

Blood and Silk

Carol McKay

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It is obvious that *Blood and Silk*, with its sixteen-page list of “Works Consulted,” is a serious attempt to reinterpret Christian theology within the confines of an historical novel, and not just a cavalier attempt to generate publicity.

The novel opens with Christ crucified and Mary of Magdala living in Roman-ruled southern France. She lives in the company of Maximinus of Galilee, the Bishop of Gaul, and a tribe of Domari, wanderers from the banks of India’s Ganges, led by Raja Abraham. Though Mary has chosen anonymity, she causes controversy during a lewd stage play of *The Passion of Christ*. With that, her companions begin to fear for her safety and urge her first into hiding, and then to write her story. Mary replies, “No one wants to hear from his wife.”

Blood and Silk is based on the life of Mary of Magdala, the historical figure whose presence is noted at several points in the Gospel and whose own fragmentary writings have sparked controversy since the third century. Artist and cultural historian Carol McKay takes readers through the youthful betrothal of the intelligent young Mariamne of Magdala, daughter of the prosperous Aram, to Jesus, son of Joseph, descendant of the House of David, and the Imahot, Mary. Other figures from the New Testament populate the novel, including assorted apostles and Roman and Greek historical figures, and the story moves quickly from Mariamne’s home near the Sea of Galilee to an Essene Monastery near the Dead Sea. There, Mariamne and Jesus marry and produce two sons and a daughter.

The tapestry woven in *Blood and Silk* includes threads from Egyptian and Greek lore, the influences of the shadowy Melchizedek, visions of past lives by Mariamne, a journey by a young Jesus to India, Roman emperors and centurions, and sojourns into exotic Alexandria. Readers will become immersed in this complicated story, but the narrative becomes disjointed at points, and it contains some overwrought, adjective-laden descriptions. For example, McKay writes, “At last, four of the multitude of hands belted the heavy, gold-embroidered damask robe over my soft cotton tunic, and grandmother’s blood ruby hung from a gold chain around my neck. The conical pearl-studded wedding hat sat heavily on my head.”

Blood and Silk may not sit well with believing Christians, some of whom might label it sacrilegious. While agnostics and atheists may appreciate that it offers practical explanations for Jesus’ miracles, they could be troubled that the story relies on the unknowable Elohim —God—who is manifested as love (including love between man and woman).

Readers’ personal beliefs will influence whether the book is to be read, and if so, whether it is to be read as fantasy, as a reimagining of history, or as part of a quest to expand one’s spirituality. But no one will finish it without appreciating the author’s impressive research and her scholarly attention to detail. Readers will marvel at the details and anecdotes she imagines, all generated through a thorough knowledge of the disparate cultures melding within Judea at the time of Christ.

GARY PRESLEY (May 18, 2010)

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