

## MARY MAGDALENE

### Fact, Fiction and Speculation

In modern media there has developed an image of Mary Magdalene. The image of Mary Magdalene in the minds of most Americans has come from films such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Passion* and *The Da Vinci Code* more than from fact or scripture.

*Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Passion* all portray in varying degrees, an intimate relationship between Mary and Jesus. *The Da Vinci Code* “reveals” that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had a child.

It has become common belief, even among Christians and those familiar with scripture that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, she was the woman nearly stoned for adultery and that she and Mary of Bethany are the same person. So where did these beliefs originate from and what do we really know about her?

Part of the problem is that there are at least 6 “Mary’s” in scripture and numerous unnamed women. We know very little about Mary Magdalene and that just naturally leads to speculation. Perhaps some of these “unnamed women” were Mary Magdalene and maybe some of the Mary’s were the same person. From speculation comes discussion and pretty soon the speculation is accepted as fact.

Of the sixteen women named in the Gospels, six are Mary. “In the first century, nearly one out of four Jewish women from Palestine whose names are known was called Mary. This is why ancient sources sometimes differentiate among these people by identifying them in other ways: thus one woman is called Mary Magdalene (literally, Mary of Magdala), another one is called Mary of (the town of) Bethany, another is called Mary the mother of Jesus, and so on.”<sup>1</sup>

Only Luke mentions Mary Magdalene before Christ’s crucifixion: *1 And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve were with him, 2 And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, 3 And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance.* (Luke 8:1-3) Although Luke doesn’t say that it was Jesus that cast the seven devils from Mary Magdalene, when considered with Mark 16:9, that was probably the case.

Before the crucifixion, this is all that we specifically know about Mary Magdalene: She was a woman that Jesus had cast seven devils from and that she followed Jesus with other women that had had similar experiences. She was financially in a position to be able to support Jesus from her “substance”.

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<sup>1</sup> *Peter, Paul & Mary Magdalene*, Bart D. Ehrman pg.188

The reference to seven devils makes it easy to speculate that Mary Magdalene had many problems before she was healed by Jesus. She must have therefore done many evils and as the number seven often denotes completeness, she must therefore have done every sin that one could imagine. But is any of that true?

Both *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Passion* portray Mary Magdalene as the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). In John this woman is not named. It is therefore easy to guess that this woman was Mary Magdalene, but it is not likely, as all four gospel authors (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) at some place in their writings refer to Mary Magdalene and so she was known to all four by name and therefore not likely to be referred to simply as a "woman". This is also particularly true considering how important she appears to be during the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord.

The thought of Mary Magdalene as a woman of sexual immorality is not new. In *The Golden Legend* by Italian author Jacobus de Voragine, published in 1260 she is a reformed sex offender (prostitute). It takes the assumption that the woman caught in adultery, the sinful woman of Luke 7 and Mary of Bethany are all the same.

The first recorded teaching of this comes from the 33 Homily of Pope Gregory in 591 A.D. "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all vices?...It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer's feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt."<sup>1</sup>

Is this "sinful woman" of Luke 7 Mary Magdalene? The event is recorded in all four gospels. In Mark 14:3-9 an unnamed woman anoints Jesus. This occurred in Bethany in the house of Simon. In John 12:1-8, Mary is named as the one that anoints Jesus. Again we are in Bethany. The same event is recorded in Matthew 26:6-13. Here the woman is unnamed, but again the event is in Bethany and in the home of Simon. These must surely be all the same event. Now we come to the event as it is described in Luke 7:36-40. Here the woman is unnamed, but labeled a "sinner". According to verse 40, it occurs in Simon's house and so it must be the same event as in the other three gospels.

A "sinner" in reference to a woman, does not exclusively mean "prostitute". Under the Mosaic Law, a person (male or female) could be classified as a sinner for breaking the most minute portion of the law. Only John names the woman as Mary, but is this the same Mary as Mary Magdalene?

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<sup>1</sup> *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* by Susan Haskins pg. 96



In John 20:1, 18, he refers to Mary Magdalene by that name and so it would seem that he would designate her here if that was the case. John gives the location as Bethany and perhaps feels that is sufficient to differentiate between the two: Magdala was a town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Bethany is a town near Jerusalem in Judea. Luke refers to the woman in this event only as a "sinner". In the very next chapter (Luke 8:1-3) he "introduces" Mary Magdalene. If Luke felt that they were the same person, it would seem probable that he would have given the introduction in chapter 7.

Only Luke 8:1-3 makes any mention of Mary Magdalene before Christ's crucifixion, during His ministry. We know that she was a Galilean Jewish of means from Magdala that followed Jesus and financially supported Him.

Most of what we know of Mary Magdalene is at the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord. Three of the gospels (Mark 15:40-41; Matthew 27:55-56 & John 19:25) all agree that Mary Magdalene (with other women) were present at the crucifixion. Luke 23:49 speaks of the "women" present at the crucifixion and we can safely assume from the other three accounts that this includes Mary Magdalene.

Mark 15:47 & Matthew 27:61 both place Mary Magdalene at Jesus' burial, while Luke 23:55 speaks of the "women"

After Christ's crucifixion and burial, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb (either alone or in company) to witness the resurrected Lord. In John 20:1, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb by herself. In Matthew 28:1, she goes with another Mary. In Mark 16:1-2, Mary goes with Mary mother of James and Salome. In Luke 24:10 Mary Magdalene is included in a list of women that had seen the resurrected Lord.

The events at the tomb with the resurrected Lord vary greatly, but they are in agreement (perhaps the only thing they are in agreement about) that Mary Magdalene was a significant part of the discovery and relaying the news. In Matthew 28:1-10, Mary Magdalene with "the other Mary" go to the tomb. They find the tomb empty, an angel speaks with them, they are instructed by the angel to tell the other disciples and meet the risen Lord while doing so. In Mark 16:1-13, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb with Mary the mother of James and Salome (perhaps the "other Mary" of Matthew), they find the Lord's body gone and a man in the tomb (perhaps the "angel" in Matthew) who instructs them to tell the other disciples. Mark 16: 9 says that the risen Lord was first seen by Mary Magdalene. Luke 23:55 - 24:35 only says that "women" that went to the burial returned to the tomb, found the body of Jesus gone and found two men there. Luke 24:10 includes Mary Magdalene with those that deliver the report to the apostles.

In John 20:1-18, Mary Magdalene first goes to the tomb alone, finding it empty, she summons Peter and John. When they return they find two angels in the tomb. Mary Magdalene waits outside and is the only one to see the risen Lord.

## CONCLUSION

Mary Magdalene was without question a faithful disciple of Jesus. It is quite possible that she was the first to see Jesus after His resurrection and told the others and thereby becoming the first "Christian". She was known and identified by all four gospel authors and they were very specific when writing about her and it is therefore unlikely that they would refer to her in other verses anonymously. Although it makes for intriguing speculation, there is no fact to support the thought that any of the unnamed women was Mary Magdalene. Additionally, Mary of Bethany is distinguished from Mary Magdalene and we have no fact to support they were one and the same. On the contrary they are differentiated and therefore were undoubtedly different individuals. There is no indication of an intimate relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus outside of gospel bonds. Quite the contrary, on the cross Jesus asks John to care for His mother, Mary (the assumption is that Joseph is deceased) in John 19:26-27. If Mary Magdalene were His wife, would He not have done at least the same for her?

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April 1, 2007