this was the natural state of female-male relationships," she writes, "it is to these remote periods of human history that we must travel."

Known as the age when large scale agriculture and permanent settlements first appeared, the Neolithic has been traditionally glossed over in the history books. Why? Because the male-dominated academia of yesteryear claimed these were times of primitive debauchery and "fertility cults", hence the term "Pre-history" which they attached to it. In addition, since the earliest examples

of writing date back only to 3000 B.C., the argument went, there was no real hard evidence to prove what may or may not have taken place during this interval.

Yet, as Stone and other investigators would eventually uncover, the artifacts and edifices dug out of the ancient mounds of

the Near East, Europe and Latin America had plenty to say about the past, if anyone would listen. In particular, archaeologists discovered that some of the world's first cities were built with feats of civil engineering and construction that are still in use today. There was also a well-developed, almost universal religion of a Great Goddess that went far beyond the pale of the occasional rain dance and communal orgy practiced on each of the solstices.

In fact, the remains of temples and shrines honoring the feminine deity dot the ancient landscape from Avebury (in the British Isles) all the way down to Iraq. The Temple of Artemis, for instance, was rebuilt several times over the course of an entire millennium. It would be eventually named one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Stone writes, "Most of the information and artifacts concerning the vast female religion, which flourished for thousands of years before the advent of Judaism, Christianity and the Classical Age of Greece, have been dug out of the ground only to be reburied in obscure archaeological texts, carefully shelved away in the exclusively protected stacks of univer-



Neolithic ruins at Catalhuyuk, in Turkey.

sity and museum libraries. Quite a few of these were accessible only with the proof of university affiliation or university degree."

The belief in a Goddess apparently extends at least as far back as the "Venus figurines" excavated throughout Europe and said to have originated in 25000 B.C. Many were found in the first manmade dwellings, just a few feet away from the shelves in the walls where they had been placed. Other excavations have unearthed "plastered brick houses, some with clay ovens and chimneys and even sockets for doorposts," according to Stone, and carbon-dated from a period between 9000 and 7000 B.C.

By 5500 B.C., multi-room houses were being built around a central courtyard, similar to residential schemes in Europe today.

"There is every reason to suppose," scholar Jacquetta Hawkes has argued, "that under the conditions of the primary Neolithic way of life, mother-right and the clan system were still dominant, and the land would generally have descended through the female line."

As for the alleged "cult" nature of spiritual beliefs among ancient Sumerians and Babylo-

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nians, historians generally concur that the mythology of these two matriarchal societies formed the backbone for the rosters of Egyptian and Greek goddesses and gods that would later emerge, and whose names are still taught in public schools throughout the world.

Regardless, Stone cites a leading authority on Palestine, W.F. Albright, who maintains that the spirituality of the Near East in ancient times consisted of "orgiastic nature worship, sensuous nudity and gross mythology." This unseemly state of affairs he contrasts with "Israel's pastoral simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism and its severe code of ethics."

Stone challenges such conclusions in light of the various massacres perpetrated by the Hebrews on the original inhabitants of Canaan in the last two millennia B.C. Despite their crude cultures, the nomadic tribes who constituted the Indo-European migrations to the Near East enjoyed a Bronze Age technological edge over their more culturally advanced counterparts to the south. The marauders were also equipped with swords, another innovation absent from the Neolithic era.

According to Stone, by 1800 B.C. the situation of women had definitely changed for the worse. In Canaan, they lost their rights to property, money, and the ability to engage in commercial transactions or sign a contract. Kinship lines now passed from the mother to the father, and in many cases women became the bona fide property of their husbands. Goddess worship was forbidden, temples were destroyed, and the Hebrew god Yahweh became the central figure of religious worship.

"Perhaps the most shocking laws of all were those that declared that a woman was to be

stoned or burned to death for losing her virginity before marriage, a factor never before mentioned in other law codes of the Near East, and that, upon being the victim of rape, a single woman was forced to marry the rapist; if she was already betrothed or married she was to be stoned to death for having been raped."

Meanwhile, the formulation of the Old Testament is generally thought to have begun in 500 B.C. Installing the new cultural order naturally involved ringing out the old. However, while the Neolithic legends carved on tablets or walls were being systematically destroyed by religious edict, much of the oral history survived the siege, subsequently passed down through generations of rural farming families who escaped the harassment of the religious police. In the more or less secular urban centers within Egypt and Greece, society managed to preserve all the more practical aspects of the older traditions as well as much of the cosmology.

As for the Adam and Eve story in Genesis, modern mythologists have determined that this particular story did not spring from any previous tradition, unlike two other creation myths in the Bible. To the contrary, Adam and Eve appear to have been spun out of whole loincloth, so to speak, with the ultimate objective of dissuading later generations of man from reverting back to the old matriarchal ways.

"This curious mythological idea," mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote in 1960, "and the still more curious fact that for two thousand years it was accepted throughout the Western World as the absolutely dependable account of an event that is supposed to have taken place about a fortnight after the creation of the universe, poses forcefully the highly in-

teresting question of the influence of conspicuously contrived, counterfeit mythologies and the inflections of mythology upon the structure of human belief and the consequent course of civilization."

Stone devotes an entire chapter of her book to an analysis of the Adam and Eve story, pointing out that of the one thousand pages that constitute the Good Book, this piece of fiction was placed on Page 3. "Myths present ideas that guide our perception," she writes, "conditioning us to think and even perceive in a particular way, especially when we are young and impressionable."

God's famous comment to Eve at the end of the tale, "I will greatly multiply your pain at childbirth," represents an ingenious touch, according to Stone, demonstrating an awareness by the Levite priests that playing the guilt card on women would in time amount to its most powerful weapon. In the stroke of a chisel, the gender that once presided over the totality of human affairs had been relegated to the back of the bus.

## **Prostitute or Saint**

In 1945, the Coptic Scrolls, containing several previously unknown gospels, were discovered at Nag Hammadi, in Egypt. Sometimes referred to as the Gnostic Gospels, this material consists of texts that date back to the second or third centuries A.D.

That's not as old as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are believed to have been written around the time of the Jewish Revolts against the Roman occupation in A.D. 66-74. The scrolls were hidden away for safekeeping. Good thing, too, since the rebellion was crushed

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and the Jewish territories razed to the ground. While most of the Apostles are thought to have died in the violence, Mary Magdalene appears to have left Israel years earlier.

Like the Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John, among the texts preserved in the Coptic scrolls are accounts of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. While the recovered copies were penned sometime between A.D. 350 and 400, judging by references in the narratives, it's possible that the original stories date back to the late first century A.D. - about the same time as the four Gospels featured in the New Testament are said to have been written.

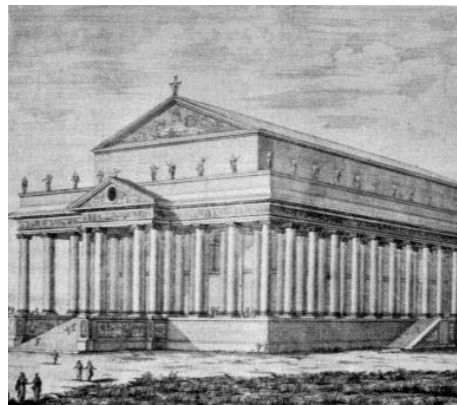
The Vatican, for its part, dismisses both the Coptic and Dead Sea Scrolls as unreliable duplicates of works that may have been contrived in the first place by spin-off sects peddling alternative agendas. Among the Coptic texts are documents that claim to be covert, such as the Secret Book of James and the Secret Book of John.

Yet rather than being hidden because of some occult aspect of the groups that produced them, all the hush-hush more likely stemmed from the frequent round-ups and executions carried out by the Catholic Church. Ironically, the earliest existing versions of the four canonical Gospels are copies themselves, all of them penned sometime *after* the Dead Sea Scrolls.

But that's only the beginning of the debate over the arbitrary, if not politically motivated selection process that produced the New Testament. Some fifty years before the papyrus at Nag Hammadi was uncovered, a gospel identifying Mary Magdalene as its author came to light. It was sitting on a shelf in 1896, along with a few other ancient texts, in an antique store in Egypt. Purchased by

a German collector, these documents were eventually deposited in the Museum of Berlin and are today known as the Berlin Codex. Together with the other works, the 1896 scriptures contain a startling narrative of Jesus's life, one that differs dramatically in both tone and content from the stodgy old King James text that has been circulating around the western world for the last two hundred years.

Yet it was only in 1979 that this whole fascinating controversy reached the public eye when Elaine Pagels published



The Temple to Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

*The Gnostic Gospels.* In her book, Pagels details the chain of custody of different scriptures associated with Jesus that did not make the cut for the canonical New Testament. This crisp, engaging tale of antiquity on the auction block greased the wheels for a slough of other titles, among them the 1982 work, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, on which Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* is based.

One of the steamier bits of material in the Gnostic Gospels is a passage in the Gospel of Philip. In it, Mary Magdalene is proclaimed the disciple that Jesus loved most, and that Jesus kissed her frequently on the mouth. In other documents, she is referred to as "the Apostle to the Apostles", credited with mustering all the disciples back together after the

crucifixion and reviving the ministry which Jesus had started.

In another Gnostic text called *The Pistias Sophia* (which loosely translates as faith in convergence), we get the inside scoop on a long-standing feud between the apostle Peter and Mary Magdalene. Evidently, these two disciples constantly bickered, forcing Jesus to mediate their differences. During one such altercation, Peter blurts out, "My master, we cannot endure this woman who gets in our way and does not let any of us speak, though she talks all the time."

Jesus replies, "Let anyone in whom the power of the spirit has arisen, so that the person understands what I say, come forward and speak. Peter, I perceive that your power within you understands the interpretation of the mystery of repentance that Pistis Sophia mentioned."

A few paragraphs later, Mary Magdalene vents her own frustration. "My master, I understand in my mind that I can come forward at any time to interpret what Pistis Sophia has said, but I am afraid of Peter, because he threatens me and hates our gender."

That's pretty intense language for A.D. 30. Yet Jesus assures her, "Any of those filled with the spirit of light will come forward to interpret what I say," he says. "No one will be able to oppose them."

Of course, he never said that would be easy.

**I**t turns out that even the officially sanctioned gospels have their television sitcom moments. Mathew, Mark, Luke and John all recount the infamous spikenard incident, which again pitted the male disciples against Mary Magdalene

According to Margaret Starbird, the author of *The Woman with*  
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the *Alabaster Jar*, spikenard is a rare and expensive perfume worth about a year's wages in those long ago days of Galilee. One day, while everyone was gathered at the home of Lazarus, Mary Magdalene cracked open the jar and spilt its contents over Jesus, performing a ritual of anointment that dated back a thousand years.

The male disciples immediately protested the lavish expense of the perfume, with Judas Iscariot, the group treasurer, particularly blowing a gasket. Iscariot complained that the money could have been better spent on alleviating poverty. However, Jesus admonished him with the remark that while the poor are always with us, he himself would not be around much longer.

It seems Pope Gregory drew from this episode when preparing his infamous "Homily 33", claiming, "It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts."

The problem with his argument is that none of the Gospels ever refer to Magdalene as a prostitute, although Luke uses the term elsewhere in his dispatch.

Magdalene and several other women associated with Jesus were known to belong to wealthy families, and probably used their not unsubstantial resources to fund the spread of the new religion, since neither Jesus, who worked as a carpenter, nor his male disciples possessed that kind of cash.

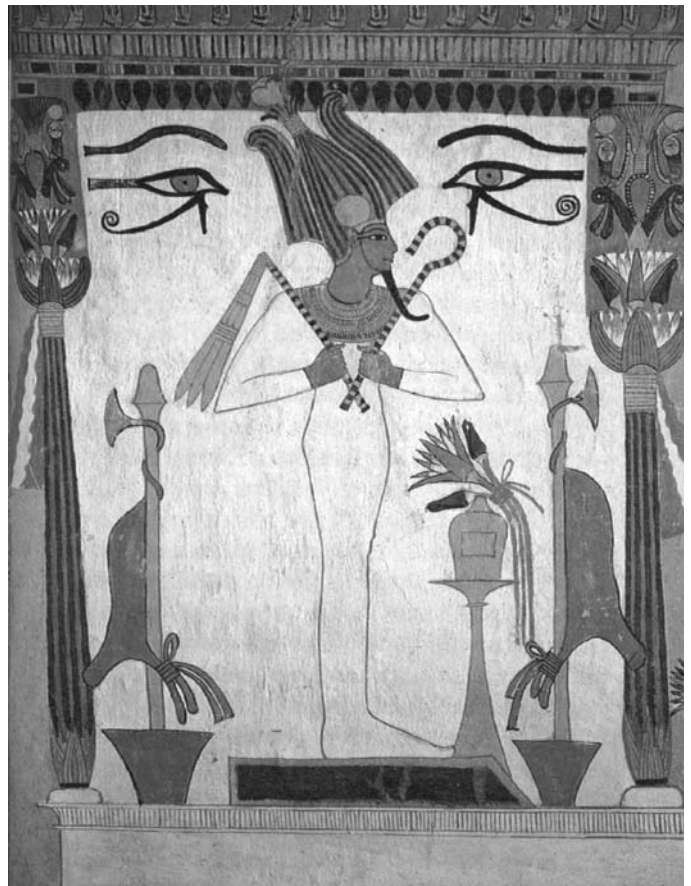


The Greek goddess Demeter.

Furthermore, Margaret Starbird writes that all of these folks stridently opposed the Roman occupation of Israel. Galilee is said to have been a hotbed of insurrection. The Christian savior's famous meltdown in the temple there might well have been a protest against trade and commerce practices imposed by the Romans on local Jewish communities.

Starbird further asserts that the claim that Jesus was arrested and prosecuted as a result of Jewish prodding of Pontius Pilate is very unlikely, given his ultimate sentence. Blasphemy in those days didn't carry the penalty of execution, whereas sedition against the Roman authorities routinely led to crucifixions.

Recently featured in a *U.S. News and World Report* publication documenting the history surrounding *The DaVinci Code*, Starbird has followed Mary Magdalene's life from her days as an Apostle to her alleged



The Egyptian god Osiris is also said to have been resurrected.

migration across the Mediterranean into France. In her book *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine*, the author also reveals some fascinating parallels between biblical passages such as the Song of Songs, and the poetry and myths of earlier, matriarchal-based religious traditions.

The Song of Songs retells the ancient Sumerian myth of the goddess Inanna and the God Dumuzi, a story that was hugely popular at the time Jesus and Mary Magdalene lived in the land of Canaan. Just as Dumuzi is referred to as a "shepherd" and "faithful son", and the Goddess Inanna as the "sister" and "bride", so, too, would the lives of the man from Galilee and the woman from the Tribe of Benjamin become inextricably linked for all time.

Rosemary Regello

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