

Perhaps no figure in the Bible has received more attention in recent times than the Magdalene. In some ways beneficial, in others, detrimental . But what can we know of Mary called the Magdalene? What is true and what is not and why are questions this will try to answer.

First, what do we know?

Mary, (for the remainder of this article I will speak of her as Mary or the Magdalene but it is good to remember that Mary is one of the most common female names in first century Judea) is first mentioned in the Gospel of Luke 8:2 where she is mentioned as a member of a group of women who travel with Jesus and provide for His ministry out of their resources. From this we can infer that she must have had some wealth, either through marriage or inheritance. Also, she is one “out of whom were cast seven devils”. Who cast out the devils we are not told but it can be inferred that Jesus did though this is not certain. From this point forward, Mary Magdalene figures not at all in Jesus’ ministry.

Many would identify her with the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-9), the penitent woman washing Jesus feet (Luke 7:37-38), the Mary who anoints Jesus feet with nard (John 12:1-3, she *is* identified as Mary of Bethany) and others. It is these mistaken identities which are used to paint her as a repentant prostitute. In particular, the Luke reference and a few others is the source of the image, so frequently seen, portraying her as the wife or mistress of Jesus. In fact some later Gnostic gospels carry this identification farther.

But, as mentioned above, Mary does not reappear in the canonical gospels until the crucifixion. She is mentioned by name along with others in Mathew, Mark and John and by inference in Luke. And she and other women were present at His burial, noted the location of His tomb and return home to prepare spices and ointments against final preparation of His body after the Sabbath.

It is here, on the third day after the crucifixion that the importance of the women and of the Magdalene in particular becomes evident. It is *not* the apostles that return to the tomb to prepare the body of Jesus. It is the women possibly led by Mary Magdalene. They discovered the empty tomb. To this point all four gospels testify. Jesus’ first Resurrection appearance is to Mary alone (John 20:11-18) and to Mary with others (Matthew 28:8-10). The Magdalene and the women were the ones to announce the Resurrection to the apostles. For this reason Mary Magdalene was called the “Apostle to the Apostles” by some early Christian writers and was known by that title in the Middle Ages.

Indeed, a case could be made that Christianity was founded by a woman. Consider this question: would anyone have known that Christ had risen if the women had *not* gone to the tomb? The apostles were hidden behind locked doors fearing for their lives. There are indications that they did not believe the women’s report or understand what had happened when the women tried to tell them. In the gospel of Luke the women’s report is called “idle gossip”. Jesus later upbraids them for their unbelief.

So the place of women should never be under estimated. Even a cursory look at the gospels will show that Jesus interacted with women throughout His ministry and was not dismissive of them as the men of His time customarily were. His earthly life is bracketed with the two Marys: His virgin mother at His birth and the Magdalene at His resurrection.

This regard for women carried forward into the early Christian movement. Paul's known epistles are peppered with women's names showing that women were a vibrant and effective force in early Christianity. In Romans 16:7 Paul calls Junia an apostle, the only woman so called in the New Testament. And consider Paul's famous statement in Galatians 3:28:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, *there is no longer male or female*; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Italics are mine.)

So what happened to demote women from this equal status? A suggestion could be made that it is the outcome of a successful attempt by a male-dominated orthodoxy to put women into subordinate positions within the church. Why would they need to?

A possible answer is to be found in what was happening in the late first and second centuries. A group of Christians arose which historians have called the Gnostics. One of the features of this movement was the idea that the priests and bishops set up by the orthodox groups were unnecessary. Salvation could be found individually through "special knowledge" (*gnosis*) which was revealed by Jesus. Now it is not the purpose of this article to explore the esoteric world of the Gnostics. But it needs to be pointed out that the figure that the Gnostics cited most often as their champion was Mary Magdalene. In their literature there is frequently conflict between Mary and the apostles, most often Peter, as to the true doctrine taught by Jesus.

This leads us to two points: 1. Mary Magdalene must have had some authority in the early Christian movement for the Gnostics to make appeal to her. 2. The early church was forming the orthodox power structure which was founded on the principle that the apostles were male and therefore was the ultimate authority. This can already be seen to be set in place in the Pastoral epistles.

What a turnaround from Paul's statement in Galatians. The constant battle with Gnosticism and the growing power of orthodoxy gradually eroded the position of women and the authority of Mary. The final demotion for the Magdalen can be traced to the Thirty-third Homily delivered by Pope Gregory the Great in 591 CE, where he lumps the Magdalene with the women mentioned earlier together making her identity as a repentant prostitute church teaching. This is the image which existed until recently when the Roman church apologized and corrected the error.

But what happened to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection? Perhaps she can be included in the "certain women" mentioned in Acts 1:14. But for anything further, the canonical writings are silent. Among non-canonical writings, she appears frequently in such works as the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Phillip, the Pistis Sophia and others. There is even a second century gospel attributed to her which is worth a read. But as to anything factual, nothing more is known for certain.

Legend, following Pope Gregory, has her retiring clothed only in her long, luxurious hair to a cave where she spent the rest of her life praying and fasting. Another story, also following the Papal line, is to be found in the medieval book The Golden Legend where she brings Christianity to southern France. More popularly, using the gospel of Phillip as a starting point, she has been portrayed as Jesus' wife and the mother of His child, who fled to France where her child became the founder of the Merovingian dynasty

as per The DaVinci Code.

So what should be drawn from all this? In my mind, several things immediately become apparent. That men and women are equals in Christ. That's nothing new. But further could we even be Christian if a certain devoted Galilean woman and her friends had not made their way in the early morning mist to the tomb to witness the miracle on which our faith rests? As we celebrate this Easter season, let us be thankful for our sisters and honor them and, yes follow them. Remember it was Mary of Magdala who led us first to the open tomb.