

The Meaning of Mary Magdalene - Book Review by David G. Benner

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A quick glance at the cover of Cynthia Bourgeault's latest book may lead one to pick it up looking for information about Mary Magdalene – perhaps expecting the same sort of prurient focus on the question of whether she and Jesus were secret lovers that one finds in much of what has issued from the fascination with this woman since *The Da Vinci Code*. But this is far from the focus of Cynthia Bourgeault. Her aim is to explore the meaning and significance of Mary, not simply provide us details about the life of the woman who, she argues, is at the very heart of Christianity and who can uniquely help us understand that heart.

The book begins by laying the groundwork for a revisioning of her popular portrait as the penitent prostitute and setting out her credentials as the Apostle to the Apostles. This apostolic claim is based on the accounts in the canonical gospels of her private encounter with Jesus as the first witness to the post-resurrection Jesus and her commission by Jesus to go and tell the disciples what she had seen and what he had said to her. This picture is enhanced, although never contradicted, in the extra-canonical gospels she examines (particularly the gospels of Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Philip). These indicate that Mary Magdalene had a special relationship with Jesus as soul mate, and that she was recognized and honoured by the disciples as the one who most fully understood and reproduced in her life the teachings of Jesus related to inner transformation. Bourgeault focuses on this relationship, arguing that the real legacy of the love between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is not that it allows us to meet her but that through her we meet and better understand Jesus.

The author's approach in this book is once again from the perspective of Wisdom Christianity with its emphasis on those perennial spiritual practices of transformation and inner awakening. Much of her focus is on love and the way in which a faithful walking of this path has the potential to be profoundly transformational. This, she suggests, is the deepest message of the life and teachings of Jesus and it is this that she feels lies at the heart of the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Her unpacking of the spiritual theology of love as transformational practice is, in my mind, itself worth the price of the book. As is her discussion of the way in which Mary Magdalene offers us a way to engage what she calls "the feminine dimensions" of Christianity without some of the complications that come from placing this entire task on the Blessed Virgin. But overall, the value of this book is, as the title correctly anticipates, the meaning of Mary Magdalene. Through the witness of the deeply beloved disciple of Jesus, Mary invites us to commit ourselves more deeply to the path of love – not as sentimentality, attachment or self-fulfilment, but as a letting go of the egoic self that results in a transformation of eros into agape and flows into a life that is characterized by servanthood.

This is an important book. Read it with your heart, not just your head, because the path it describes is the way of the heart. This, she reminds us, was the way of Jesus and should be the center of any spirituality that seeks authentic transformation.

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