

The Woman With the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail

by Margaret Starbird

Reviewed by Magdalene Meretrix

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My first sign that I'd picked up yet another piece of Women's Studies pseudo-scholarship was the fact that, while the author claimed that her intent was to find the truth and attempt to debunk the heresy of Lincoln, Leigh and Baigent, fifteen percent of her footnotes refer the reader to Lincoln, Leigh and Baigent's writings – and not for purposes of debunking but rather for the purpose of proving Starbird's often eccentric theories. While the author claims that “gradually I found myself won over to the central tenets of the Grail heresy, the very theory I had originally set out to discredit,” (pp xx-xxi) citations from the source she was researching do not serve any purpose beyond redundancy.

The remainder of the author's cited references largely consists of questionable sources as well. Another six percent of footnote citations are of an author named Harold Bayley. Starbird cites Bayley on page 95 of her book where she states, “When lux, the Latin word for “light,” is spelled with the Greek letters Λ , ν , and χ , the entire word can be summed up with the single letter χ , which came to designate “truth”.”

Either Starbird, Bayley, or the heretics who allegedly developed this shorthand may understand “truth” but have little comprehension of Greek. The Greek letter Λ is a capital Lambda, ν is a lower-case nu and χ is either capital or lower-case chi. This combination of letters does not spell “LUX” but rather “LNCh,” which is where I assume someone was out to while developing this theory. With such comic-relief from one citation of Bayley, the other 5% of citations attributed to him become immediately suspect.

Among the other questionable sources the author employs are Barbara Walker, Merlin Stone, Robert Graves and Raphael Patai.

The author makes dramatic leaps from one topic to the next, attempting to lead the reader to believe that similar characteristics in unlinked phenomenon indicate an obvious historical link. As the book goes on, the

reader is expected to stretch his or her imagination farther and farther in order to encompass the author's flights of fancy.

For example, Starbird claims that Georges de la Tour was privy to heretical secret knowledge about Mary Magdalene, citing as evidence his six different versions of Mary Magdalene in which “the woman is invariably pregnant.” (p 128) In Tour's “The Magdalene at the Mirror,” we cannot see her stomach as the entire lower half of the painting is obscured in shadow. Tour's other paintings of Magdalene depict a woman in typical Seventeenth century garb – appearing no more pregnant than any of hundreds of other paintings of women from this period when the female form was apparently considered more attractive with a rounded belly. With Starbird's theories on women dressed in red and white, wearing pearls in X patterns and appearing pregnant, Marie de Medici, wife of Henri IV of France must secretly be Mary Magdalene.

The author also throws in an entire chapter about unicorns that has very little, if any, bearing on Mary Magdalene whatsoever. This chapter appears to be an attempt to link unicorns to sexuality and the Holy Grail but ends up coming across as mere filler material.

Without any citation, questionable or otherwise, Starbird tells us that the people of Jesus' lifetime and geographic location would have obviously known that priestesses used to anoint the Palestinian kings over a thousand years before the birth of Christ. She then goes on to counter this information by reporting that there were no Palestinian kings prior to a thousand years before the birth of Christ. (p 37)

Having established that Starbird's book is not a serious scholarly book, but rather a work of fiction loosely based on a combination of very loosely interpreted historical data, “evidence” from questionable sources and wild speculation, the question arises: is this book at least an entertaining and enlightening piece of fiction?

While some may find Starbird's book entertaining and enlightening, I more frequently found it disgusting. The author claims to promote equal partnership of the sexes and the ideal of the united bride and bridegroom, but her references to both men and women are often sexist and demeaning.

The author speaks of the masculine as “spoiled,” “immature,” “angry, frustrated, bored and often dangerous.” She tells us that the end result of unbridled masculinity is, “not just environmental pollution, hedonism,

and rampant crime – the ultimate end is holocaust.” (p xxiii) She tells us that, “our ravaged environment, our abused children, our maimed veterans, our self-destructing families and abandoned spouses” (p 177) are caused by unchecked masculinity and will be healed by the acceptance of Mary Magdalene as the Bride of Christ.

She tells us that, “the scales have been tipped in favor of the masculine, causing the equilibrium to be destroyed on all levels” (p 178) but all she tells us of the feminine is of her gifts. No warning is offered as to the dire results if we allow the scales to tip in favor of the feminine. In fact, the reader is left to assume that nothing wrong or hurtful ever comes from an excess of the feminine while only a Pandora's box of evil and pain comes from the masculine if the feminine is not there to soothe and control it.

While busily blaming the solar masculine principle for the holocaust and pointing at Third Century attitudes towards women as examples of how the feminine is devalued today, she paints a most unflattering picture of Mary Magdalene, calling her “the exiled woman-child at the hearth, sooty faced and abused, waiting for the fulfillment of her destiny: her eventual marriage to the bachelor prince.” (p 155) and saying that, “the handsome prince has been seeking her for two thousand years, trying to restore her to her rightful place at his side.” (p 177)

This is hardly the strong woman that I picture when I think of Mary Magdalene. This is a victim, a child with no control over her own destiny, waiting pitifully to be rescued. I can picture Jesus loving such a creature, but with pity, not as a husband.

I picked up Margaret Starbird's book hoping to read historical accounts of the views of Mary Magdalene through the centuries, a spiritual meditation on Mary Magdalene or a piece of entertaining fiction. What I got was flimsy pseudo-scholarship masquerading as fact and a manifesto on the oppression of women by the evils of men. I'm sorry to have spent money on this pulp and relieved that I purchased a used copy at significant discount. Even so, half the cover price was still more than this book was worth to me.