

# The Gospel of Mary

translated by  
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## *Introduction*

The Gospel of Mary is preserved in two small Greek fragments (P.Ryl. 463 and P.Oxy 3525) and a single Coptic translation (Berlin Codex 8502,1), which is unfortunately incomplete due to extensive damage to the manuscript. Ten pages of the Coptic version – nearly half the text – are lost (pp. 1–6 and 11–14). The first six pages probably involved conversations between Jesus and his disciples, including Peter, Mary, Andrew, and Levi, who are mentioned elsewhere in the narrative; the second large gap (pp. 11–14) evidently included much of Mary’s vision of Jesus and the teachings he delivered to her in private.

It is not clear which Mary is featured in this Gospel, as there were several women named Mary in Jesus’s circle (Mark 16:1, Luke 10:39, John 11:1, 19:25). Nevertheless, many modern interpreters posit that it is Mary Magdalene,<sup>1</sup> which is not improbable given the close relationship between her and Jesus mentioned in other gospels (John 20, Matthew 28:9, Luke 8:2, Gospel of Philip 59, 63).

The Gospel of Mary is most famous for addressing the prominent controversy over women playing leadership roles in the early Church, as teachers, apostles, and recipients of revelation from the risen Christ. Along with narratives such as the Acts of Thecla, this Gospel can be read as the opposition to the prohibition of women’s leadership laid down by writings such as the Acts of the Apostles, 1 Timothy, and dogmatists such as Tertullian (e.g., *On baptism*, 17).

The following translation is based on the Coptic and Greek texts printed in the Brill Edition (BG 8502 and P.Ryl. 463), and P. J. Parson’s edition of P.Oxy 3525.<sup>2</sup>

## *Textual Signs*

[. . .]	gaps in the manuscript
[abc]	reconstructed text
† . . . †	obscure text, meaning uncertain
(7) etc.	Page number in the Coptic manuscript

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Robert McL. Wilson and George W. MacRae, “The Gospel According to Mary,” in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott, Nag Hammadi Studies 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 456–71; P. J. Parson, “3525. Gospel of Mary,” in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. 50 (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1983), 12–14.

*(The first six pages of the manuscript are missing. As the narrative resumes, the mise en scène is Jesus in conversation with his disciples.)*

(7) “So, then, will matter be broken up or not?”

The Savior said, “Each nature, each formation, and each creation are (mixed) in and with each other, and yet each will dissolve into its own root. Indeed, the nature of matter dissolves into what belongs to its own nature.<sup>3</sup> He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Peter said to him, “Just as you’ve told us everything else, tell us about this too: What is the sin of the world?”

The Savior said, “Sin (itself) doesn’t exist. But it’s you who commit sin when you do things like adultery, which is called sin.<sup>4</sup> Therefore what is good came into your midst, to those of each nature, so that it might establish each nature in its own root.” Then he added, “This is why you get sick and die, because [. . .] (8) of the one who [. . .]. He who understands, let him understand! Matter has produced incomparable suffering, because it (suffering) came from something contrary to nature. At that point a disorder arose in the whole body. That’s why I told you, †’Be content.’ When you are not content, you are nevertheless content with each form of nature.† He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

After the Blessed One said this, he embraced all of them and said, “Peace be with you; receive my peace.<sup>5</sup> Look out, and don’t let anyone lead you astray saying ‘Look here’ or ‘Look there.’ For the Son of Man is within you.<sup>6</sup> Follow him. Those who seek him will find him.<sup>7</sup> So go, preach the gospel of the kingdom. (9) Do not lay down any rule beyond what I established for you,<sup>8</sup> and do not give a law like that of the lawgiver, or else you will be constrained by it.”

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<sup>3</sup> Thus our world as we know it is transitory. Here, Jesus teaches that material things will eventually dissolve into their constituent elements, or ‘roots,’ a common view in ancient philosophy. The term ‘roots’ was used to refer to the elements of nature (earth, air, water, and fire) as early as the sixth century BCE by the philosopher Empedocles of Acragas.

<sup>4</sup> The idea seems to be that sin does not exist as a universal power exercising dominion over humanity, as suggested, for example, by Paul in Romans 5–7. Rather, sin is found in people’s own actions that hurt others, such as committing adultery.

<sup>5</sup> John 20:19–26

<sup>6</sup> Luke 17:20–21

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 7:7, Luke 11:9

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 4:6

Coptic	Greek (P.Oxy 3525) <sup>9</sup>
After he said this, he departed. But they were grieving and weeping terribly, saying “How are we supposed to go to the gentiles and preach the gospel of the kingdom of the Son of Man? If they didn’t spare him, then how are they going to spare us?”	After he said this, [. . .] [. . .] [. . .] saying, “How [. . .] [. . .] [the] gospel of the [kingdom] [. . .] [. . .] How [. . .] us?”
Then Mary stood up and embraced all of them. She said to her brothers, “Do not weep, do not grieve, and do not doubt. For his grace will be with all of you and it will protect you. But rather, let’s praise his greatness, for he has made us ready, and made us human beings.” After Mary said this she turned their minds toward what is good, and they began to meditate <sup>10</sup> on the words of the [Savior].	[. . .] kissed them [. . .] “[. . .] [. . .] and do not doubt [. . .] [. . .] with you, protecting you. But rather, [Let us] praise his [. . .], for he has joined us together and [. . .] human beings.” [. . .] she turned their minds [. . .] on the sayings of the Savior.
(10) Peter said to Mary, “Sister, we know the Savior loved you more than other women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, the ones you know and we don’t, the ones we never heard.” Mary responded, “I will tell you what is hidden from you.” And she began to say these words to them:	[. . .] Mary, “Sister, we know how much [. . . by the] Savior, as no other woman. So tell us the Savior’s [. . .] [. . .], which we did not hear. [. . .] [. . .] [. . .] [. . .] these words:
“I myself,” she said, “I saw the Lord in a vision <sup>11</sup> and said to him, ‘Lord, I have seen you today in a vision!’	“Once I saw [. . .] in a vision [. . .] today, Lord [. . .]

<sup>9</sup> I translate only the extant Greek text, and not Parson’s extensive reconstructions based on the Coptic parallel.

<sup>10</sup> Or ‘discuss,’ ‘examine,’ ‘investigate’

<sup>11</sup> Ancient tradition holds that Mary Magdalene was the first disciple to witness the risen Jesus: see Mark 16:9, John 20, Matthew 28:9. In contrast, both Paul and Luke are silent on this tradition, and instead say Jesus appeared first to male disciples (1 Corinthians 15:3–8, Luke 24).

And he responded to me, ‘Blessed are you, for you did not tremble when you saw me. For where the mind is, so is the treasure.’<sup>12</sup> I said to him, ‘Now tell me, Lord, he who sees a vision, does he see it <by> the soul <or> the spirit?’ The Savior responded, ‘He doesn’t see it by the soul or the spirit, but by the mind, which is between the two. It’s this that sees the vision, and it’s this that [. . .]’”

*(Pages 11–14 are missing. When the narrative resumes, Mary is describing what she learned from Jesus about the soul’s journey to heaven and its encounter with a series of demonic powers who appear as personified vices: Desire, etc.)*

(15) “And then Desire said, ‘I didn’t see you when you were coming down, but now I see you going back up! How can you lie when you belong to me?’ The soul responded, ‘I saw you, but you didn’t see me, nor did you know me. I was cloaked and you didn’t recognize me.’ After she said this she proceeded very pleased.

Next she came into the hands of the third power, called Ignorance. It scrutinized the soul saying, ‘Where are you going? You were constrained by wickedness; you were constrained. Don’t you judge!’ And the soul said, ‘Why are you judging me, even though I do not judge? They<sup>13</sup> constrained me; yet I did not constrain. They did not recognize me. But as for me, I recognized them as they were destroying everything, whether the things on earth (16) or in heaven.’

When the soul defeated the third power, it went on up and saw the fourth power, which took on seven forms: the first is darkness; the second is desire; the third is ignorance; the fourth is eagerness for death; the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh; the sixth is the asinine thinking of the flesh; the seventh is the reasoning of an enraged person. These are the seven powers of wrath. They interrogate the soul, saying, ‘Where are you coming from, murderer!? Where are you going, deserter!?’<sup>14</sup> The soul responded,

‘What constrains me has been vanquished,  
and what surrounds me has been defeated.  
My desire has ceased,  
and ignorance has died.  
Through a world I was set free (17) from a world,  
and through an image, from an image in the heavens,  
even the chain of forgetfulness that exists in time.’<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 6:21, Luke 12:34

<sup>13</sup> Presumably the constraining powers of wickedness just mentioned.

<sup>14</sup> Or ‘destroyer.’ Lit. ‘one who leaves a place desolate.’

<sup>15</sup> Image (*typos*): a form or visual representation; a model or a pattern. The ‘image in the heavens’ from which the soul is liberated may refer to the power of Fate, described here as a chain of forgetfulness that exists in time.

Coptic	Greek (P. Ryl. 463)
From now on I will have rest in silence in this age's time and season."	[. . .] rest in silence for the remainder of this age's course of season and time."
After Mary said this she was quiet, since the Savior had spoken with her up to this point.	After Mary said this she was quiet, since the Savior had spoken up to this point.
Andrew responded and said to the brothers, "Say what you will about what she said. I for one do not believe the Savior said these things! For they are quite different ideas."	Andrew says, "Brothers, what do you think about what has been said? I for one do not believe the Savior said these things! They seem to be quite different from his ideas.
Then Peter responded. He spoke about these things in the same way and questioned the brothers about the Savior:	
"He didn't really speak with a woman in secret, did he, apart from us and not out in the open? Are we all going to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?"	When he was asked about these sort of things, did the Savior speak to a woman in secret, and <not> openly so that we all might hear?" [. . .] more important [. . .]"
(18) Then Mary wept. She said, "Peter, my brother Peter, what are you thinking? Do you think I made all this up myself in my heart, or that I'm lying about the Savior?"	<i>(several lines missing)</i>
Levi responded, "Peter, you've been a hothead from the beginning. And now I see you struggling against the woman like the adversaries. If the Savior made her worthy, who then are you to reject her? At any rate, as the Savior knew her very well, he loved her more than us.	Levi says to Peter, "Peter, your hot temper is [always] with you. And now you're going after the woman like this, as if you're her adversary. If the Savior deemed her worthy, who then are you to despise her? At any rate, as he knew her very well, he loved her.

Rather, let us be ashamed and clothe ourselves with the perfect person,<sup>16</sup> and receive him to ourselves just as he commanded us. And let us preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or law beyond what the Savior said.”

After [Levi said] this, (19) they started going out to teach and preach.

Rather, let us be ashamed, and clothe ourselves with the [perfect] person.

Let us do what was commanded us, to preach the gospel, not laying down any rule or law, as the Savior said.

After Levi said this, he [went out] and started [to preach the gospel].

### The Gospel according to Mary

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<sup>16</sup> Or ‘mature person.’ Cf. Ephesians 4:13, 22–24, Colossians 3:10, Galatians 3:27