

MARY MAGDALENE – ALL ABOUT LIFE & RESURRECTION

Mary Magdalene has long been controversial within the church. To some, a source of embarrassment. To others, a symbol of repentance and forgiveness.

To yet others, a model of devotion and intimacy. And perhaps for us all, a lesson in suppressed history.

This is the abbreviated story of how one Mary – the Magdalene – became *the bridge* between the dead and the resurrected Christ, keeping the flame of Christianity alive during its earliest and darkest hour.

THE MARY ACCOUNT

First a bit of background. We start with the inevitable confusion that has surrounded all of the Marys in the New Testament, followed by an abbreviated account of the historical Mary, then the consideration of writings attributed to one Mary – the Magdalene.

Six New Testament Marys: There are at least six persons who go by the name of Mary that can be identified in the New Testament:

- Mary the mother of Jesus – also very likely the mother to James, Jude, Joseph, Simon and unnamed sisters.
- Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus – with a home at Bethany.
- Mary the Magdalene – *our subject*
- Mary the wife of Clopas (or Alphæus) – first mentioned on the day of the crucifixion standing by the cross and, later, sitting desolate at the tomb with Mary Magdalene.
- Mary, mother of John Mark – reputed author of the Gospel of Mark
- Paul’s Unidentified Mary – noted at the conclusion to his epistle to the Romans. with the message: “Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you.”

Our interest is with the Mary ready to embrace Jesus – the one to meet her “Rabbouni” after his resurrection from the tomb.

The Magdalene: Different explanations have been given of this name; but the most natural is that she came from the town of Magdala on the southwest coast of the Sea of Galilee. After Jesus cast seven demons from her, she became one of His followers.

According to the Talmud (the collection of Rabbinic writings that make up the basis of religious authority for traditional Judaism), the city of Magdala had a reputation for prostitution – a factor that justly or unjustly has served to taint Mary’s reputation over the last two millennia.

Available New Testament accounts do not describe her illness in any greater detail. This information, coupled with the fact that Luke first mentions Mary Magdalene immediately

following his account of the sinful woman leads some to the conclusion that the two women are one and the same. John's gospel does not name the woman accused of adultery; however, this person also has been widely assumed for centuries to be none other than the Magdalene.

Over the centuries, Mary Magdalene has also been linked romantically with Jesus. The non-canonical Gospel of Philip is the most direct:

And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. But Christ loved her more than all the disciples, and used to *kiss her often on the mouth*. The rest of the disciples were *offended by it and expressed disapproval*. They said unto him, Why do you love her more than all of us? The Saviour answered and said to them, Why do I not love you like her? ... Great is the *mystery of marriage* – for without it the world would not have existed. Now the existence of the world depends on man, and the existence of man on marriage.

Some have speculated that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married and had children. For example, one recent writer goes so far as to suggest that Magdalene died in AD 63, at age 60 in what is now southern France.

In the book *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography*, author Bruce Chilton suggests a plausible social context for Jesus' relationship with Mary:

Jesus' itinerant life precluded marriage and raising children. Loyalty to the Torah precluded adultery. But adultery was defined in Judaism as taking the wife of another, which, like seducing a maiden (who might become another's wife), is clearly forbidden. But sexual contact with an unmarried woman who was not a virgin, particularly a sinner or a formerly demon-possessed person, did not fall under the definition of adultery or seduction. There is no evidence that Jesus did or did not enjoy sexual contact during his life, but seven-demoned Miriam remains the most likely candidate if he did so, because she is the only woman, apart from his mother, with whom he had persistent contact. Indeed, her status made her the kind of woman Jesus' mother might once have hoped her *mamzer* son would marry.

Beyond the speculation, it is more instructive to consider how the Magdalene is portrayed in the New Testament gospels. The only definitive mention of Mary Magdalene prior to the reported crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus occurs in Luke's gospel, which goes like this:

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, *who provided for them out of their resources*.

This passage clearly indicates two items worth noting:

- Along with other women, Mary Magdalene had been cured of some form of spirit possession.
- The other women mentioned (and possibly Mary) were individuals of some resources (or wealth), who apparently helped to fund the travels not only of Jesus but the twelve disciples as well.

So there we have it, all the events in the canonical New Testament that directly relate to Mary Magdalene. But not quite, because there are two other matters often attributed to the Magdalene to be covered:

- Mary Magdalene has been associated with the “woman in the city who was a sinner” who washed Jesus’ feet, but there is no definitive New Testament basis for this.
- Mary also is often associated with the woman whom Jesus saved from stoning after she had been taken in adultery, again an association with no evidence.

So, the New Testament gospels leave us with a portrait of a woman who clearly was a long-time follower of Jesus. She was someone who was a doer, evidenced by her initiative to attend to the grave of her master at the earliest opportunity after death and the intervening Sabbath.

If we had just the three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, that might be the end of the story. But John’s gospel opens a new dimension – a story that clearly portrays a more intimate, closer connection between the rabbi and the Magdalene. A closeness evidenced by the imminence of her reaching out to embrace a newly resurrected Saviour – stopped only by the request of Jesus not to be touched.

Did Mary Write a Book? The answer: Who knows? No New Testament work is attributed to a woman, much less Mary. However, one non-canonical document is attributed and in fact is widely known for the Magdalene – titled simply as the Gospel of Mary.

Today, there is no complete manuscript available for the Gospel of Mary. For centuries, this gospel has remained virtually unknown.

The Gospel of Mary re-surfaced in 1896, when Papyrus Berolinensis 8502 (Akhmim Codex) was acquired in Cairo by Dr. Rheinhardt. This Coptic manuscript dates to the 5th century but, unfortunately, was not published until 1955. The Mary manuscript is fragmentary, missing its first six pages and another four pages toward the middle of the codex.

All told, there are only three fragmentary manuscripts that have been recovered in recent years. Two are 3rd century Greek fragments in addition to the longer 5th century Coptic translation. Dating of an original document remains uncertain, but some argue that the Gospel of Mary could have been written in the late first or early second centuries.

Authorship of the Gospel of Mary also is uncertain. There is no explicit claim made that Mary Magdalene is the author of this gospel, although she figures as the subject of much of the discussion with Jesus (as Savior).

LIFE & RESURRECTION

John's gospel quotes Jesus as saying: "I am the resurrection and the life." Herein lies the heresy of Mary the Magdalene – and possibly the reason for the disappearance of Mary's account of Jesus and his disciples. In effect, Mary's heresy is two-fold:

- As witness and advocate of the resurrection.
- As holding together a group of men ready to abandon the church in its earliest hours.

The New Testament Feminist Perspective: Is there a war of the sexes at work in the early church, even earlier in the midst of Jesus? Let's consider the evidence which is clearly documented – beginning back at Easter morning. Even the gospel writers can't hide the undertones of sexual tension at play.

Start with Luke's account of the resurrection: The women (including Mary Magdalene) arrive at the tomb, see two angels, and then return to tell the eleven of what they have seen. But Luke records the negative reaction of the disciples: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." So Peter has to run off to the tomb on his own, and comes back, as Luke says, "amazed at what had happened." The disciples gave little credibility to the women's account; Peter is incredulous when he finds that the women have not hallucinated, dreamed, or fabricated, but have perceived the situation correctly.

The two alternative accounts of Mark's gospel are the most telling: The earliest available manuscripts end Mark's gospel with women who have "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (with the end of the gospel at Mark 16: 8). For Mark, this is the end of story and hardly a flattering view of the women at the tomb.

Introduce Matthew's version: Matthew recounts how the two women see an angel who tells them not to be afraid, that Jesus is risen, and that they should go tell the disciples. They leave the tomb "quickly with fear and great joy."

Back to Mark: However, the second and more conventional ending of Mark puts a more conventional spin on the event (more similar to that of Luke's gospel):

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

In this account which appears in all conventional bibles from the King James forward, Mary is vindicated. In fact, this longer version of Mark's gospel indicates that once Jesus finally appears to the eleven, "he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen."

It is also useful to consider John: For the writer of John's gospel, the women's credibility with male disciples comes across as less of an issue. Like Luke, John indicates that Mary arrives first, goes and tells Peter who comes back with the beloved disciple.

Then all the disciples apparently return to their homes. Only Mary stays around the tomb site, where she then has her encounter with the gardener, actually Jesus. Jesus asks Mary to:

...go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and *she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Jesus has used Mary as his envoy, taking a message back to the other (male) disciples. While these disciples are not cited as being openly contemptuous of the message of Mary, they still don't seem to get it without Mary

Beyond the New Testament: If the tension between the apostolic men and women of the Jesus movement is muted in the canonical New Testament, it flares into the open with several non-canonical works (all from the Nag Hammadi library discovered in 1945 in the Egyptian desert).

Start with the most famous of the Nag Hammadi works, the Gospel of Thomas. In the very last of 114 sayings, Thomas makes this tension explicitly clear:

Simon Peter said to them, "Make Mary leave us, for *females don't deserve life.*" Jesus said, "Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every *female who makes herself male* will enter the domain of Heaven."

Back to the Resurrection: It takes the non-canonical Gospel of Mary to offer a counterpoint to male-centric Christianity. For this, let's travel back to the resurrection – this time as told by Mary.

Mary's account begins mildly enough. Upon issuing a commandment to "preach the good news of the domain" (much as is recorded in the four gospels), Jesus leaves them. The disciples "were distressed and wept greatly". It is at this point that Mary takes command:

Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all and addressed her brothers: "Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has joined us together and made us true beings." When Mary said these things, *she turned their minds* toward the Good, and they began to ask about the words of the Savior.

Following this, Peter is reported as saying to Mary: “Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than any other woman. Tell us the words of the Savior that you know, *but which we haven’t heard.*” Mary then proceeds to “report to you as much as I remember that you don’t know.”

After speaking of the secrets of what she terms the seven Powers of Wrath, Mary falls silent. At this point, gender resurfaces as the real issue:

“Andrew said: ‘Brothers, what is your opinion of what was just said? I for one don’t believe that the Savior said these things, because these opinions seem to be so different from his thought.’

After reflecting on these matters, Peter said, ‘Has the Savior spoken secretly to a woman and not openly so that we would all hear? *Surely he did not wish to indicate that she is more worthy than we are?*’

Then Mary wept and said to Peter, ‘Peter, my brother, what are you imagining about this? Do you think that I’ve made all this up secretly by myself or that I am telling lies about the Savior?’

Levi said to Peter, ‘Peter, *you have a constant inclination to anger* and you are always ready to give way to it. And even now you are doing exactly that by questioning the woman as if you’re her adversary. *If the Savior considered her to be worthy, who are you to disregard her?* For he knew her completely and loved her devotedly.

Instead, we should be ashamed and, once we clothe ourselves with perfect humanity, we should do what we were commanded. *We should announce the good news as the Savior ordered,* and not be laying down any rules or making laws.’

After he said these things, Levi left and began to announce the good news.”

The Gospel of Mary (at least with the fragments currently available) ends here. Clearly, this non-canonical (and deeply heretical) gospel provides the most open assessment of the tension between the sexes that appeared early in the history of the Christian movement. For women, the message of this gospel is one of hope; Mary prevails over the objections of other prominent male disciples.

What do we make of this? It definitely appears that the New Testament accounts demonstrate reluctance of the men to accept the women as credible witnesses. Three different Nag Hammadi documents suggest that the issue may extend beyond a question of credibility to outright resentment of Mary’s special relationship with Jesus. This may be more than just a difference in perspective. It apparently leads to a confrontation between the men and an embryonic women’s movement led by Mary – essentially a tussle for early control of the Christian movement.

Reconciling Radical Feminist & Life/Resurrection Messages: Coming from a non-canonical source (the Gospel of Mary), it's easier from some to discount Mary's critical contribution. But don't we get the same message from the canon – all four gospels? Just more veiled?

In Matthew the angels tell the two Marys to “go quickly and tell his disciples.” Mark's version: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee ...” Luke's message from two men in dazzling clothes: “He is not here but he is risen.” John has Jesus telling Mary: “But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending ...’ ”

Here, at the pivotal post-resurrection starting point of a Christian church, Mary *is in command* of pivotal information available to none of the other disciples. She is commissioned to bring a message to those who are skeptical, fearful, confused. She is asked to take charge – bringing the disciples and, by them, others to understanding.

MARY IN SUMMARY

This is the end of a tale – of events at a pivotal juncture in the history of the Christian faith. With Mary the Magdalene, there is an understanding to linger at the tomb when others more impatient depart.

So, it was to the Magdalene that a newly resurrected Jesus first appeared, as recorded by John's gospel saying: “*Do not hold on to me*, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But *go to my brothers* and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ”

This is a woman who understands because she first inquires – incessantly. Mary's gospel reveals a Lord who tells her: “Congratulations to *you for not wavering* at seeing me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure.”

From both New Testament and non-canonical sources, the weight of the evidence available is clear. Without the Magdalene to carry the message of resurrection, there would be no Christian church.

This is a message based on the experiences of a woman who achieved the confidence of her Rabbouni both before and after resurrection. Experiences too intimate, too exclusive to be duplicated by others – except vicariously. Yet this is the Mary who almost single-handedly animates the Christian church to faith in the goodness of the present and confidence of life beyond the human realm.

This excerpt is adapted from the “The Heresy of Mary: Life & Resurrection,” further detailed in the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For more information on the *12 Heresies of Christianity*, please click here to return to: www.jesustheheresy.com.