

In the name of the ancestors to whom we are beholden,
In the name of the children to whom we entrust our blood,
With the authority vested in me as Holy Magdalene,
I, Mary,
Do humbly and prayerfully request
The complete healing and restoration to life of my beloved,
Jesus of Nazareth
Whose mutilated, crucified corpse now cools in a stone tomb
Across this holy city of Jerusalem.

I request this healing in Your Name,
Oh Great Mother Goddess Astarte,
oh Great Father God Yahweh.

No. That will not do, that will not do at all. It should be more
of a psalm:

*Most Gracious Lady Astarte, Most Glorious Lord Yahweh
Show Your Greatness to Your humble servant, myself,
Mary of Magdala,
Restore to me the man who opened my heart and let me touch
his.
Though we are far apart across the city of Jerusalem,*

*He in his tomb of stone, where Pontius Pilate deigned to let us
lay him this night,
I in this house of marble, without him.
Without him!
Oh Great Mother Goddess, Great Father God,
You make the rain and watch over the newborn's life.
Restore Jesus' heart to beating and –*

No, that will not do either. These are old forms, and what I need to do has never been done. For an amulet like this to work, it has to be completely different from any I have written.

Back in Galilee, in Magdala, I wrote countless amulets in our dank mountain scroll room, sitting alone on a worn wooden stool. Here, in Jerusalem, in this mansion of smooth marble and fragrant cedar wood, I sit on a stone bench whose cold penetrates my thin tunic like the hand of death itself. As I write, my arms rest on a long pink marble table amidst jars full of ink, piles of soft papyrus and boxes of sharp reeds. I sit alone here too.

I happened upon this windowless library seeking sanctuary from our friends, the very ones who brought me to the shelter of this vast home. They plan to flee this holy, terrible city; they are ready to mourn Jesus but not fight for him. I must reject their fear and remain calm and purposeful. I must ignore the scent of musk still in my hair which I have let fall loose around me like a cloak. I set aside the memory of that last kiss in the garden of Gethsemane. I push back all thought of broken body heaved up on bloody cross by crude soldiers.

I need to find a way to write this amulet. I have no shortage of supplies. I can keep trying.

Up north in Galilee, where our papyrus was hardly this smooth, nor the ink so abundant, I wrote many amulets for protection against evil spirits, ten times more to bring quickening to a woman's empty womb, and whatsoever else the Valley folk requested of us priestesses.

Rachel and Dinah both taught me, "The people slip these amulets inside their small stone pendants and wear them for comfort, to remember that they are protected, but the power of these words comes the moment they are written, for that is when the healing begins."

Then let the healing begin. Though I have never heard of an amulet meant to heal one back from death, have I not seen and done much that others said could never be?

For an amulet such as has never been, I must write in a new way. I will address not Our Creator but speak to you, my love. You are a man born of woman, Jesus, but you opened the very sky for me.

I will tell the full story of how I came to be yours and how you came to be mine. And I will tell how you were torn from me.

I pray that in being written, the power of our story will stir you from your deathly slumber and bring you back to me.

May it please Our Creator that no one find me in this library until I am done. Just in case, I have slid both bolts across the thick cedar doors.

I solemnly promise, as best as is in my power, that I will not cease until you and I are reunited.

What else would you have me do?



story properly told begins with birth. But our story begins before we were born. I could not be witness to these events, and so I will tell them as they were told to me.

The year before I was born, a mighty Oracle came to the three seers of Magdala as they sat in the fragrant shade of the ancient oak tree. The High Priestess Deborah, her daughter, and her granddaughter received in their meditation the same Oracle, at the same time.

They had been waiting for this their whole lives. Indeed, the struggling faithful of Magdala had awaited this Oracle for six hundred years. As promised in the ancient Psalm, this Oracle announced the arrival of the Queen and King who would restore righteous rule to Jerusalem, and peace to the whole land of Israel.

At the outset, the lofty Oracle presented an earthy and thorny problem: how best to summon a young woman to leave her husband and little children at the start of winter? This task fell to the prickliest messenger: my great-grandmother, Rebecca, healer and priestess of Magdala.

Uninvited, unexpected, and unannounced, Rebecca rode her mule through the open gate, into the walled courtyard of Muriel's vast and well-appointed home on the outskirts of the town of Bethany.

Despite the pouring rain, the crone remained thus mounted just inside the gate until Muriel rushed out from the kitchen where she was conferring with her servant. Her thick wool cloak extended over her head like a small tent, this young woman who would become my mother stood in the wet cold and asked, “Greetings, stranger, are you in need of shelter for the night?”

The old woman pushed her blue cloak off her pale gray hair, looked down her long nose at Muriel, and answered, “I am no stranger. I am Rebecca, your grandmother, your mother’s mother. I have come from Magdala in Galilee, on behalf of our High Priestess. I am in need of shelter, yes, and much more.”

This could only be trouble, Muriel said to herself. Please let it not be what I think. Out loud, she said, “Come in from the rain!” Rebecca gathered up her cloak, slid gracefully off her mount and handed Muriel the reins of the docile animal. These were immediately transferred to Jesse who had appeared without being called and took the mule into the warm, dry barn.

Extending her cloak over her elder’s head, Muriel asked, “You’ve come all the way from Magdala! Surely not alone? The roads are fraught with danger.” Rebecca indicated with a motion of her head the young redheaded woman and two black-bearded men-of-arms who stood waiting outside the gate. Just as Muriel was about to invite them in, the crone called out, “Salome, take the guards and be gone! I will let you know if I need you again before the trip home.”

After showing the old woman into the second-story guest room, Muriel went out and found the three escorts setting up a threadbare camp in the wet olive grove, outside the high wall that enclosed the courtyard, house and barn. She sent Jesse to bring them

into the dry barn, and she told him to make sure they were brought food and drink.

The priestesses' home in Galilee was a three-day journey from Bethany under the best conditions, and in this weather who knew what they had to endure, even if, as it seemed, they had traveled without incident. Muriel did not understand why Rebecca treated her attendants this way, especially the young woman who wore the dark mask and soft curves of early pregnancy.

That evening, in the main receiving room directly across the courtyard from the gate which had been closed and barred since sundown, Muriel sat next to her husband Jacob on embroidered cushions before the food-laden table. Her good servant Ruth was putting the children to bed – a first. Muriel wondered how her babes were liking that.

She waited patiently while her grandmother, seated across from her on many cushions, picked carefully through the fine wooden bowls containing the best Muriel had to offer an unexpected guest at the edge of winter: fresh bread, some dried figs and dates, dried fish, fat cured olives and the best olive oil from their grove. Silver goblets held clear water from the well, and wine.

Turning up her long nose as she sniffed the fish, choosing instead a date, Rebecca lifted her black gaze and broke the long quiet, “Muriel, Jacob, I bring an urgent message. Shall I tell you, or can you imagine what would bring an old woman such a distance in such a downpour?”

Neither Jacob nor Muriel spoke. Rebecca snorted at their silence, “I am your closest living relative, whom you have never met, arriving unannounced at the start of winter,” she spat out a smooth date pit, “and you have no questions for me?”

Muriel rounded her shoulders. There were so many questions. Which one should she ask of this grandmother who had cast her out of Magdala as a baby, when her mother died in childbirth? Jacob leaned in over the low round table. He put one wide hand over his wife's and ran the other through his thick combed beard.

"Rebecca," he asked, "we have no recent news of your sister Phebe, who as you well know raised Muriel, indeed brought her to Bethany as an infant, along with her own newborn son. Perhaps you bring a message from Phebe, or her son, Muriel's milk-brother Yudah?"

"My sister Phebe is well, thank you, quite content to be in Magdala." As Rebecca spoke, she toyed with five date pits, arranging them into various configurations on the table before her. "Her son Yudah is as he should be, fighting the Roman occupation, alongside the rebels he leads. With the help of our allies, he is preparing to take the Romans, and their vile puppet King Herod, head-on, and to evict them from our northern province of Galilee, and indeed from all of Israel. Though I am so old, I may live to see Yudah complete his kingship ritual and rule over all of Galilee."

"Has not Yudah already completed his ritual?" Muriel asked. "I thought that Rachel already –"

"– No, his ritual with Rachel will not suffice," Rebecca answered, cutting her off. "We need –"

Suddenly parched, her heart racing, Muriel reached for her goblet, "Why will Rachel not do?"

Rebecca looked up, rested her gaze not on her granddaughter's eyes but on her forehead and said, "Now you interrupt me?"

"I am sorry, Rebecca, forgive me; I do not understand."

Just then Ruth rushed in, "Muriel, please come, little Martha has come down with a terrible fever, she is delirious."

As the young mother raced after her servant, Rebecca followed with her eyes, saying just loudly enough to be heard, “Muriel, I think you understand perfectly.”

The heavy rain drowned out the crone’s uneven, softly booted footsteps, but heavier still was the blanket of a mother’s hush-lullaby over her fevered child’s moans – woman bending over girl like palm tree over water.

Muriel jumped out of her skin when she heard the ashen voice behind her speak, “You know what I am here to tell.” She gathered herself, turned to face the wizened woman, one hand still on her sweat-soaked child.

“Rebecca, shh, I have just got her back to – ”

Rebecca pulled Muriel by the arm out of the room with a brute strength that surprised the younger woman, then released her outside the door. Relentless curtains of rain splashed off the pale sandstone railing of the wide, covered balcony that ran along the entire second story of the L-shaped house. Only a small strip along the exterior wall remained completely dry. The women huddled there for a moment, pulling their fine wool cloaks tightly across their chests, looking out with a single resigned gaze at the impenetrable night.

“Such rain.”

“Never seen the like.”

Muriel turned her head, “My daughter needs me.”

Rebecca faced her granddaughter. “Your daughter? You cannot be a mother first. Do you not understand, we of Magdala... yes, that means you too, you were born there...”

She stopped short, letting the rain speak for Muriel's birth, that brief moment long ago when they first met, which only one remembered. Rebecca leaned her back against the wall, pinched her brow between thumb and forefinger. She inhaled deeply, held her breath, then exhaled slowly. She turned back and spoke to the space above her granddaughter's worried oval face.

"Muriel, I bring word..." She grabbed the young woman's arm, this time in eagerness, "Oh Muriel! How many times have we heard the Psalm of Magdala?"

"Well each month, on the new moon, when the women gather we always..."

"Yes, I know I know, but each month for how many years now? Six hundred years, yes?"

Muriel's heart fluttered inexplicably as it had earlier, but she kept her voice calm, reasonable. "Well yes, Rebecca, but a six-hundred-year-old psalm is hardly urgent, and right now my daughter..."

Rebecca dropped Muriel's arm like a hot stone and glared into the night. "Phebe spoke so highly of you when she came home to us. She told us how well you had learned the ways of Magdala. Still, I was against you having a husband and children here. Jacob is a fine man, but living like a wife, you seem to have forgotten everything Phebe taught you. Why would you not forget? You dwell here with such luxuries: for the children a separate room, for your dinner a table instead of a rug, on which you eat food you do not sweat to raise or harvest." She scowled, "You were born a priestess of Magdala; you have known from the beginning that the nation of Israel is your child, the one who must always come first."

Turning her ear to the soft moans coming from the room behind them, Muriel asked, “How can you say that when your own great-granddaughter aches with fever?”

“I do not put up with the rabid dogs of old age to worry over any random child! Who gave you permission to call her Martha, anyway? It is one of the sacred names.”

“I had a dream; she has a right.”

Realizing that Rebecca refused to meet her gaze, it occurred to Muriel that she might look exactly like her own mother, and her maternal throat caught on Rebecca’s pain.

“Rebecca,” she said softly, “I know that Martha was my mother’s name. I dreamed of her. She told me my daughter had a right to her name.”

“Though the girl was born to you she was not priestess-born,” Rebecca spat out, her voice rising in pitch as she spoke. “She has no right to that name, as you know full well. You think you live above the rules here, beyond responsibility to those who made you, who keep you safe.”

“No, that is not it at all, I told you – ”

“And as to your dreams, they are ordinary dreams, without power. If you were anything you would not be a seer but a healer, which clearly...” Rebecca’s chin indicated the room where the fevered child lay. Muriel’s mouth opened to form a dark silent “o”, but before her throat could loosen to let words out, the old woman had already turned away.

As Rebecca walked carefully toward the stairs down to the courtyard, she called out over her shoulder, “We will speak again tomorrow after dinner. I see now that it is best for us to talk with Jacob present.”

Finding her voice, Muriel called after her, “But tomorrow is Friday; it is Shabbat.”

“Fear not, granddaughter: our discussion will be of a most holy nature.”

With an anxious sigh, Muriel returned to her children’s room. Her baby Lazarus was sound asleep on his back, his thumb in his mouth, in his bed against the opposite wall. She settled herself down on the thick rug on the tiled floor and leaned against her daughter Martha’s small wooden bed. Muriel pulled the soft brown wool blanket back over the frighteningly ill girl each time she kicked it off. When Martha’s breath softened, the young mother rested her weary head next to her daughter’s tangled locks.

Muriel’s serene face did not betray how haunted she was by Rebecca’s words: “You know what I am here to tell.” There was only one thing the women of Magdala could want from her. Her great-aunt Phebe had taught her that much.

A priestess of Magdala was obligated to do three things: contribute to the community with her individual skills and gifts, lead the new moon rituals, and when called to do so, serve in the Ritual of the Sacred Marriage, the enactment of the Sacred Union of Our Great Mother Goddess Astarte with Our Great Father God Yahweh. The Ritual which, on occasion, served to anoint and bless the new king.

Muriel knew she had no special skills. Born of a line of healers, her hands were deaf and dumb. She weaved some, as did every woman who did not have to work the land, but her cloth lacked grace. It was only suited for blankets at best, certainly not clothes nor anything as fine as the sacred veils for the ritual tent.

As for the new moon circles, she had never led them, nor done more than attend. Ever since she was a child, the women of Bethany

came to Phebe in the olive grove just outside the gate, and gathered around a small careful fire where incense burned and smoked. After Muriel began menstruating and became initiated, Phebe went back to Magdala. Phebe's other sister, Judith, had led the circle ever since.

Judith had come to Bethany from Magdala with Phebe all those years ago, and had settled in nearby Jerusalem where she still lived. Judith came to the new moon circles in Bethany with a group of devout women dressed all in white, known as the Holy Doves. Judith herself dressed in a white tunic and blue cloak, as did all the women of Magdala. While the women babbled gaily, Judith sat on the ground and waited for them to quiet and join her in a circle around the sparkling fire. Then, she would stand and shake her tumbling mane of red and silver hair. Then, she spoke the ancient stories, the ancient prayers, and held them all rapt with her song.

Recalling those nights, Muriel felt as though she were floating, or was she drowning, or had she caught her daughter's fever? Muriel clutched Martha's small warm hand but behind closed eyes, she saw Judith's glowing face; in the calm room of sleeping children she heard her great-aunt proclaim their well-worn story, the Psalm of Magdala.

“Long ago, Our Great Mother Goddess Astarte was worshipped freely throughout the land, side by side with Our Great Father God Yahweh. In every hearth and in every field, in every high hill and in every temple, the people praised them both and praised their Sacred Union from which all Creation sprang.

“Then came Young King Joshua, who banished Astarte from the Great Temple of Jerusalem, and broke all the altars to Her therein. More than this, Young King Joshua forbade Her Worship anywhere in all the land. More than this, he destroyed the great Tower, the great

'Magdala', that Wise King Solomon had built for Astarte long before. Young King Joshua ordered the Tower smashed to the ground, with the High Priestess trapped inside.

"More than this, he forbade all worship beyond the Great Temple of Jerusalem. All sacrifice would be made at its altar; all tithing would flow to its coffers.

"But worst of all, Young King Joshua commanded the ruthless slaughter of all of Astarte's priests and all Her priestesses, some beheaded at the very altars where they prayed. The few who survived the scourge gathered at their sanctuary, the lush oasis of En Gedi in the pale rock desert. There they wept, adding their tears to the immense Sea of Salt.

"They mourned their brothers and sisters who had been slain like pigs, their bodies unburied, left for vultures. They mourned the silence of ancient hilltops, where no more lambs would be offered, no more psalms would be sung. They mourned for the gathered-stone altars under the sacred trees, where the holy fires would go out and the incense grow cold. Most of all, they mourned the loss of Sacred Union.

"How lonely would Astarte be in the fields without her Yahweh. How lonely would Yahweh be in the temple without his Astarte.

"Surely the crops would fail and the babes die; surely the king of Jerusalem had brought a terrible wrath upon his head, and upon his people's.

"But what could the Holy Ones in the desert do? There were only ten times as many of them as we have fingers. What could so few do against such great evil?

"After many days of lamenting and mourning, mourning and lamenting, one moonless evening the Holy Ones became still. And

among them was a young woman who had not been there at the beginning, who had just arrived, and who told them,

‘I was with the High Priestess in the Magdala, in the Tower, before it fell. She told me:

*Hear these words in your dreams,
carried to you on the wind of your journeys:
Many generations of faithful and generations of tyrants will come and go.*

Be steadfast and await the Oracle.

*Three seers will receive together a single Oracle announcing One
who will be known as the Magdalene,
the new Tower of Jerusalem,
not a building of stone but a living woman, a tower of faith and courage.*

The Oracle will tell of the king to be Anointed by her.

Then we will know that the time to reclaim the Holy City is upon us.

*When you next return to worship Astarte and her Yahweh,
to celebrate their glorious fertile union
in our Jerusalem, in our City of Peace,
then the Peace of Creation will settle in all the lands.*

*Until then, keep Her flame burning, if only in your hearts,
when there is no oil for the lamp.*

Remember this: Be fierce in self-preservation.

You who carry this knowledge are essential to the world’s peace.

Be pliant in your compassion:

your heart must be pure to create our world anew.

Be steadfast, and wait for the Oracle, no matter how long it takes.’

“Upon hearing the High Priestess’s charge, the Holy Ones rejoiced, for they were restored to hope and faith. They pledged to

continue in secret the worship of Astarte and the ritual of the Sacred Union, until the Oracle was received, until the Magdalene and her King appeared. The Holy Ones swore an oath to risk their lives in so doing, if necessary. They knew the people of the land would help them, for those who tilled the soil would never cease in their worship of the Great Mother.

“Being thus exiled from Jerusalem, the Holy Ones wrote down the sacred texts, so knowledge would not be cut off when heads were, not be dispersed when bodies were.

“They wrote what Young King Joshua did to them: the Lamentations.

“They wrote the liturgy of the Sacred Union: the Song of Songs.

“They wrote the words of the High Priestess: Magdala.

“And wherever they settled from then on, there was called ‘Magdala’ for they knew not into what generation the Magdalene would be born.”

With her mind’s eye, Muriel saw Judith reciting these words, her ecstatic face and open hands raised to the stars, her fiery hair ablaze in the night.

“One day soon,” Judith intoned the Psalm’s familiar closing, “we will again sing the Song of Songs in the Temple of Jerusalem. Once again the sacred lovers will walk through the seven gates in Jerusalem, the City of Seven Hills, and with their joining restore Our Creators’ grace to our people and to our land.

“We have always known that this time will come. Thanks to this Psalm of Magdala, our guiding hope these past six hundred years.”

Rebecca's words from earlier in the evening came back again to Muriel: "You know what I am here to tell." When Muriel first welcomed the crone, she feared Rebecca had come to call on her to serve in the Sacred Marriage Ritual, as all priestesses of Magdala must do. But it was much worse, she realized with a jolt of understanding that lifted her to her feet, much better and much worse. Muriel felt in her bones that the Oracle had been received. And she was to play a part in its fulfillment.

"I am not worthy! I am not ready!" she cried out to the night. But all she heard was Judith's desert chant – no longer an incense-scented tale from the past, but a fierce living wind that would tear her life apart.