

“Women of the Bible: Mary Magdalene”

John 20:1-2, 11-18 ¹

We end our summer study of ten of the most famous women in the Bible with Mary Magdalene, perhaps the most enigmatic of them all.²

Her name, “Mary,” is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew “Miriam,” and was a very common personal name in New Testament times. The New Testament mentions a number of Mary’s, including not only Mary Magdalene, but Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, Mary the mother of James (the younger), Joses, and Salome, Mary the mother of John Mark, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and later, Mary, from Rome.

“Magdalene” simply means “from Magdala,” just as “Nazarene” means “from Nazareth.” In New Testament times, Magdala was a thriving business center on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, about three miles south of Capernaum. We know nothing about Mary of Magdala’s parents, her age, or her marital status; but she is mentioned with those women who were benefactors of Jesus and His band of disciples, so she appears to have been a woman of some means.

The truth is that we really know very little at all about Mary Magdalene, and this absence of information has lent itself over the centuries to a great deal of fanciful—and sometimes slanderous—stories and opinions about her. Most notoriously, Mary Magdalene has been confused with “the woman taken in adultery,” and she has often been considered to be a repentant prostitute.

At one point or another, Mary Magdalene has been confused with every other Mary in the Gospels except Jesus’ mother. She has been portrayed in art more than any other New Testament figure apart from Jesus, His mother, and John the Baptist, and she often appears in those paintings dressed in red (if she is dressed at all) with the long, flowing hair associated with “a loose woman.”

It’s crucial to note, however, that there is absolutely no evidence, either in the New Testament or in the writings of the Early Church to suggest any sort of blemish on Mary Magdalene’s reputation or character. To the contrary, she consistently appears as one of the most stalwart and courageous of Jesus’ followers, and one of the only persons present at His death, burial, and resurrection. Indeed, it was to her alone that Jesus first appeared after His resurrection, and it was she whom He commissioned to bear the news to the others—including the men.

Although she is mentioned in the Gospels more often than most of the disciples, Mary Magdalene is only mentioned once prior to Jesus’ crucifixion. Doctor Luke recorded that Jesus had “*cast seven demons*” out of her (Luke 8:2), after which she became one of those benefactress women who supported His ministry.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 4, 2016. For more information, see

www.newadvent.org/cathen/09761a.htm;
www.biography.com/people/mary-magdalene-9401421#synopsis;
www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-mary-magdalene-119565482/?all;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Magdalene
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-women-bible/Mary-Magdalene>;
www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/marymagdalene.shtml

² Mary Magdalene is mentioned in the following Scriptures: Matthew 27:56, 61, 28:1; Mark 15:40, 47, 16:1, 9; Luke 8:2, 24:10; John 19:25, 20:1, 11, 18.

While “demon possession” can indeed happen to humans, it is quite rare in the sense in which it is usually understood. But in those days, any sort of mental illness was regarded as “demon possession.” With seven being the biblical number of “completion,” it seems likely that Mary Magdalene was troubled by some sort of severe mental disturbance before she met Jesus, and that He healed whatever malady afflicted her.

It is noteworthy that with only one exception, where she is preceded by Jesus’ mother and aunt, Mary Magdalene is listed first among all the women with whom she appears in the Gospels. This suggests that, far from being an unusually sinful woman, Mary Magdalene was exemplary in her leadership among those who served the Lord. Let’s look, then, at what the Gospels tell us about her.

Although with the single exception of John, all the disciples abandoned Jesus after His arrest (in fairness, they were much more likely to be arrested than were the women), several women stayed the course with Him through His mock trial, His crucifixion, and His burial; and chief among these was Mary Magdalene (Matthew 27:56, 61; Mark 15:40, 47; John 19:25). When the Sabbath ended the next day—on Saturday evening—Mary Magdalene and a few other women went to the market to purchase spices with which they hoped to anoint Jesus’ body.

Then, before dawn on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene and the others made their way to the tomb, where they found Jesus’ grave both open and empty. All four Gospels describe angels who announced Jesus’ victory over death, after which the women ran to report this astounding news to the disciples (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1, 9; Luke 24:10; John 20: 1, 11, 18).

After making this report, John told us that Mary went back to the tomb alone, unable to believe that Jesus had been resurrected, and thinking that someone has stolen His body. There she became the very first human to actually encounter the Resurrected Jesus, and He commissioned her to return to the disciples with the news that she has actually seen the Lord!

And that’s all we know about Mary Magdalene. She doesn’t appear any more in the New Testament; but that hasn’t stopped folk from trying to “fill in the blanks” in her story. Let’s look briefly at some of the stories that have been told about her.

Some of you may remember that in the year 1054 A.D. the Christian Church split into the Eastern Church, headquartered in Constantinople (the Eastern Orthodox Church, for the most part) and the Western Church, headquartered in Rome (the Roman Catholic Church, for the most part). Mary Magdalene’s reputation has fared rather differently in those two traditions.

Mary’s reputation had suffered quite a lot before that split, though. The most damage was done by Pope Gregory I (“Gregory the Great”), in a sermon about the year 591 A.D. In this sermon, he confused or conflated Mary Magdalene with the unnamed “sinful woman” in Luke 7:38 *and* with Mary of Bethany, sister to Martha and Lazarus. He also took “the seven demons” Jesus had cast out of Mary Magdalene and transformed them into what the Church was already calling “the Seven Deadly Sins,” thus making her as immoral a person as could be imagined. This “conflated Mary” is known to scholars as “the composite Magdalene.”

Building on all this confusion, the most complicated “conflated Mary” story eventually went like this—*although there is not a shred of evidence to support it*: Mary of Magdala was the woman being married at the wedding at Cana, and her husband-to-be was John, who became “the Beloved Disciple.” Jesus called John to be His disciple during the celebration, before the wedding was completed, and John abandoned the wedding ceremony to follow Jesus. Being thus abandoned, shamed, and desperate, Mary became a prostitute, appearing next as “the woman taken in adultery” who was later brought to Jesus. Jesus’ kindness in that encounter caused

Mary to repent, and from then on, she followed Him in chastity and devotion. *This makes a nice story, perhaps, but it has absolutely no basis in any facts we know.*

Other early efforts to “fill in the blanks” can be found in what have come to be known as “the Gnostic Gospels,” documents that the early church did not recognize as authoritative.³ In these apocryphal gospels, Mary Magdalene is presented as a visionary leader who had a deeper understanding of Jesus’ message than the other disciples (hence the “gnostic” label) and whom Jesus loved more than He loved the other disciples.

This last dimension often had somewhat erotic overtones, and that eroticism is reflected in Martin Scorsese’s film adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis’s novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in José Saramago’s *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, among others.

As you can see, Mary Magdalene’s reputation has had a hard time as a result of all this conflation, imagination, and misogyny. It is this stream of negative tradition that has resulted in Mary Magdalene’s sometimes being considered the patroness of “wayward women,” and in homes for unwed mothers and recovering prostitutes being named for her around the world.

In stark contrast, this “composite Magdalen” was never accepted in the Eastern Church. There, Mary Magdalene was considered to be an exemplary disciple, virtuous throughout her life. Indeed, this tradition holds that Mary Magdalen was so extremely virtuous that Satan expected her to be the mother of Messiah, and so afflicted her with demons to try to prevent that outcome.

In the Eastern tradition, Mary Magdalene is sometimes called “Myrrh Bearer” in memory of her journey early on Resurrection morning to anoint the body of Jesus. And since about the time of the split between East and West, she has also been known as the “Apostle to the Apostles,” in recognition of Jesus’ commission to her to tell the disciples of His resurrection.

It is perhaps through this positive stream of tradition that both Oxford and Cambridge Universities have “Magdalene Colleges” (which they pronounce “maudlin”), and it is Magdalene at Cambridge that is the background of today’s *PowerPoint*.

Today, both East and West claim Mary Magdalene as a Saint, and her Feast Day is July 22. And both traditions claim that she died and is buried in their territory. The Eastern Church believes her to be buried near Ephesus in western Turkey, while the Western Church believes her to be buried in southern France.

As we’ve already noted, Mary Magdalene is very frequently seen in Christian art over the centuries. Indeed, no Christian figure except Jesus, His mother, and John the Baptist has inspired, provoked, and confounded the imagination of painters and other artists more than has Mary Magdalene. And, to this very day, Mary Magdalene remains an important New Testament figure whose role in the beginning of Christianity continues to be vigorously discussed and debated.

What, then, are we to make of all this? It seems to me that the weight of evidence, sparse though it is, rests with the Eastern tradition that sees Mary, not as a repentant prostitute, but as a devoted disciple who helped to underwrite Jesus’ ministry, who was faithful to Him throughout the darkest hours of His Passion, and whom He honored both as the first witness to His Resurrection and as the first to bear witness to others of that fact.

³ These gospels, many of which were discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945, include the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Mary, and the Gospel of Thomas, among others.

An examination of the widely-varying traditions associated with Mary Magdalene reminds us of the importance of diligent scholarship as it relates to Scripture, scholarship that resists our very human desire to “fill in the blanks” when information that interests us is unavailable.

Mary Magdalene’s story is a reminder of the elevated place that women had in the ministry of Jesus, as well as of the fact that Christianity has tended to elevate the status of women wherever it has become known. There remains a great deal of work yet to be done in such elevation around the world, but where it has come thus far, it has nearly always been the result of the life and ministry of Jesus.

And so we come to the end of this ten-week look at some of the most famous women in the Bible. Many others could have been chosen, and perhaps we’ll do some of that at another time.

We’ve looked at the faithfulness and patience of Sarah, the courage and conniving of Rebekah, the envy between Rachel and Leah, the courage of Hagar, the faithfulness of Ruth, the trusting prayer of Hannah, the machinations of Bathsheba and Jezebel, the courage of Esther, the trust of Elizabeth, and now the discipleship of Mary Magdalene.

We’ve repeatedly seen the devastation that favoritism visits upon families, and we’ve been reminded of the often-unsung-but-key-roles women have played in every generation of God’s Story that began long ago in Eden’s verdant Garden.

In the end, the thing we do best to remember is that the Good News still remains what it has always been. It really doesn’t matter so much what your past or my past has been. What matters is that God loves us and will use us to change the world, if we will say, with Rebekah (and Isaiah), “I will go.”

“Come now, let’s settle this,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool” (Isaiah 1:18). “Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago” (Ephesians 2:9-10).

So how about it? Will you go with Him?