

Magdalene's Lost legacy: Symbolic Number's & Sacred Union

By Ed Conroy

God in the beginning of creation made the body of the universe to consist of fire and earth. But two things cannot be rightly put together without a third; there must be some bond of union between them.
- Plato, *Timaeus*

There is a new Madonna in the Western world, and her name is Mary Magdalene. She is, it appears, the patroness of the people whom Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong calls "believers in exile." To her new advocates, she is herself the archetype of the "Bride in Exile," the feminine principle denied and suppressed by a patriarchal church desperately out of touch with women and their emotional lives.

Long regarded by the mainstream churches as a penitent prostitute, the figure Mary Magdalene is now being "resurrected" from that status by numerous writers, each with a different concept of her significance. In the general upsurge of interest around Mary Magdalene, the question of her possible marriage to Jesus of Nazareth has feverishly captured the popular imagination of the English-speaking world, firing an intense debate in the North American mass media in 2003 that continues this year.

Dan Brown's best-selling thriller, *The Da Vinci Code*, of course, has been the principle vehicle for conveying this idea, with over 4.5 million copies in print. In addition, much homage has been recently paid to (and scorn once again heaped upon) Henry Lincoln, Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, the authors of the earlier best-seller, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, for first broaching to a mass readership, over 20 years ago, the idea of a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a feminist revolution in Biblical scholarship, led in many ways by the pioneering work of Elaine Pagels, whose *The Gnostic Gospels* made the teachings of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts known to a new generation of lay readers. In concluding her chapter "God the Father/God the Mother" in that work, Pagels wrote: "The Nag Hammadi sources, discovered at a time of contemporary social crises concerning sexual roles, challenge us to reinterpret history - and to re-evaluate the present situation."

In Pagel's footsteps have followed distinguished feminist scholars such as Karen King of Harvard and Jane Schaberg of the University of Detroit Mercy, among others, who have re-evaluated sexual roles in Christianity through advancing the concept of Mary Magdalene as a person of considerable stature, power and authority in the early church.

Yet it is Margaret Starbird, an independent scholar and theologian with deep Roman Catholic roots, who has emerged as the most recognised advocate for the heretical idea of a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. That marriage, she asserts, was a model of sacred partnership, and a template for the union of male and female energies in the human soul as well as in our personal relationships.

Starbird has developed her position in three books: *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, *The Goddess in the Gospels* (her spiritual autobiography) and, most recently, *Magdalene's Lost Legacy: Symbolic Number and Sacred Union in Christianity*.

In *Magdalene's Lost Legacy*, Starbird formally argues that the authors of the New Testament regarded Mary Magdalene as having the status of “sacred partner” with Jesus because of the symbolic numerical value of her epithet “the Magdalene.” Starbird says the meaning of “the Magdalene” is derived not from her supposed hometown of Magdala, a fishing village on the shores of Lake Kinnaret (which received its name from early Christians), but from the Hebrew word *magdala* (*migdol*) which means “tower-stronghold” or “elevated.”

Her overall argument is based upon the “sacred canon of number” - the ancient, Pythagorean idea that harmony in human relationships depended upon the recognition of balance and proportion in all things - a philosophy which is encoded into books of the Jewish bible and the New Testament. Among contemporary feminist authors presently writing on the subject of Mary Magdalene, Starbird is the first to utilise the technique known as *gematria* (from the Greek root word for geometry) to analyse and interpret Christian scriptures in support of the idea of a sacred partnership, a marriage, between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

As Starbird clearly defines it in her most recent book,

Gematria is a long-honored and well honed literary device employed to enhance the subtle meaning of certain verses and phrases and possibly used as a mnemonic device as well. It required a deliberate manipulation of letters and words, similar to the rhyme scheme of a poem but more sophisticated. Instead of setting their verses to music, the authors of the sacred texts set them to number.

In Greek, in which the New Testament was written, as earlier had been done in Hebrew and later even in the Roman alphabet, every letter was given a numerical value. By adding together the numerical values of the letters in a name, verse or epithet (such as “the Magdalene”), the reader is able to obtain the symbolic value of that phrase. Phrases and words in both the Jewish bible and the New Testament that share the same value thereby become linked in their significance and must be taken into account, in this ancient but now academically ignored way of explicating the meaning of sacred texts.

In constructing her arguments, Starbird gives full credit to the authors who laid their foundation. She particularly acknowledges John Michell, the author of over 20 books exploring themes of high civilisations in antiquity and the esoteric dimensions of “duodecimal philosophy,” or systems of meaning based upon the number 12. He is perhaps best known for his classic work *The View Over Atlantis*, which outlined the relationship between the great megalithic centres of Britain and the “ley line” system of telluric currents that, he suggested, linked them in an energy grid for the benefit of nature and humanity. Michell is also noted for his many years editing *The Cereologist*, the first serious periodical concerning crop circles.

Michell’s book *City of Revelation* has provided for Starbird the basis of her arguments in *Magdalene’s Lost Legacy*, as she clearly recognises. She also credits the importance of the work of David Fideler, whose *Jesus Christ, Sun of God* is also a milestone in explicating the development of Pythagorean number mysticism in Hellenistic culture and its role in the creation of specific passages of the Gospels.

Michell attaches particularly great importance to the number 153, which, according to chapter 21 of the Gospel of John, is the number of the fishes the disciples caught in their net when fishing on the sea of Galilee. Both Michell and Starbird point out that the number for one of the Greek words for “fishes” is 1224, which is the product of 153×8 - eight being the number of regeneration. In addition, the Greek word for “net” has a value of 1224. Moreover, the Greek phrase “multitude of fishes” has the value of 153×16 - a doubling of the previous factor of eight. Michell’s interpretation of these numbers, with which Starbird agrees, is that the “multitude of fishes” refers to “the harvest of humanity,” or, in Christian terms, the *ekklesia*, the “Bride of Christ,” all those who are converted to the path of Jesus.

Mathematically, 153 is also related to the square root of 3, which before the use of the radical sign in mathematics was expressed by the ratio of 265 to 153. That ratio is geometrically derived from the pattern commonly known as the *vesica piscis* (the “fish’s bladder”), and is formed by the intersection of two circles of equal radii whose circumferences pass through each other’s centres. The central shape formed by the intersection of the two circles is at once a symbolic vulva, and also the source of the “fish” symbol utilised by Christians since antiquity to identify themselves. If one draws a cross from the centre of that symbol to obtain the horizontal and vertical axes of the diagram, the ratio of those lines to one another is 265 over 153 - the square root of 3.

David Fidler expanded upon Michell’s discovery of the importance of 153 in *Jesus Christ, Sun of God*, noting that the square root of 3 is the governing ratio of a complex and beautiful diagram which he describes as “the cosmic ‘fish net’.” As he puts it, “To the early Christian Gnostics the net was an important cosmological symbol, but this natural symbolism predates Christianity and represents the woven web of nature or the vivifying power of harmony which enforms (sic) the pattern of creation.”

Starbird said that she met John Michell at a conference of the Fortean Society in 1993 and asked him if he had ever considered what might be the gematria of “the Magdalene.” “He replied that no, he had not,” Starbird said, “but then looked at me and said ‘Maybe that’s your job!’”

The number value of “the Magdalene” that Starbird obtained by gematria from the Greek, she states, is none other than the significant 153, the number of the Hellenistic “net,” and the number of *vesica piscis*, the “fish’s bladder,” long identified exclusively with Jesus. The sacred form of the two intersecting circles and their unique generative properties had been known since antiquity, and Michell argues it is represented in the design of Stonehenge, as well as in the floor plans of the great Gothic cathedrals.

Starbird is both modest and critical of conventional attitudes in her assessment of her contribution.

“The only really original contribution I made was to check out the number for Mary Magdalene and to realise her connection with the whole ‘153’ gematria and sacred geometry, which I feel was overlooked by the men because they never gave her the time of day (since she was a ‘prostitute’),” she said.

“For me, the ‘sacred marriage’ is the ‘pearl of great price hidden in the field,’ a metaphor for the kingdom of God. No one ever thought to look for it - since they didn’t realise it was missing!”

Michell recalled his original meeting and, having read her arguments concerning a possible marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, told this writer in a telephone interview from his home in London that “her arguments are highly plausible, and it is a delight to see someone take one’s work and expand upon it for a good purpose.”

Michell added he concurs that Starbird’s association of Mary Magdalene with “153” and the *vesica piscis*, is her own unique and original contribution to the growing debate over the identity and significance of Mary Magdalene.

As the joining together of two circles of equal radii, creating a third intersecting area that is symbolic of the vulva and the womb, the *vesica piscis* is one of the fundamental symbols of sacred geometry, and the origin, as well, of the Tree of Life of the Kabbala.

Simone Weil, the remarkable 20th century philosopher/social worker, in her extraordinary meditations on the meaning of Pythagorean number mysticism, wrote this passage, which Gordon Strachan quotes in his own book, *Jesus the Master Builder*:

It is impossible that the disposition or arrangement of two of anything, so long as there are only two, should be beautiful without a third. There must come between them, in the middle, a bond which brings them into union. The most beautiful of bonds is that which brings perfect unity to itself and

the parts linked. It is geometrical proportion which, by essence, is the most beautiful for such achievement.

This concept of the beauty in perfect proportion is fundamental to Pythagorean number mysticism, and appears to have been completely embraced by the authors of the New Testament. At the heart of Starbird's arguments concerning the relationship of Mary Magdalene and Jesus lies her assertion they created a beautiful model of sacred partnership - a "bond that brings them into union" - that was to have been the birthright of humanity. As she put it in my feature profile of her for the *National Catholic Reporter* in 2003, that birthright was "hijacked" by a male dominated church until the present time.

Sacred partnership, to Starbird, is much more than equality of the sexes in domestic and professional terms. She says the incarnation of Jesus is not correctly understood as the imposition of an exclusively male son of God as king of the Earth, but rather his life showed he was here to demonstrate that wisdom is the result of the balancing of opposites, in human terms of male and female energies.

Mary Magdalene, therefore, was much more than a "Mrs. Jesus," in Starbird's arguments. As Jesus' royal consort, she was his partner in the sacred enterprise of his ministry as well as his beloved. That the church could not accept this role for her, and that she was cast in the role of penitent prostitute, is to Starbird not merely a tragedy, but directly linked to the sexual scandals now plaguing the Roman Catholic Church, and to the wasting of the natural world, the global ecological crisis brought on by centuries of denigrating the female.

To completely "round out" her argument, Starbird delves even deeper into Michell's *City of Revelation* to explicate his interpretation of the Book of Revelation.

As is widely known, the number 666 has now been appropriated by evangelical Christians as not only the "number of the Beast," but the number of Satan, the devil, the fallen angel. As Starbird points out, however, John Michell has explained the significance of 666 as the number routinely used in ancient texts to refer to the power of the Sun in its symbolic role as the male, procreative force of the universe.

The number 666 is obtained through constructing the "magic square" of the Sun, in which the numbers 1 through 36 are arranged in a box of six rows of six numbers each. Each line (vertical, diagonal and horizontal, from corner to corner) adds up to 111, and the sum of the entire box is 666.

Michell also points out, Starbird says, that the complementary number to 666 is 1080, the number of the Moon, and these two numbers take on a dynamic meaning in Jesus' parable of the mustard seed: "The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which a farmer sowed in his garden. Although it

is the smallest of seeds it grew into a tree with great branches and the birds came to nest in it.” (Mark 4:30-32)

The phrase “the grain of mustard seed” in Greek has the value of 1746, which is the sum of 666 (the male force) and 1080 (the feminine principle), pointing to the union of opposites - within oneself and within society - as inherently involved in the process of coming into relationship with the Divine, what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven.

“Jesus was really the first feminist,” Starbird says. “He came to liberate women from a social tradition in his times in which they were completely subjugated to men, and in doing so, he wanted to create a condition of harmony and balance.”

To lay even more firmly the foundation for that argument, Starbird utilises Michell’s interpretation of the Book of Revelation as a critique of unbalanced, unchecked solar power - 666 out of relationship with 1080 through the deification of Jesus as a celestial god.

As she put it in *Magdalene’s Lost Legacy*:

The prophetic warning at the heart of the Apocalypse insists that the raising of the human Jesus to an image of cultic worship, as an image of an all-powerful and wrathful God of Justice, Power and Might, is itself a deification of the solar 666, the male power principle: ‘This calls for wisdom. If anyone has understanding, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666’ (Rev. 13:18). John Michell added up the gematria of the phrase ‘and his number is 666’ and discovered that the sum of the letters is 2368, the same sum as the Greek letters for the name of the man in question - ‘Jesus Christ.’

Clearly, both Michell and Starbird have given mainstream Christian theologians plenty to consider, particularly as popular interest in apocalyptic scenarios has never been higher.

So far, the academic theological community has tended to ignore Starbird’s formal arguments in *Magdalene’s Lost Legacy*, just as they did with Michell’s earlier *City of Revelation* and his related work *The Dimensions of Paradise*. Perhaps some dialogue may be stimulated in the future by feminists attracted to Pythagorean philosophy, as Simone Weil was.

In the interim, though, Starbird’s work has attracted an appreciative reader and commentator in the person of Lesa Bellevie, who runs the website www.magdalene.org, by far the most comprehensive source of information on the many facets of Mary Magdalene and the emerging spiritual/cultural movement coalescing around her figure.

In 1992, Bellevie gave a talk entitled “Brides In Exile: A Primordial Religious Impulse Latent in Western Civilisation” to the Seattle Pagan Scholars, in which she provided a remarkable overview of the current

spectrum of scholarship and speculation concerning Mary Magdalene. (The entire text is available at Bellevie's website.)

At the conclusion of her talk, Bellevie had the following observation to make, which is an apt summation of the current state of considerations concerning Mary Magdalene, Jesus and the concept of "sacred union":

The concept of sacred union is one that affects a variety of religions, particularly those of Abrahamic origin.... With that in mind, I think that 'the bride in exile' is an archetypal expression of our sense of being apart from the divine, however we conceive of it.

To make an absolutely unscholarly statement, I think that the rejuvenation of goddess-oriented and earth-centred religion, as well as the awakening of Mary Magdalene in the collective awareness, is indicative of the divine yearning toward union within us. The modern pagan and magical culture is much more receptive to the idea of balance and the reconciliation of powers than the followers of Abrahamic religions, and in this regard, I think we're leading the way in what could be some very powerful spiritual movements.

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