

Through the symbolism of the Song of Songs, John's Gospel portrays Mary Magdalene as discovering that Jesus is the long-awaited bridegroom of Israel.

Jesus as the garden dweller

By Michael S. Sherwin

■ Mary Magdalene fails to recognize the resurrected Christ. She thinks he is the gardener. Since she is in a garden, this is perhaps an understandable mistake. In John's Gospel, however, no mistaken perception of the disciples is as simple as it seems. For example, when Jesus at the Last Supper tells Judas, "What you are going to do, do quickly," we learn that as the disciples saw Judas leave, "some thought that, because Judas carried the purse, Jesus was telling him, 'buy what we need for the feast'; or that he should give something to the poor" (John 13:29). They were wrong, of course, or were they? In a certain sense, Judas's betrayal of Jesus did buy the Passover lamb of sacrifice, and it did give something to the poor: their Redeemer. Thus, without knowing it the disciples are both right and wrong.

Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb has a similar experience. To understand her encoun-

ter with Jesus, we must first turn to the Song of Songs. This Old Testament book describes the love between God and his people Israel through the allegory of the love between bridegroom and bride. The Greek version of the book—which as part of the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) would have been familiar to the early Christians to whom John was writing—has the bride say to the groom, "O garden dweller, my friends are listening for your voice, let me hear it" (Song 8:13).¹ Israel's God is a groom who dwells in a garden. Israel longs to hear his voice. In John's Gospel, Jesus is also described as a bridegroom who has friends that long to hear his voice. John the Baptist, for example, styles himself as a "friend of the bridegroom." When followers of the Baptist complain that his disciples are going over to Jesus, the Baptist responds, "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the

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bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now complete" (John 3:29). John's joy is complete because he recognizes Jesus as the bridegroom of Israel whose voice he longed to hear. The traditional role of the bridegroom's friend was to lead the bride to her groom.² Having completed this task, the Baptist can now depart in peace.

Another sign of the connection between Jesus and the Song of Songs occurs at Bethany when he is anointed by Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 12:1-8).³ While Jesus reclines at table with the resurrected Lazarus, Mary anoints Jesus' feet. The Gospel tells us that the perfumed oil was made from genuine nard whose fragrance filled the whole room. The word nard (*nardos*) appears in only two contexts in the Scriptures: the anointing at Bethany (John 12:3; Mark 14:3) and in the Song of Songs (Song 1:12; 4:13-14). In the Song of Songs, the bride proclaims, "While the king reclined, my nard gave forth its fragrance" (Song 1:12). The parallels between these two scenes are striking. The fragrance of the nard is noted in a scene where both Jesus and the king are reclining.⁴ As early as the third century, Christian theologians saw the connection between these two texts. Origen, for example, in a homily on the Song of Songs affirms that "it was in order to be the figure of she who says here, 'my nard gave forth its fragrance' that Mary pours perfume on the head of the Lord."⁵ Both John the Baptist and Mary

of Bethany, therefore, reveal by their actions that Jesus is the bridegroom of Israel.

At the empty tomb on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene engages in a similar set of revelatory actions. Her actions parallel closely those of the bride in the Song of Songs. St. Hippolytus was one of the first to see these parallels.⁶ Many subsequent scholars have followed his lead.⁷ Like the bride, Mary goes out while it is still dark to search for him whom she loves (Song 3:1; John 20:1). Like the bride, her first attempt to find her beloved fails (Song 3:1b, 2b; John 20:2). Also like the bride, she does not find her beloved until she has an encounter with the "watchmen" (Song 3:3-4), who are presented as angels by John (John 20:12). The bride tells us that "I hardly left them when I found him whom my heart loves" (Song 3:4a). The words could be Mary's own, for after speaking to the angels, Mary turns and sees Jesus before her (John 20:14). Seeing him, she sees a gardener. In other words, seeing him, she sees the long awaited garden dweller, the bridegroom of Israel.⁸ She does not yet recognize him to be Jesus. Only when she hears his voice calling her by name does she recognize the voice of her beloved. Jesus is the garden dweller. Jesus is the bridegroom of Israel who has finally responded to the bride's desire to hear his voice. In other words, as the apostle Thomas will subsequently proclaim (John 20:28), Jesus is the God of Israel.

The bride in the Song of Songs tells us that at this point, "I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me" (Song 3:4b). Mary likewise clings to Jesus, but Jesus famously explains that the time is not right. "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). Over the centuries a vast array of interpretations has been offered to explain Jesus' apparently cruel response, interpretations ranging from the mundane to the fantastic. It is only by recognizing that Mary's



intentions in clinging to Jesus are those of the bride's (to bring him into her mother's house), that Jesus' response becomes intelligible. Jesus does not object to Mary's clinging to her Lord. The issue is when and how this clinging is to take place. Jesus is here teaching Mary the same lesson he gave the disciples at the Last Supper. After Jesus returns to the Father, the Father will send his Spirit in Jesus' name, and Father, Son and Spirit will dwell with them (John 14:15-31). Thus, only after Jesus ascends to the Father, will his bride be able to hold him close to her. Only then will he dwell in the house of our Mother, the Church, who conceives us at baptism. Far from rejecting Mary Magdalene, therefore, Jesus gives her the mission of announcing to the disciples that the moment of his promised ascension to the Father had arrived; thus they should prepare

to receive the gift of the Spirit. In the verses that follow, this is exactly what happens. Jesus appears to the disciples and breathes the Spirit upon them, saying "receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). In his response to Mary, therefore, Jesus is leading his bride to discover that she can only cling to him through the gift of the Spirit as sent from the Father. First, however, she must recognize his divinity. Mary Magdalene grasps this gradually. Initially, she simply calls Jesus "teacher" (*Rabboni*), but by the end of the encounter she is ready to run to the disciples and proclaim him the resurrected Lord: "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:16, 18). Through the symbolism of the Song of Songs, therefore, John's Gospel portrays Mary Magdalene as discovering that Jesus is the long awaited bridegroom of Israel. ■

End notes

¹ The Mesoretic Hebrew text of the Song of Songs attributes these words to the groom, while the Septuagint and two other early Greek versions of Song of Songs (Theodotian's and the version known as the *Quinta*) ascribe them to the bride. See Michel Cambe, "L'influence du Cantique des cantiques sur le Nouveau Testament," *Revue Thomiste* 62 (1962): 15.

² See, Joachim Jeremias, "nu,mfh, numfi,oj" in *Theologisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1942) vol. 4, p. 1094.

³ Although subsequent tradition will identify this Mary with Mary Magdalene, John's Gospel does not do so.

⁴ See Michel Cambe, "L'influence du Cantique," 15-17.

⁵ Origen, *Hom. Cant.* 2.2; cited by Michel Cambe, "L'influence du Cantique," 17. See also Jocelyn McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah and the People of God: Marriage in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-2. By referring to

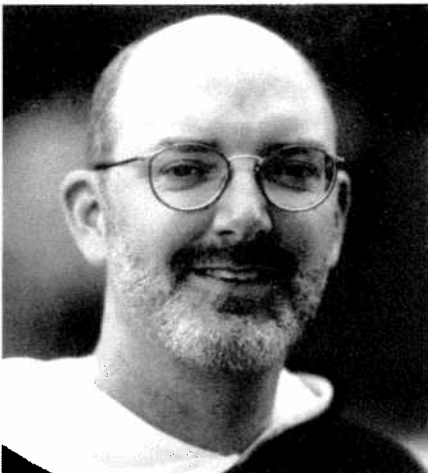
Mary as anointing Jesus' head, Origen is conflating the Johannine and Marcan accounts of the anointing at Bethany. Although in both accounts *nard* is used, in John, Mary anoints Jesus' feet, while in Mark, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus' head.

⁶ Hippolytus, *Ei'j to. a'w|sma*, Frag. 15, in *Exegetische und Homiletische Schriften*, edited and translated by G. Nathanael Bonwetsch and Hans Achelis (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1897) vol. 1, Part 1, pp. 350–52. Cited by and commented upon by Jocelyn McWhirter, *Bridegroom Messiah*, 2.

⁷ Jocelyn McWhirter offers a helpful account of the many who have seen this relationship (*Bridegroom Messiah*, 4–10). She notes that the “most sustained treatment to date of John’s allusions to marriage texts” is Ann Roberts Winsor’s *A King Is Bound in the Tresses: Allusions to the Song of Songs in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999). The works that have most influenced this current study are Michel Cambe, “L’influence du Cantique,” 17–19, and André Feuillet, “La recherche du Christ dans la nouvelle alliance

d’après la christophanie de Jo. 20, 11–18: comparaison avec Cant. 3, 1–4 et l’épisode des Pèlerins d’Emmaüs,” in *L’homme devant Dieu: mélanges offerts au père Henri de Lubac* (Paris: Aubier, 1963) vol. 1, pp. 105–107.

⁸ The linguistic link between the Gospel of John’s “gardener” and the Song of Songs’ “garden dweller” is very close. John’s Gospel is the only one that describes Jesus’ place of burial as a garden. Although, as Michel Cambe has noted (“L’influence du Cantique,” 19), John could have employed the term *paradeisis* for garden and thus linked it to the paradise of Genesis, he chose the Greek word *kepos*. This word for garden, although rare in the rest of the Septuagint, appears frequently (seven times) in the Song of Songs, and importantly in the description of the beloved as a “garden dweller” (*kathemenos en kepois*). The Greek word for gardener that John’s Gospel employs (*kepouros*) appears nowhere else in the Septuagint or New Testament. As a word whose root comes from *kepos*, the Gospel’s use of *kepouros* seems a clear reference back to the Song of Songs.



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