MARY MAGDALENE

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Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition.

Mary Magdalene in the New Testament

Magdala (which means “Tower”) was a town on the central western coast of the Sea of Galilee. It had a salted-fish industry and perhaps 40,000 inhabitants, mostly gentile.

Mary Magdalene (literally, “of Magdala”) has a minor role in the gospels.

She was a former demoniac who underwent exorcism. Luke 8:2 says, “some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities [included] Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out . . .” Her reputation as a former demoniac is repeated in Mark 16:9, “he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons.”

With some other women, she joined Jesus and his closest followers and provided for them. Luke 8:1-3 says, “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.”

Mary must have been with the group of Galileans who accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem, since she was there during passion week. She “witnessed his crucifixion from a distance, observed the tomb with his body in position, went to the tomb with the burial spices which they had prepared, found the tomb empty, and experienced the startling appearance of two men in dazzling apparel (Luke 23:49, 55-56; 24:1-9). [She was] one of those who told the apostles about the Easter day events, only to have the report fall on deaf ears (Luke 24:10-11; cf. Mark 16:9-11).” (Collins 4.579)

That’s it for what the New Testament tell us about Mary Magdalene.

But Luke 7:36-50 also tells this story: a woman “who was a sinner [probably a prostitute], having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair.” Starting around the 500s CE, the anointing woman became identified as Mary Magdalene. In 591 Pope Gregory I (Gregory the Great) said in a sermon, “She whom Luke calls the sinful woman . . . we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark.” However, “there is no historical evidence on which to base such identification . . .” (Collins 4.580) In 1969, the Catholic Church revised its missal (book of readings for Mass) so that Mary Magdalene is no longer mistakenly identified as a sex worker.

Mary Magdalene in gnostic writings

Gnosticism was a movement which claimed that people are saved by knowing secret knowledge. (“Gnostic” is from Greek *gnosis*, “knowledge”—so “gnosticism” means “knowledge-ism.”) (New-Testament Christianity, on the contrary, said people are saved by faith.)

The *Gospel of Mary* [i.e., Mary Magdalene], a gnostic writing, claims that Jesus loved Mary Magdalene more than the disciples.

In the gnostic *Pistis Sophia*, “Mary is described as blessed, she whose heart is more directed to the kingdom of heaven than all her brothers, excellent, blessed beyond all women, beautiful in speech, the pleroma of all pleromas, the completion of all completions, superior to all the disciples . . .” (Collins 4.580)

In the Gospel of Philip (late 200s, §§ 59, 63), Mary is called “the companion of the Lord and described as one who always walked with him. She is portrayed as one whom Christ loved more than the other disciples and as one who was frequently kissed by Christ. The other disciples took umbrage at this and merited a rebuke from the Lord . . .” (Collins 4.581)

Mary Magdalene in popular culture

“Many proponents of a revisionist version of early Christian history suggest that the role of Mary Magdalene was diminished in canonical literature because of the patriarchalism of early Church structures. [According to them,] The prominence accorded to Mary Magdalene in gnostic literature preserves and develops the earlier memory.” (Collins 4.581) (See Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *In Memory of Her*: *A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1983. 50-51; 321-23; 332-33.)

Martin Luther assumed that Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ wife. So did Mormon leader Brigham Young. (Biema)

“According to Eastern tradition, she accompanied St. John the Apostle to Ephesus, where she died and was buried. French tradition spuriously claims that she evangelized Provence (southeastern France) and spent her last 30 years in an Alpine cavern.” (“Saint Mary Magdalene”)

“The notion that Magdalene was pregnant by Jesus at his Crucifixion became especially entrenched in France, which already had a tradition of her immigration in a rudderless boat, bearing the Holy Grail, his chalice at the Last Supper into which his blood later fell. Several French kings promoted the legend that descendants of Magdalene’s child founded the Merovingian line of European royalty [who ruled France 476-750], a story revived by Richard Wagner in his opera *Parsifal* and again in connection with Diana, Princess of Wales, who reportedly had some Merovingian blood. . . . The idea that Magdalene herself was the Holy Grail—the human receptacle for Jesus' blood line—popped up in a 1986 best seller, *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail*.” (Biema) That book inspired Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code*, in which Jesus and Mary Magdalene are married.

Many now argue that Mary Magdalene would have played a stronger role in Christianity if she had not been suppressed by Jesus’ male followers. Paul never mentions Mary Magdalene, but one could argue that he slights her: “Despite the unanimous witness of the fourfold gospel to Mary Magdalene’s function in the resurrection narratives, she is not cited in the list of authoritative witnesses to the resurrection given by Paul in 1 Cor 15:5-6.” (Johnson 1.286)

Paul was “certainly androcentric and patriarchal, perhaps sexist, and possibly even misogynist.” (Johnson 1.286) According to Paul:

Women must be submissive to their husbands (Eph 5:22-24; Col 3:18).

Women must be silent in assemblies (1 Cor 14:33b-36; 1 Tim 2:11-15).

Women must wear veils when praying or prophesying in assemblies (1 Cor 11:2-16).

Women are defined by their domestic roles (1 Tim 5:3-16; Titus 2:3-5).

Women are sometimes “immature” (2 Tim 3:6).

But Paul, and Jesus’ other male followers, were men of their times: “the succeeding nineteen centuries . . . advanced very little beyond Paul . . .” (Johnson 1.289) And “What is today taken for granted in the twenty-first-century first world about the genders . . . [remains] alien to the perceptions of substantial parts of the world’s population today.” (Johnson 1.291)

At any rate, in the present-day culture wars (feminism good, Christianity bad, or vice versa), liberals, to advance women’s equality, have adopted gnosticisms’ promotion of Mary Magdalene to top apostle and pop culture’s promotion of her to Jesus’ spouse. Liberal Catholics, for example, see Mary Magdalene as an argument for women priests.