



Mary Magdalene: Tradition and Gospel

SESSION 1

Who was Mary Magdalene, and what is her importance to Christians? How should Christians view the Gospel of Mary?

Introduction

Through history there has been a curious variety of understandings—or misunderstandings—of just who Mary was. She has been described in these ways:

- Jesus' wife and the mother of his children, the Holy Grail—in *The Da Vinci Code*
- A prostitute—in medieval tradition allegedly based on Scripture
- Jesus' frustrated lover—in *Jesus Christ Superstar*
- Almost a Christian goddess—as presented in many medieval pictures and poems
- Author of a Gospel treasured by Gnostic Christians
- A wealthy woman who helped pay Jesus' bills—Mark 15:41
- A kind of model for feminists, being the first preacher of the good news—Matthew 28:8
- A demoniac; a naked, wild woman in the wilderness—in Margaret George's novel *Mary, Called Magdalene*, based on Luke 8:2

This study will look at several things:

- What the Bible actually says about Mary Magdalene
- Some other stories in the New Testament that came to be thought of as being about the Magdalene and how bringing these together helped form the popular image of her as the penitent prostitute
- Mary Magdalene as she has been interpreted in great paintings and sculpture
- The *Gospel of Mary* (in session 2)



The New Testament Gospels and the Magdalene

The four Gospels in our New Testament come from four different authors in four churches in four different places in four different situations and who wrote in perhaps four different decades. It is not surprising, therefore, that they tell their stories differently and sometimes may seem to contradict one another. Nevertheless, they have remarkable unity about Mary Magdalene.

She is called "Mary Magdalene." The second name is usually understood as meaning that she came from Magdala, or Migdal, a small fishing town on the Sea of Galilee. There is some indication that Magdala had a reputation for immorality. That reputation may have contributed to the later picture of Mary as a prostitute, but the New Testament itself says nothing about Magdala.

Look at the lists of women who followed Jesus (Matt. 27:55–56; Mark 15:40; Luke 8:2–3). Note that Mary Magdalene is always named first, suggesting that she was the most important. Note also how the other women, in these and often in other passages, are named in relation to men: their husbands, fathers, or sons. Mary, however, seems to be independent, a woman worthy of note in her own right.

Luke 8:3 adds that these women not only joined Jesus' disciples but "provided for them out of their resources." While the men listened to Jesus, the women also paid the bills. (It was not the last time that women financed missions!) Her giving Jesus financial support suggests that Mary was an independently wealthy woman.

Very importantly, she is among those women "who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities." Indeed we are told that Jesus had cast out of her "seven demons" (Luke 8:2). That does not necessarily mean that Mary had been an especially sinful woman. In the first century, demon possession was believed to be an identifiable disorder. Apparently the Pharisees achieved exorcisms (Matt. 12:27). The note that Mary had once housed seven demons did add considerably to the medieval picture of Mary as having been a prostitute.

One vivid description of how a demoniac might have behaved is found in Mark 5:1–20. Apparently using that as her model, best-selling author Margaret George in *Mary, Called Magdalene* imagines the possessed Mary becoming a wild woman wandering naked in the wilderness, until Jesus heals her.¹ Then she becomes his follower.

Mark reports that when Jesus was arrested "all of them [the disciples] deserted him and fled" (14:50). But not Mary Magdalene! Though at a distance, she and some other women watched him as he died (15:40). And when he had died, she and another woman watched as Joseph of Arimathea buried the body (15:47).

Mary at Easter

All the Gospels agree that women were the first to learn of Jesus' resurrection. The accounts of Easter differ, but all agree that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb Easter morning, made the happy discovery that the tomb was empty, and was commissioned to spread the good news. If Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, ends with Mark 16:8, it leaves us uncertain about whether Mary and the oth-

MARY'S SEVEN DEMONS (LUKE 8:2)

Mary's seven demons are to be identified as the seven deadly sins denounced in Catholic ethics: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.

ers carried out that mission. Very early, however, Christian writers, knowing that Mark's story was incomplete, added what they knew. The women did tell the disciples, and soon the early writers added that Mary Magdalene was the first. The other Gospels make it clear: Mary was telling them the good news even when they were afraid to believe it. (For a discussion of why the Gospels differ in their accounts of the events of Easter, see *The Thoughtful Christian* study "Four Accounts of Jesus' Resurrection.")

The other three Gospels give a high place to Mary Magdalene in their Easter stories, but to understand more fully her place in Christian history, and what God may be saying to you through her story, now please read John 20:1–18.

It is Mary who is first to the tomb that great morning. She reports to Peter and "the other disciple," traditionally John. They run to confirm her news, but they do not yet see Jesus. She returns and stands now at the tomb crying. All that has given her new life is dead. No wonder she is weeping! But when she looks into the tomb she sees "two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying." They simply ask her the cause of her sorrow. "Woman, why are you weeping?" She cries: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Yet Christ is standing near her, right behind her. Jesus repeats the angels' question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary, like many of us, fails to recognize Christ in somebody who looks like just an ordinary worker. But then Jesus calls her name, "Mary!" Now in that personal encounter she cries, "Rabbouni!" (which means "Teacher").

Now, commissioned by her Lord, she *announces* her experience to the disciples. The word is the verb form of the Greek word for "angel." Mary had seen two angels. Now she becomes a messenger of the divine, a kind of evangelizing angel herself. She would come to be called "the Apostle to the Apostles."

Mary as a Combination of New Testament Women

Pope Gregory the Great was the leader who sent the first missionaries to England. The Gregorian chants are named for him. In AD 591 Gregory established a transforming understanding of Mary Magdalene. He was not the first to bring together as one several of the women in the New Testament. But a homily by this pope made it official. He announced, "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." The pope did not brand her as a former prostitute, but that identification was now inevitable.

To see what the pope was talking about and to understand the figure of Mary Magdalene as she was to be pictured through the rest of Christian history, you must read two passages. First read Luke 10:38–42. Mary of Bethany and her sister Martha were hostesses to Jesus. Mary listens intently to his teaching, while Martha stays busy in the kitchen.

More important, read the story of the weeping sinner recorded in Luke 7:36–50. Apparently Jesus is reclining in the Roman fashion at the table, rather than sitting in a chair. He does not see this sinful woman as she comes up behind him. She begins to anoint his bare feet with the perfume she has brought in an alabaster box. But soon it is her tears that are bathing those feet, and she is kissing them. With her hair, long and unbound, she dries them. It is quite possible that she is a prostitute. Women were not supposed to wander alone on the street, much less into a stranger's house. Only her husband was ever to see a woman with unbound hair. To let your hair fall free was a disgrace and would be taken as a sign that one was a prostitute. The Pharisee is incensed that Jesus has not recognized what this woman is, and he protests. Jesus, however, contrasts her behavior with that of the Pharisee. He makes no mistake about what kind of woman she is. "Her sins . . . were many," he readily agrees. But "she has shown great love." Thus he can say to her, "Your sins are forgiven." From at least the time of Pope Gregory until the latter part of the twentieth century, the traditional picture of Mary Magdalene was that of a prostitute weeping tears of penitence as she kisses Jesus' feet, the prototypical saved sinner.

The idea that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene are one and the same is no longer the position of the Roman



Catholic Church officially, or of most scholars, but it is deeply imbedded in the church's tradition and art down through the centuries.

The Image of Mary Magdalene in the History of the Church

Early church fathers Tertullian and Hippolytus called her "apostle" and "disciple," though they were careful not to suggest that Mary, a woman, was given any authority in the New Testament church. Mary Magdalene was to become the best-loved woman saint of the Middle Ages. At first, art historian Susan Haskins reports, she appeared in paintings and sculpture only in scenes with Jesus. But in the thirteenth century artists began picturing her alone or at the center of their works. Typically artists painted her with a jar in her hand, reminding the viewer of how she had anointed Jesus' feet. Sometimes she is shown reading a book, because the legend had grown up that she spent thirty years of her life in a cave in France, devoting herself to meditation. (Mary of Bethany had spent time just listening to Jesus.) Men loved the image of Mary as a seductive woman. Some Renaissance artists delighted in painting her nude, clad only in her long hair. That hair, of course, reminded people of how she had dried Jesus' feet after washing them with her tears. Though Palestinian Jews did not often have red hair, Mary's hair was red as a symbol of her profession as a prostitute.

Legends attested to her ability to answer prayers with miracles. She healed the sick and gave sight to the blind. She preached to the emperor as he was dining. He said that a man could no more rise from the dead than his egg turn red. She turned it red, and the Easter egg custom was born.² She became the patron saint of gardeners,

wine growers, pharmacists, perfume manufacturers, and hairdressers.

As early as Tertullian, a second-century church father, theologians associated her with Eve. Augustine added to this image, and others developed it. As the woman Eve in the garden had brought damnation to all humankind, so the woman Mary in Joseph's garden had been the first to bring the good news of Christ's redeeming resurrection.

Mary became one to whom prayers and hymns were composed. Cathedrals were built in her name. She was, indeed, *Saint Mary Magdalene*. She was also, as the title of a book by Marjorie M. Malvern puts it, *Venus in Sackcloth*.³ Malvern uses the word *sackcloth*, the ancient Jewish sign of mourning, because Mary was often recalled as the woman who wept so copiously that she bathed Jesus' feet with her tears of repentance.

One kind of institution that perpetuated the glory of the Venus in sackcloth was the convent established at Avignon in 1376. Its constitution stated this requirement for admission:

We decree and ordain that from this moment on there will be received in the said monastery only young women of the age of twenty-five years who in their youth were lustful, and who by beauty and formliness could still be prompted by worldly fragility and inclined to worldly voluptuous pleasure and attract men to the same totally.⁴

The description of the young women who could enter this convent gives us a glimpse of how Mary was pictured in the fourteenth century. As a matter of fact, convents did often shelter prostitutes.

With her own cathedrals, shrines, miracles, and devotees, she had become almost the goddess of a Marian cult. She could even serve as a kind of goddess of battles. In 1622 Louis XIII won a great victory over the Calvinists. He gave thanks to the intercession of Mary Magdalene. In *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*, Susan Haskins traces the similarities between many pagan religions and the cult that grew up around the Magdalene.⁵ "The sacred feminine" demands a place in many religions.

Mary's Last Days

The Eastern Orthodox Church says that Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother, Mary, retired to Ephesus, where

IMAGES OF MARY

Use Google as your browser or search engine. Above Google's search field, click on Images. In the search field type "paintings of Mary Magdalene." Click on Search Images, and you will find many beautiful paintings; click Next at the bottom of the screen to see additional images. You can enlarge some of these by clicking on them.

John was the pastor. She died there, and her bones were later taken to Constantinople. A Roman Catholic legend says instead that she journeyed to France and her sepulcher is in the oratory of Saint Maximin at Aix-en-Provence. One legend alleged they were miraculously transported to the abbey of Vézelay in Burgundy. The Benedictines of Vézelay and the Dominicans of Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume competed with each other for pilgrims, telling stories of miracles performed by the saint at each shrine.⁶ What is certain is that, for Christians, Mary Magdalene will never die.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Margaret George, *Mary, Called Magdalene* (New York: Viking, 2002).
2. Easter egg tradition is described in the Wikipedia entry for "Mary Magdalene" in the section "Easter Egg Tradition," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Magdalene#Easter_Egg_tradition.
3. Marjorie M. Malvern, *Venus in Sackcloth: The Magdalen's Origins and Metamorphoses* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975).
4. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 182.
5. Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1993).
6. See "Mary Magdalene," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Magdalene.