

## Reconstructing Mary Magdalene

How many of you think of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute? Until recently, that has been the dominant image despite that fact that there is not a shred of biblical evidence.

Depending on what you read and who you believe, Mary Magdalene was:

- The adulteress of John 8
- A prostitute
- Mary of Bethany
- The anointing woman of Luke 7
- A pagan priestess
- A wealthy woman of towering strength
- Jesus' lover or wife
- A leader of the church
- A feminist icon
- A Christian emissary to the emperor of Rome

This issue of *ET&N* examines this fascinating and sometimes enigmatic character and attempts to place her in her proper position in early church history. This issue had been billed previous as "Teaching and Learning" but I've been so immersed in Mary Magdalene for the past couple of weeks that I felt compelled to switch topics. The "Teaching and Learning" issue will come later.



### The Biblical Magdalene

The biblical record of Mary Magdalene is relatively limited but nonetheless highly revealing. She first appears in Luke 8 as one of "many women" who helped support Jesus and his band of disciples: *"Soon afterwards, He began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means"* (Luke 8: 1-3)

One interpretation of her name is that it comes from the Hebrew word, *migdal* (a tower) and suggests that Jesus Himself may have given it to her, as He gave Peter (rock) to Cephas and Boanerges (sons of thunder) to James and John. A simpler interpretation, however, is that she came from the city of Magdala on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, an area that Jesus would have passed through on many occasions during his three-year ministry (see Matthew 15: 39). An intriguing spin-off of that interpretation is that she was a priestess of the Temple of Ishtar in Magdala, a pagan cult with a seven-stage initiation, which could correspond to the seven demons that were exorcised from her. Such speculation is not important to understanding her place in the Gospel, for we next encounter her at the climax of Jesus' mission:

- She is one of the women who are last at the cross (at a time when the men, except John, have gone "underground").

"There were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. When He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister to Him; and there were many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem" (Mark 15:40-41). Note: Joses, one of Jesus' four brothers, is the Greek form of Joseph.

- She is present at the burial of Jesus.

"Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses were looking on to see where He was laid" (Mark 15:46-47).

- She discovers the empty tomb.

"Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said\* to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb" (John 20:1-3).

- She is directed to carry the news to the disciples.

"But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you.'" They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:7-8).

- Jesus makes his first resurrection appearance to her.

"Now after He had risen early on the first day of the week, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons" (Mark 16:9). When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said\* to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said\* to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Jesus said\* to her, "Mary!" She turned and said\* to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (John 20:14-17).

- She brings the news to the disciples.

"She went and reported to those who had been with Him, while they were mourning and weeping. When they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they refused to believe it" (Mark 16:10-11).

There is simply no way to minimize Mary's deep affection for Jesus—notice that He has to get her to let go of Him and He clearly links Himself to her in saying "I ascend to My Father and your Father" (John 20:17). There is also no way to minimize Jesus' concern for and trust in her. One the one hand, He hastens to end her overwhelming grief in appearing to her first—before all those disciples who had been with him from the first—but he also entrusts her with the most important message in history—*He has risen!*

### **The Legendary Magdalene**

These facts should be sufficient to enshrine Mary in the Disciple Hall of Fame alongside the Twelve (less Judas Iscariot, of course), Barnabus, Mark, Joanna, Mary and Martha, and others, but something happened to the Magdalene to alter her image. She disappears from the literature of the early church (both the New Testament and patristic works), but she lived on in several ancient legends. One from the Eastern church involves Easter eggs. As a wealthy woman, Mary traveled to Rome after Jesus' Ascension, according to the legend, where she gained an audience with Emperor Tiberius. When she attempted to help explain Jesus' resurrection with an egg from their dinner table, Tiberius scoffed that a human being could no

more rise from the dead than the egg turn red. The egg turned red immediately, which is why red eggs have been exchanged at Easter for centuries in the Byzantine East.

A Greek legend places her in Ephesus with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the Apostle John after the fall of Jerusalem, but the most involved legend comes from France. Traveling there with Lazarus and others, she evangelizes the entire city of Marseilles, after which she retires to a 30-year penance on a nearby hill, La Sainte -Baume. A shrine dating from 1279 remains there today.

### **The Gnostic Magdalene**

The proper view of Mary Magdalene was probably doomed when the Gnostics of the second and third century adopted her as the central figure in their often-bizarre doctrine, elevating her above the Twelve, particularly in the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary*, both part of the Nag Hammadi (Egypt) find in 1945 (see [ET&N 39](#)):

"And the companion of the Savior is Mary Magdalene. But Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?' The Savior answered and said to them, 'Why do I not love you like her?' When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness" (*Gospel of Philip*).

"[The disciples] grieved and mourned greatly, saying, 'How shall we go to the Gentiles and preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of the Son of Man? If even he was not spared, how shall we be spared?'

Then Mary stood up and greeted all of them and said to her brethren, 'Do not mourn or grieve or be irresolute, for his grace will be with you all and will defend you. Let us rather praise his greatness, for he prepared us and made us into men.' When Mary said this, their hearts changed for the better, and they began to discuss the words of the [Savior].

Peter said to Mary, 'Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than other women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you have in mind since you know them; and we do not, nor have we heard of them.'

Mary answered and said, 'What is hidden from you I will impart to you' (*Gospel of Mary V*).

Mary then relates a mystical vision of Jesus (much of which is lost) and then describes a petulant response from Peter:

"When Mary had said this, she was silent, since the Savior had spoken thus far with her. But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, 'Say what you think concerning what she said. For I do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are of other ideas.'

Peter also opposed her in regard to these matters and asked them about the Savior. 'Did he then speak secretly with a woman, in preference to us, and not openly? Are we to turn back and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?' Then Mary grieved and said to Peter, 'My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I thought this up myself in my heart or that I am lying concerning the Savior?'

Levi answered and said to Peter, 'Peter, you are always irate. Now I see that you are contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you to reject her? Surely the Savior knew her very well. For this reason he loved her more than us. And we should rather be ashamed and put on the Perfect Man, to form us as he commanded us, and proclaim the gospel, without publishing a further commandment or a further law than the one which the Savior spoke.' When Levi had said this, they began to go out in order to proclaim him and preach him" (*Gospel of Mary IX*).

It was probably this portrayal of Mary Magdalene exercising authority over the men selected by Jesus Himself that incensed the leaders of the church. Characterizing Peter, firmly (but wrongly) established as the ultimate authority among the Apostles by the last sixth century, pushed powerful men over the edge.

## The Roman Magdalene



Saint Mary Magdalene  
Donatello, c. 1457

With an all-too-typical over-reaction, the Roman church began to denigrate Mary, painting her as a wanton prostitute in desperate need of the restoration only orthodox Christianity could provide. The campaign culminated when Pope Gregory I (the Great) botched the biblical record in a 591 sermon: "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary [of Bethany], we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark." The Catholic Church officially, albeit quietly, finally disavowed this error at Vatican II in 1969, but the damage of nearly 1400 years was done, evidenced by countless works of art, many of which are essentially religious pornography.

It is ironic that at during the same general period that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was elevated to near-divine status, Mary Magdalene was almost completely stripped of her deserved biblical status

While the conspiracy theorists who suggest a chauvinistic smear campaign may go well beyond reasonable conclusions, it is not difficult to image a genuine intent to marginalize women in the unbiblical hierarchical structure of the Roman church, perhaps reaching its zenith with the comments of the sainted Peter Damian (1007-1072) to the wives of priests:

"I speak to you, o charmers of the clergy, appetizing flesh of the devil; you poison of the minds, companions of the very stuff of sin; you women of the Ancient Enemy; you bitches, sows, screech owls, night owls, she-wolves, blood-suckers—hear me harlots, prostitutes with your lascivious kisses, you wallowing places for fat pigs, demi-goddesses, sirens, witches, devotees of Diana—the Ancient Foe pants to invade the summit of the church's chastities through you. You have sucked the blood of miserable, unwary men. They should kill you."

In classic Adamic fashion, misguided Roman church leaders blamed their own sin on women.

The repudiated connection of Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman of John 8 continues today, having been reinforced in Mel Gibson's [The Passion of the Christ](#). This is not surprising, however, since Gibson observes a pre-Vatican II strain of Roman Catholicism. However evocative and faithful [The Passion](#) may have been, this is one of the things Gibson got wrong.

### Now

And so, Mary Magdalene remained a prostitute until the discovery of Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi in 1945. Even those documents remained relatively obscure until the publication of [The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail](#) (Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, New York: Dell Publishing Co.) in 1983 and, in particular Dan Brown's [The Da Vinci Code](#) in 2003. These books, both theorizing a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene have hatched or incubated a new batch of Magdalene myths, to the delight of both feminists and modern Gnostics. As disingenuous as the Roman demotion of Mary Magdalene may have been, this new adoration of her would undoubtedly disturb her all the more.

Consider, for example, this revision by Mary Seekins of the [Order of Mary Magdala](#):

"Hail Mary Magdalene, the Lord has wed thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb and Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of kings, give aid to us seekers now and in the hour of our need."

Or this poem by Maya, priestess of the same order:



•Magdalene• by Richard Stodart

### **MARY, WE DID NOT KNOW YOU**

Mary, we did not know you.  
Kept hidden for centuries you were despised,  
A Queen not seen, under harlot's disguise.  
Mary, we did not know you.

No Wife has He, we were told.  
No Priestess, no Bride, no Queen, He was alone.  
They dressed you in rags, royal purple not shown.  
Mary, we did not know you.

My heart weeps for what was lost.  
How we treated you, Divine Daughter on High.  
I search Heaven and Earth and ask myself, why.  
Mary, we did not know you.

May we now bring wrong to right.  
We will sing of Your Queenship for all to hear.  
We will ring your truth, north, south, far and near.  
Mary, now all may know you.

And finally, [magdalene.org](http://magdalene.org), a website "celebrating the mysteries of the Woman Who Knew The All," includes [Magdalene's Mind](#), a 2003 play by Gloria Amendola that places Mary in modern New York City where she comforts, heals, and forgives a cynical student-prostitute, a depressed single mother, and a hard-hearted male corporate executive. In the final act, she is reunited with Jesus, and they engage in a titillating conversation that is apparently the prelude to their entry into the Gnostic Bridal Chamber. (*A warning for those offended by profanity and the spiritually profane, do not click the magdalene.org link above.*)

The danger of such silly modern myths, of course, is that they join the chorus of atheists, liberal theologians, and others in misrepresenting the Bible and genuine Christianity. I am convinced that God and His Son embody far more of the feminine and mystical than most 21st century western churches encourage, but the answer does not lie in swinging the proverbial pendulum to the other extreme. It is said that the truth usually lies somewhere between two extremes, and in this case (as in all cases), the truth lies in the biblical record itself. The Gospels and the rest of the New Testament paint a picture of the virtual equality of genders before God (Galatians 3:28) and does so with startling candor.

When Mary Magdalene rushes back to the rest of the disciples after encountering the resurrected Jesus, Mark reports that "they refused to believe it" (16:11) and Luke tells us that they considered her report "nonsense" (24:11). Those who claim that the Bible was edited to elevate men and denigrate women either have not read it or deliberately distort it. The disciple's failure to believe is not a commentary on their attitude toward women either since they also refused to believe the two men who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Mark 16:12-13, see also Luke 24:13-35). It would seem that Thomas got a bad rap being labeled "Doubting" since none of them believed until Jesus appeared to them personally!

The problem of gender inequity doesn't come from the Bible! It comes from a Roman church that either over-reacted to radically feminist Gnosticism or inappropriately clung to Mosaic patrimony and Socratic chauvinism in opposition to the Gospel. The fall interrupted God's initial design for gender relationships. Jesus is the new Adam (1 Corinthians 15) and in a sense (one far less literal and profane than the new Magdalenes advance), Mary was the new Eve. If it was the Eve's belief in tehj Lie followed by Adam's willful complicity that brought death the world, it was Jesus' sacrifice that restored life. In making Mary Magdalene the messenger of Truth, Jesus cancelled Eve's sin. It is long past time to live that restoration.

## Discussion

The Mary Magdalene issue of ET&N generated a lot of interest but, surprisingly, not much response. When Edward Fudge mentioned the article in his [GracEmail](#) Family Notes, I received almost 50 requests for a copy. Quite a few of these GracEmail subscribers are now ET&N subscribers as well. Welcome to all of you!

(Y)ou are most correct... the problem of gender inequity did not originate in Scripture. My sense is that it originated in the culture(s) of fallen humanity and was embraced by the church (along with other cultural ideas, world views and ways--both Roman and Eastern).

I just finished reading the DaVinci Code and enjoyed it. The provocation of thought, especially for believers was immense. Even though it was fiction there were so many areas that were so real in the presentation that you have to understand and accept some of the conclusions.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

### **NEXT ISSUE: Lepers**

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