

Who is Mary Magdalene?

BY MARY ANN BEAVIS

The traditional image of the Magdalene as a repentant prostitute, not to mention contemporary speculations about her being a priestess or goddess figure or bride of Christ, are quite mistaken. They fail to do justice to the biblical and historical woman behind the legend.

For western Christians, Mary Magdalene has long been viewed as a repentant sinner, a prostitute forgiven by Jesus and subsequently devoted to him. In recent decades this image has been challenged by feminist biblical scholars who have clarified Mary's portrayal in the Gospels and the early church. After explaining how the traditional image of the penitent Magdalene developed and why it does not do justice to the biblical and historical woman behind the legend, I will introduce some new directions in recent Magdalene studies.

Let's begin with what the Gospel writers say about Mary Magdalene. She is mentioned in all four Gospels as one of several Galilean women who followed Jesus and supported him and the other disciples out of their personal means (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:2-3). Luke 8:2 adds the unique detail that Mary Magdalene had been liberated from "seven demons," an exorcism attributed to Jesus in Mark's secondary ending (16:9). John 19:25 places her at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother, the beloved disciple, and Mary Clopas. She, with other women, witnesses the burial of Jesus (Mark 15:47; Matthew 27:60-61; Luke 23:50-24:10). Matthew (28:1-10) and John (20:11-18) portray her as first witness to the resurrection, as does Mark's secondary ending (16:9). In both Matthew and John, Jesus commissions her to tell the other disciples about the resurrection (Matthew 28:10; John 20:17; see also Mark 16:10).

The term "Magdalene" is usually regarded as referring to Mary's hometown of Magdala, a fishing center on the Sea of Galilee (although it should

be noted that there is no first-century reference to a town by that name). A minority view is that Magdalene (“Tower”) is honorific, referring to her status as a beacon of faith (St. Jerome, *Letter to Principia* 127, 255). Her importance is signified by the fact that in lists of female disciples, she is always mentioned first (Matthew 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1; Luke 8:2-3; 24:10).

A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

The Gospel portrait of Mary Magdalene as disciple, supporter and proclaimer of the good news of Jesus bears little resemblance to the western cultural stereotype of the penitent sinner. The notion that she led a sinful life before she met Jesus seems to be the result of confusion between an unnamed woman, identified as “a sinner,” who anoints Jesus’ feet in Luke 7:36-50, and another Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany, who anoints Jesus’ feet when he is dining at their home (John 12:1-8). The two women are described in very different terms: Luke’s “sinner” appears uninvited at a dinner party in Capernaum (Luke 7:1) in the house of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36). The point of the story is the woman’s faith and the forgiveness of her sins (7:47-50). In John’s story, which takes place in Bethany, Mary is identified as a beloved friend of Jesus (11:5) who anoints Jesus in her brother’s home (12:1) in gratitude for the raising of Lazarus, and Jesus connects her act of devotion with his own burial (12:7).

Although all four Gospels contain stories of women who anoint Jesus (see Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13), none of them is identified as Mary Magdalene. However, there are several references in post-biblical tradition to the sisters Martha and Mary of Bethany visiting the tomb and meeting with the risen Jesus, which led some early Christians to conclude that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany were the same person.¹ Eventually, the composite “Mary” figure was expanded to include the anonymous sinner of Luke 7:36-50, whose story is told immediately before Luke’s listing of Jesus’ women disciples from Galilee: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (8:2-3). However, it was not until 591 that Pope Gregory the Great authoritatively pronounced that Luke’s sinner, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene were one and the same (*Sermon* 33.1). Although Gregory did not actually call her a prostitute, he interpreted the “seven demons” of which she had been exorcised as the totality of vices, and asserted that the ointment she used to anoint Jesus’ feet had previously been used by her to perfume her body for sensual purposes. Subsequently, the legend of Mary Magdalene, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, as a beautiful, vain, and lustful young woman saved from a life of sin by her devotion to Jesus became dominant in western (Catholic) Christianity, although the eastern (Orthodox) church continued to regard Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany as distinct saints, and identified neither with Luke’s sinner.

THE Gnostic MARY

Both academic scholarship and popular culture have made startling claims about the role of Mary Magdalene in a movement in early Christianity

known as Gnosticism (from the Greek word for “knowledge”). Although Gnostics varied in their doctrines and practices, they were unified by the belief that knowledge or insight into the true nature of the human soul and its relationship to God was the key to salvation. Some Gnostics were more open to female leadership, and to female images of the divine, than other ancient Christians.

There are, in fact, several Gnostic documents that portray “Mary,” sometimes specified as “Mary Magdalene,” as a preeminent Gnostic, an enlightened woman who understands the teachings of the Savior better than the male disciples, and who was especially loved by him (e.g., *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and *Pistis Sophia*). For example, the *Gospel of Philip* 63 calls Mary Magdalene Jesus’ “companion” whom he loved more than the other disciples; the *Dialogue of the Savior* 139-140 refers to Mary as one who understood everything and who showed the Revealer’s greatness; *Pistis Sophia* 19 extols Mary’s greatness and spiritual purity.

Although Mary’s authority, understanding, and relationship to Christ are highlighted in these documents, the notion that “Mary Magdalene” was a Gnostic heroine needs qualification. In fact, many of the references to the Gnostic Mary do not actually refer to her as “Magdalene”; this is even the case in *The Gospel of Mary*. The Gnostic Mary is actually a composite figure who partakes in characteristics of both Mary Magdalene – faithful disciple and resurrection witness – and Mary of Bethany, who learns at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:38-42), is beloved by him (John 11:5), and who is commended by him (Luke 10:42; John 12:7-8). Much as the composite Mary functioned as a model of faithfulness and (later) repentance for non-Gnostic Christians, the Gnostic Mary was the ideal enlightened disciple.

Unfortunately, while the role of the biblical Magdalene in the “Mary” figure has been emphasized by scholars (for instance, in books like *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*), the qualities of Mary of Bethany in the character have been overlooked.²

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THE WIFE OF JESUS?

Perhaps the most sensational claim that has been made about Mary Magdalene is that she was not only a faithful disciple and teacher, but that she was actually married to Jesus, and that she secretly bore his child, an heir to the messianic dynasty. This idea has not been taken seriously by most academics, but it has been disseminated by works of popular scholarship such as Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh’s *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and a series of

books by Margaret Starbird.³ Even more influentially, Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and the ensuing film presented the speculations of these authors as historical fact. Subsequently, novelists such as Kathleen McGowan have published similar works of fiction. Several of these books present Jesus and Mary Magdalene as a model of equality and mutuality for married couples.

The theory that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were husband and wife is developed differently by the various authors. Among the data often used to support their conjectures are the Gnostic references to Jesus' particular love for Mary (*Gospel of Philip* 63; *Gospel of Mary* 10). However, as noted above, the tradition of the Savior's love for the Gnostic Mary is traceable back to John 11:5, which mentions that Jesus loved Martha, her sister (Mary of Bethany), and Lazarus. Indeed, the love of Jesus for all his brothers and sisters is a theme of the Gospel of John (e.g., 13:1, 34, 35; 14:21; 15:9). Another piece of evidence presented by such writers is a doctrine held by a medieval sect known as the Cathars ("Pure Ones"), who allegedly taught that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were husband and wife. In fact, there are two medieval references from southern France—where local Catholics believed that Mary Magdalene was buried—that claim the Cathars taught that Christ and the Magdalene were married. Another medieval source claims that the Cathars taught there were two Christs, one good and one evil, and that Mary Magdalene was the evil Christ's concubine.⁴

The Cathars were extreme ascetics who preferred celibacy to marriage; they regarded Christ as a purely spiritual being so heavenly that he never left paradise, but who manifested on earth (which they regarded as hopelessly corrupt) only through the apostle Paul. Thus, it is unlikely that the Cathars viewed the relationship between Jesus and Mary as a paradigm for human marriage affirmative of sexuality, or that they believed the couple had children. Furthermore, these references to Cathar doctrines are from Catholic witnesses who regarded the Cathars as deplorable heretics, and so were inclined to present Cathar teachings as bizarre and shocking. In addition, there is evidence that the Cathars had a tendency to interpret biblical and theological metaphors literally. For example, some Cathars apparently interpreted the theological axiom that the Virgin had conceived Christ through her ear, referring to her obedience to the divine word, to mean that she had actually conceived—and given birth—to Jesus through her ear canal. Possibly, the Cathars similarly literalized romantic French legends that emphasized the extravagant love of Mary Magdalene for Jesus, and the writings of medieval theologians who extolled the spiritual "marriage" between Christ and the Magdalene as a model for cloistered women. While it is easy to sympathize with the Cathars, who were brutally exterminated in the Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229), it is unlikely that their esoteric doctrines shed much light on the historical Mary Magdalene.

MARY MAGDALENE AND THE SACRED FEMININE

Another feature of the claim that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife is the assertion that as Christ's female counterpart, she symbolizes the feminine divine. For example, the hero of *The Da Vinci Code*, Robert Langdon, is a Harvard "symbolologist" researching a book on "Symbols of the Lost Sacred Feminine." The secret of Mary Magdalene is not simply that she is Jesus' wife and the mother of his messianic heir, but that she embodies the sacred feminine who to this day is worshipped by her devotees as "the Goddess, the Holy Grail, the Rose, and the Divine Mother."⁵ This sacred marriage points to the meaning of sex as a "mystical, spiritual act" in which "man" achieves the "spark of divinity...through union with the sacred feminine," and, presumably, by which woman unites with the sacred masculine.⁶ Surprisingly, for Margaret Starbird, who is a strong proponent of the marriage of Jesus and Mary, and who believes that they were the parents of a daughter, the royal bloodline hypothesis is "basically irrelevant": she deems much more important its implications for the "full humanity" of Jesus, and for the restoration of Mary as the Lost Bride of Christ, image of the sacred feminine.⁷

Although, from a feminist perspective, the notion of Jesus and Mary as male and female messianic counterparts may be somewhat appealing, there is no biblical or historical evidence of any such doctrine. Some Gnostics recognized female divine figures, but there is no evidence that Mary "Magdalene" was among them. The references to Cathar belief in a married Christ reflect the medieval legend that Mary Magdalene was a sinful woman saved from her depravity by Jesus; the witnesses to this Cathar belief state that they identified her with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-30) and the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2-11). Although the Cathars believed in a purely divine Christ, there is no evidence that they regarded Mary Magdalene as a divinity.

This does not mean that metaphors of the divine in feminine terms are foreign to the Bible or to Christianity. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott has shown that there are many biblical images of God as female—for example, as a mother in labor (Isaiah 42:14), as a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15), as a midwife (Psalm 22:9-10), as a mother hen (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34), or as a bakerwoman (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21).⁸ Catholic theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson has shown that the figure of divine Wisdom, personified as a woman (*Hochmah, Sophia*), is a powerful female image of the divine in the biblical Wisdom literature (especially in Proverbs and the deuterocanonical books of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon) that shaped New Testament Christology (e.g., Matthew 11:19; 1 Corinthians 1:22-24).⁹ As Jann Aldredge-Clanton notes, "What Judaism said of personified Wisdom...Christian writers came of say of Christ: the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15); the radiant light of God's glory (Hebrews 1:3); the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 1:15); the one through whom God created the world (Hebrews

1:2)."¹⁰ Semitic-speaking early Christians often spoke of the Holy Spirit as Mother due to the feminine gender of the Hebrew and Aramaic words for "spirit" (*ruah, ruha*).

MARY MAGDALENE AS PRIESTESS?

A variant on the claim that Mary Magdalene represents the sacred feminine is the notion that she was a priestess. Barbara Walker's *Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (1983) suggested that Mary was a priestess in a pagan temple. A novel by Cythia Kinstler, *The Moon under Her Feet* (1991), portrays her as having been brought to the Jewish temple to be trained to serve the Queen of Heaven. As an adult high priestess, she marries Jesus to perform the rite of "sacred marriage" with him. Another popular scholar, Lynn Picknett identifies the Magdalene as a priestess of Isis who initiated Jesus into her mysteries through sacred sex.¹¹ Although there is evidence that in pre-exilic times goddesses were worshipped in the Jerusalem temple (Jeremiah 7:18; 44:17-18, 19, 25; Ezekiel 8:14), there is no trace of any such practice in the time of Jesus. It is highly unlikely that a Jewish woman like Mary Magdalene would have honored any deity but the God of Israel.

CONCLUSION

For most of western Christian history, traditions about Mary Magdalene have not done justice to the biblical figure. Far from merely being a repentant prostitute, the Gospels portray her as a faithful follower and supporter of Jesus, chosen by the risen Christ to proclaim the good news to the other disciples. Contemporary speculations about a "sacred marriage" between Christ and the Magdalene as his female counterpart are not supported by the Gnostic and Cathar sources often cited by pop culture writers. Nor are conjectures about a royal bloodline, or notions of Mary Magdalene as a priestess or goddess figure.

Another biblical woman whose role has been distorted throughout the centuries is Mary of Bethany. Not only was she merged early on with Mary Magdalene and subsequently labeled as a prostitute, but her role in extra-biblical tradition as one of the women at the tomb was forgotten in western Christianity (although it is remembered in the Orthodox tradition, which regards Mary and Martha of Bethany as among the "Holy Myrrh-Bearers" at the tomb). Although Mary Magdalene was often called "apostle to the apostles" by medieval theologians, the earliest use of this title is found in an early Christian homily where it refers to the Bethany sisters, Martha (who is mentioned first) and Mary (Hippolytus of Rome, *On the Song of Songs* 25.6). As noted above, scholars have virtually overlooked Mary of Bethany's role in the Gnostic figure of Mary "Magdalene."

Although pop culture speculations that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife and a manifestation of the female divine find little support in the historical evidence, this does not mean that these ideas are insignificant. The widespread public fascination with these claims can provide opportunities for

discussions of many matters relevant to contemporary Christians. Such issues include the humanity of Jesus, the role of women in ministry, the theology of marriage, and the meaning of the biblical teaching that both sexes were created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). From a feminist Christian perspective, an issue that begs for redress is that after twenty-five years of feminist theology, the significance of Mary of Bethany in early Christianity has been eclipsed by the enthusiasm for Mary Magdalene. The roles of both biblical women as disciples, witnesses, and proclaimers of the reign of God deserve equal recognition.

NOTES

1 For a fuller discussion, see Mary Ann Beavis, "Reconsidering Mary of Bethany," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74:2 (2012), 281-297.

2 See, for example, Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003), and Jean Yves Leloup, *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 2002).

3 Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004 [1982]). Margaret Starbird's books include *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 1998); *Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2005); and *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1993).

4 For a fuller discussion, see Mary Ann Beavis, "The Cathar Mary Magdalene and the Sacred Feminine: Pop Culture Legend vs. Medieval Doctrine," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 23: 3 (2012), forthcoming.

5 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 334.

6 Brown, *Da Vinci Code*, 408.

7 See Starbird, *Alabaster Jar*, 178; *Bride in Exile*, 142.

8 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

9 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

10 Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *In Search of the Christ-Sophia: An Inclusive Christology for Liberating Christians* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 10.

11 Lynn Picknett, *Mary Magdalene: Christianity's Hidden Goddess* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003), 149-161.



MARY ANN BEAVIS

is Professor and Head of the Department of Religion and Culture at St. Thomas More College in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.