

## What about Mary Magdalene?

Who was Mary Magdalene and what was her relationship with Jesus? Such questions have been the subject of great fascination and debate through the years. Dan Brown's The DaVinci Code, book and movie, created a sensation. At its center was the suggestion that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers and became secretly married, that Jesus had a child with Mary which began a secret lineage. Moreover the book suggests the church hid this truth and has suppressed what Brown calls "The sacred feminine" (I think on this last point he is right). Well, everyone loves a steamy romance and a good conspiracy story.

What was Mary's relationship with Jesus, who was she and what was her place in the early church after Jesus' death? We shall explore those questions as we look at the N.T. gospels and at the apocryphal Gospel of Mary discovered in 1896.

### I

Who was she? I'll begin by saying she was not a prostitute as portrayed in Western Christian tradition, art and literature. In art she is almost always portrayed as a repentant sinner with long, flowing, often red, hair. Mary the prostitute. In contrast in Eastern Christian art she is pictured as a regal figure

with a vase in her hands carrying the oil and spices to anoint Jesus' body on Easter.

Where did this association with Mary as a prostitute get started? It comes from Pope Gregory the Great who in a sermon he preached in 594 C.E. smushed together (smush is a highly theological term) three women figures in the gospels into one: Mary Magdalene. That is, Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:1-3); the sinful "woman of the city" who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50); and the woman who anointed Jesus in the last week of his life, named Mary of Bethany by John. (John 12:1-8). Here are Pope Gregory's words:

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John call Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven demons were ejected according to Mark. [Mark 16:8]. And what did these seven demons signify if not all the vices?... It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the oils to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner.

Note what his (overheated) words did. They reduced three women into one; they reduced the one into a prostitute; they equated the "seven demons" with "all the vices." Furthermore they ignored all the specific references to Mary which offer a

fuller, more positive picture. Because the Pope was the Pope, and most people could not read the Bible, his idea prevailed

## II

Here is what the gospels say.

### The Introduction of Mary in Luke 8:1-3

She is one of the group of women followers traveling with Jesus and supporting Jesus out of their means. Moreover, seven demons were cast out of her, presumably by Jesus, which would have cemented her devotion to him.

It is highly unlikely that a prostitute could have supported him out of her means. She came of Magdala, a thriving seaport town. More likely she was a resourceful woman who had acquired sufficient wealth to support herself and now Jesus.

### Mary Magdalene at the Cross

We do not hear of Mary again until we see her at the cross. All four gospels place her there. She is the one consistent figure in all of the accounts (Remember all the male disciples have fled.)

### Mary at the Burial

Matthew, Mark and Luke all three place Mary at the burial. She faced great danger by being there at the cross and the burial.

### Mary at the Tomb on Easter Sunday

Mary and other women went to the tomb on Easter Sunday to anoint his body. But Mary is the only one listed in all four gospels. She saw the open tomb, was encountered by angels who told her Jesus was risen and to go tell the disciples. This she did, thus is called in Christian tradition, “Apostle to the Apostles.”

### Mary’s Easter Encounter with Jesus in John’s Gospel

We have this vivid and poignant scene where Jesus is alone with Mary.

She stooped to look into the tomb. Two angels sitting there asked “Women, why are you weeping?” She answered, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

As she said this she turned around and saw Jesus there but did not recognize him. Supposing him to be the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you have carried him away tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” That is, to care for his body. At this point no Easter expectation.

At that moment Jesus called her by name in the unique way we call the names of those we love. “Mary”, he said. Then she recognized him and replied, “Rabboni”, my dear Master.”

Then he said, “Do not hold onto me. I have not yet ascended to my Abba and your Abba, to my God and your God. Go tell my brothers”. Then she, “Apostle to the Apostles”, went to the disciples and said, “I have seen the Lord.”

The gospels underline the singularity of his devotion to her and her devotion to him. She was with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, there at the cross, the burial, and at the open tomb on Easter where he called her by name. *As Jesus “loving us, loved us to the end,” so she loving Jesus loved him to the end, and then on to Resurrection’s surprise.*

All this suggests a relationship of remarkable intimacy between Jesus and Mary. They were what the Celtic Christians call *anam cara*, “soul friends”.

### III

Could they have been more than soul friends? Lovers? Secretly married? To ask a broader question: could a *married* Jesus have been Christ, Messiah, Savior?

The church, scared of human sexuality, has through the years promoted celibacy as the highest spiritual path. By that logic Jesus had to be single and

celibate. It was part of the job description. The early church inherited from Greek culture what John Dominic Crossan calls “sarko-phobia”, the fear and hatred of the flesh.

But if we follow a more Jewish way of thinking, Jesus could have been married *or* celibate. Marriage was an exalted estate in Jewish tradition, and celibacy was an option for exceptional circumstances:

- 1) The soldier at war was celibate.
- 2) The priest while serving in the temple was celibate
- 3) The Dead Sea Community, the Essenes, who saw themselves as purifiers of Israel, were celibate.
- 4) John the Baptist who may well have lived with the Essenes for a time was probably celibate.

How about Jesus? Was he celibate? I answer with measured and probable yes. Not because he had to be in order to be sinless and pure, but because of the white-hot urgency of his mission of the kingdom of God drawn near. Celibacy freed him to teach, preach, and heal and be single mindedly about his mission.

He may well have been alluding to himself in a saying, Matthew 19:12, that I’ve never heard in church.

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God. Let anyone accept this who can.

I think Jesus was in this third category: celibate for the sake of the kingdom of God.

So I do not believe Jesus and Mary Magdalene were secretly lovers or married. That won't sell any books, but it's my best estimation.

I do however believe that they could have shared deep love. And I believe human love can be an opening to the divine.

#### IV

What happened to Mary after the resurrection? Did she have a place in the leadership of the early church? We get a glimpse in the apocryphal gospels written mostly in the second century which did not make it into the Bible.

In the *Gospel of Phillip*, Mary is called a “companion” of Jesus and describes him kissing her on the mouth. We do not know the meaning of the word “companion” nor the nature of the kiss.

But let's concentrate for a few minutes on the *Gospel of Mary*. It was uncovered in 1896 in Egypt, written in Egyptian Coptic, It was not translated until 1955. We have since found two additional Greek fragments of the gospel—which speaks to the popularity of the gospel in its time. Scholars guess it was written in the early to mid second century, probably within a community where Mary Magdalene was a key figure.

There are gaps in the tattered manuscript. The first six pages are missing. Then Jesus the Risen Christ says to them: “Peace be with you” and says “the Son of Man is within you, follow him.” Then he commissions them to go preach the good news about the kingdom.

How did the disciples respond? They “were distressed and wept greatly.” “How are we to do this? If the authorities did not spare Jesus, how will they spare us?”

Then Mary Magdalene, the hero of the gospel, stood up and said, “Do not weep and be distressed, nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you.”

Then she told them some of what Jesus had revealed to her. Here comes one of the gaps where much is missing.

Then comes Peter's angry and indignant response:



Did he then speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it?

Are we to turn around and listen to her?! Did he choose her over us?

Mary wept and said, “Do you think I have thought these things up by myself in my heart, or that I am telling you lies about the Savior?”

Then Levi the disciple defends her and says:

Peter you are a wrathful person. [You always have had anger issues!] If the Savior made her worthy who are you then for your part to reject her?

After he said these things the disciples start going out to teach and preach The Gospel of Mary. Thus ends the gospel.

So we see here Mary as a figure of high esteem among some early Christians in Egypt. And here is an important glimpse of some of what was going on in those years we call Early Christianity, or better, Early Christianities. It was not uniform but multi-form.

## V

I want to close by contrasting two types of Christianity as represented by Mary and Peter.

-Peter represents a Christianity of *external* spiritual authority located in laws, rules and the fixed limits of scripture, creed and a male hierarchy—which the

church has called “apostolic succession” which has meant *male* apostolic succession.

-Mary, in contrast, represents a Christianity whose spiritual authority is *internal*: finding one’s true self, Christ and the kingdom within.

-Peter represents the outer world of action.

-Mary represents the inner world of meaning.

-Peter represents truth as known and determined in community.

-Mary represents the individual, internal apprehension of truth. (This is closer to the Baptist vision of individual spiritual freedom, of what they called “soul competence” and “soul freedom.”)

-Mary’s Christianity relies on visions and inner truth. It is Spirit-led and visionary.

-Peter’s Christianity relies on written words, creeds and church constitutions.

-Mary’s Christianity makes it hard to organize a church. It is like herding cats.

-Peter’s Christianity turns us into sheep safely grazing.

-In Peter's Christianity leadership starts with twelve male disciples who hand down power and authority to those who have official church approval and male anatomical correctness.

-In Mary's Christianity leadership is determined by spiritual experience and maturity. It bubbles up from below. Women are equally called and gifted.

Peter's Christianity won and Mary's Christianity lost—at least in that place and time. But Mary's Christianity has hung around, often at the fringes, and has been used to renew and reform the church. It is richly with us today.

I think Dan Brown was right in this regard: that the church has suppressed the “sacred feminine.” Mary Magdalene helps us recover it.