

RELIGION AND ART

Mary of Magdala

Before he was smote by light,
Saul saw Stephen die
A death from which I was saved.

Stone records the Sinai law.
Stone is cast to punish sin.
Thou shalt not kill
Except to break the law again.

Paul murdered for his jealous God
Until mosaic rule of righteous wrath
By fiercer love was killed in him.

But what did He write on the ground
As each stood by self-condemned?

Fatal is aim when we cast blame.
With self in our sight
We wide miss the mark.

Rarely did He stoop among men.
What did it mean?

A lesson in moral gravity:
The sender is object of his sending,
What goes out comes back in,
What earth receives it returns.

As long-suffering as He,
As humble, is the earth.
It takes in and takes in.
But unaided it can't forgive.
What's given it, it gives.



Fresco, c. 1450. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V, Vatican Palace, Rome
Stoning of St. Steven



Watercolor, c. 1805, William Blake (1757-1827), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
The Woman Taken in Adultery

From an early period, Christian tradition conflated in the figure of Mary Magdalen three women mentioned in the Gospels: the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, who anoints Christ's head with spikenard and dries His feet with her hair; Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus; and Mary called Magdalen, whose seven devils were exorcised by Jesus. This legend has resisted all theological and scholarly revision. It is also confirmed by the clairvoyant testimony of two notable Christian mystics: Mary of Agreda, in the 4-volume "Divine History of the Life of the Virgin"—The City Of God; and, with more explicit and extensive detail, Ann Catherine Emmerich, in the 4-volume visionary narrative, The Life of Christ Jesus (Tan Books).

New bodies are cast from the old.
Old and young both die in error—
And the earth absorbs:
Insult and injury sink down, build up.

The finger of nature indelibly records.
The accounting is grim.
The earth's debt of discord is a sum
No cursed goat can defray,
Hied to some god-forsaken place;

Nor a lamb's unblemished blood atone—
But One, Whose life is transfusion
For a gravely wounded world.

What did he write
Twice stooping to the ground?

Law begets sin.
Sin begets death,
As earth is my witness.
I sat in haughty judgment
And helped kill the planet.

Enthroned in a splendor of self,
I graved my own decalogue,
Five at my right, five at my left,
A law unto myself:
Desire rules, what I want is right.

I punished the earth with my body.
I gave it for pleasure,
For profit, for plunder, as payment
For my mounting shame.

He gave His for pardon and healing,
That the spoilers might amend,
Killers die to their errors
And wake to new life in Him.

His blood redeems the earth's abused body
And our's which are built up in Him.
His forgiveness is more fragrant to me
Than all the world's spikenard.
To die to the body of my selfishness
Is to live in His body of resurrection.



William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) Lady Lever Art Gallery, Marseyaside

The Scapegoat



Oil on canvas, Liz Lemon Swindle Lord's Art

He That is Without Sin



Die Bibel in Bildern, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1789-1859)

Mary Anoints Christ's Head with Oil

No longer do I fear and flout
The high priests of probity
Or my white-washed neighbors,
The gnat-nervous, camel-blind
Ethical epicures who feast
On the corpus delecti of fallible man.

I loved poorly with my body
Till He showed me
How to love wholly with my soul
Which His forgiveness woke in me.

One thing, though:
I was never tepid for life.
As much from desire as defiance
I risked everything.
He did not spew me from His mouth
But spoke the word
And drove the devils out.

In a storm of remorse
My heart was purged and dispossessed
Of its selfish driven lust
For physical sensation.
And in a rush of penance
I bathed His holy feet
With my grateful tears.

What does He write in the earth?

What each writes with his life,
That we may read our open book in Him
And know ourselves as Stephen's stoners,
Saul's accomplices, my accusers, and His.

So are we stoned by the hard truth.
So out of misery, despair, and, finally,
Surrendered pride, do we find Him
Blessing and healing with His love.

Thank God for my passion and Christ's.
Thank God for the new Gardener,
The Master of Sunday morning,
The living Stone rejected
By the builders of punitive law,
The Foundation and Crown
Of my forgiven world.

—Carole Swan



© Anna May McCallum

Jesus Blesses and Forgives



Detail, Fresco, Fra Angelico (c. 1395-1455), Museo di San Marco, cell 1, Florence

Noli me tangere