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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I was attracted to the topic of Mary Magdalene because very little concrete information is known about her. She is mentioned a mere 12 times in the New Testament and is only acknowledged in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I was hoping that throughout my research I would be able to acquire more information about her, and understand why through the centuries she has been described as both a prostitute and a sinner. In truth, she was a beloved follower of Jesus and the first to whom Jesus appeared after he was resurrected."



Lisa Merry

*****Mary Magdalene: Saint Not Sinner**

Introduction

I was attracted to the topic of Mary Magdalene because very little concrete information is known about her. She is mentioned a mere 12 times in the New Testament and is only acknowledged in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I was hoping that throughout my research I would be able to acquire more information about her, and understand why through the centuries she has been described as both a prostitute and a sinner. In truth, she was a beloved follower of Jesus and the first to whom Jesus appeared after he was resurrected.

While writing this paper I wish to accomplish a better understanding of the history of Mary Magdalene. I hope to be able to show others that the impression that Mary Magdalene is a sinner and a prostitute is in fact false. I also hope to learn what is so intriguing about the idea of Mary Magdalene, not only in historical context but in a contemporary context as well. I am writing this paper to discover the truth about Mary Magdalene and her growing personal history through the centuries.

Mary Magdalene has been an intriguing historical figure and has been wrongfully portrayed as a prostitute and a sinner over the centuries. I will develop this thesis in the following three points: by looking at gospel passages in the New Testament that pertain only to Mary Magdalene, by examining false images of Mary Magdalene that have been projected throughout history, and by showing that Mary Magdalene was an important follower of Jesus and the first to whom he appeared after his resurrection.

Background

Mary Magdalene came from the town of Magdala, by the Sea of Galilee in a remote province of the Roman Empire called Judaea. It was a center of trade on an international route where people of all kinds of religions and customs met one another at the market. It was one of the larger cities in the time of Jesus and was a center of trade for dyed material, salt fish, and a selection of agricultural products. People of all religions met at the market and it was a city where both Jewish and Greek cultures were accepted. Magdala was a city that greatly suffered under the Roman occupation and opposition to it. It was a very wealthy town, but regarded as morally corrupt. Mary Magdalene was named for the city from she came, unlike other Marys mentioned in the bible. Lucy Winkett states that "Mary of Magda is the only woman who is not described and defined by her family" (24). Mary Magdalene was most likely raised Jewish and may have met Jesus of Nazareth in Magdala, possibly at a synagogue, where she then began to follow him.

Gospel Passages

Using only the passages where Mary Magdalene is named specifically can we determine that Mary Magdalene was an important follower of Jesus of Nazareth. We must look solely at the passages where her name is mentioned so we do not confuse her with other Marys of the bible. According to the gospel passages, Mary Magdalene was an important figure that was present in the major moments of Jesus's life, his burial and his resurrection. In Mark 15:47, it is stated: "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid." This was stated again in Matthew 27:61: "He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb." It is clearly indicated that Mary Magdalene observes Jesus's burial and knows where to look for him at the tomb on Sunday morning.

Mary Magdalene is found at the tomb on Sunday morning in all four gospel passages. "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices, so that they might go and anoint him" (Mark 16:1). At the tomb, Mary Magdalene and the other women discover that the tomb is empty. Shortly after, a young man in a white robe instructs them to go and find the disciples and tell them that Jesus has risen. "After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb" (Matthew 28:1). When Jesus appears to the women he directs them to tell the disciples that he has been raised. "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and

went to the tomb... It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other with them who told this to the apostles” (Luke 24:1 and 10). The women find the tomb empty and two men in gleaming clothes tell the women to remember what Jesus had told them in Galilee and to report it to the Eleven. They leave and tell their stories but the Eleven do not believe them. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb” (John 20:1). Mary Magdalene tells Simon and John that Jesus’s body is not in the tomb. Then Jesus appears directly to Mary Magdalene and tells her to report to the disciples what he has said to her.

These events show evidence of Mary Magdalene being at the tomb on Sunday morning. Mary Magdalene was either, herself, or among others to be the first to hear the glad message that Jesus had been raised from the dead as well as the first to spread the good news. If Mary of Magdala was truly a sinner and prostitute, why is it that she appears in the most important account of Christian belief, the resurrection?

False Images of Mary Magdalene

The fact that Mary Magdalene is not frequently mentioned is the main cause of much of the misunderstanding in Mary Magdalene’s true identity. Many scholars have grouped together Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany, and the sinful woman of Luke 7 as the same person. This argument is based on the belief that the gospel writers may have removed Mary Magdalene’s name from the stories that were more personal, such as Luke’s sinful woman. Grenville Kent believes that Luke removes the name of Mary Magdalene from the sinful woman for privacy reasons, “Luke carefully removes her name from a story of prostitution, naming her achievements as a generous supporter of Jesus and as a resurrection eyewitness...” (22). An alternative argument to why we should group the Marys together is that the stories were arranged in such a way that one can assume Mary of Magdala is the same person as Mary of Bethany. “Viewing Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene as the same person builds a coherent narrative running through the Gospels, with Mary as consistent character...” (Kent 25). This is due to the leading from one story where Mary Magdalene is present to the next where an unnamed sinner is present. Mary Magdalene’s’ expulsion of seven demons is followed by Luke’s unnamed woman in chapter 7 and many scholars then assume that the unnamed woman was in fact Mary Magdalene. However, just because the two passages are placed one after the other, it does not mean that this unnamed woman was indeed Mary Magdalene. James Carroll suggests this: “But even a casual reading of this text, however charged its juxtaposition with the subsequent verses,

suggests that the two women have nothing to do with each other—that the weeping anointer is no more connected to Mary of Magdala than she is to Joanna or Susanna” (3-4). This false equation of mixing the three Marys into Mary of Magdala was originated by Pope Gregory the Great in a speech he delivered in Rome in 591.

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. And what did these devils signify, if not all the vices? It is clear my brothers that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt.

(Winkett 21)

Why did Pope Gregory make this interpretation? There are three main theories: an attempt to reduce the number of Marys, to provide a missing backstory for a figure of obvious importance, and possible misogyny. Most modern scholars believe that Pope Gregory’s interpretation was not supported by the biblical texts and his interpretation was officially overruled in 1969. But the damage had been done. Mary Magdalene would become the repentant sinner in many paintings, books, movies, and plays throughout history. This false interpretation of Mary Magdalene has been set and her image as a prostitute and a sinner still dominates in Western society today. “Magdalene’s witness to the resurrection, rather than being acclaimed as an act of discipleship in some ways greater than the men’s, was reduced to the final stage in a moving but far less central tale about the redemption of a repentant sinner” (Van Biema 3). And yet this perception of Mary Magdalene is not substantiated by any of the New Testament writings about her. The gospel writers give Mary Magdalene a unique and prominent position in their accounts; they name her when she appears. It is now accepted in the community of the Church that any stories where Mary Magdalene is not directly named are not about her.

Another common misinterpretation of the bible is the question of whether or not Mary Magdalene was indeed a sinner. Mary Magdalene first appears in the Gospel of Luke as one of several wealthy women Jesus cures of seven demons. “...Mary called Magdalene of which seven demons had gone out...” (Luke 8:2). The disagreement in the interpretation of the expulsion of the seven demons has never been fully resolved. Medieval theologians interpreted them as the seven deadly sins. Martin Luther interpreted them as the seven devils. Modern theologians interpret them as convulsions. Others write of a goddess cult with seven steps of initiation. This

misconception has caused many to believe that she was a sinner who was possessed by seven demons. In reality, most modern scholars agree that the expulsion of seven demons meant only that Mary of Magdala had been cured from a very serious illness, not that she was sinful. Illness was commonly attributed to the work of evil spirits and the number seven merely symbolized her illness was either chronic or very severe. The expulsion of seven devils shows no support for her being a sinner.

Mary Magdalene throughout history has been displayed as a repentant sinner and prostitute in many famous works of art. These artists based their paintings not only on Pope Gregory's speech, making Mary Magdalene a prostitute and sinner, but on John: 20's account of Jesus's appearance to Mary Magdalene where he says, "Do not touch me." This saying has been misinterpreted by many scholars. You must look at the more accurate translation of Jesus' words stating "Do not cling to (hold on to) me" (John 20:17). This translation makes this saying much clearer. Jesus does not wish for Mary Magdalene or any of the other disciples to feel lost after his resurrection.

The fact that he is risen does not mean that he will remain forever in the flesh with his friends and followers. They must see that he has risen bodily from the dead and therefore can raise others, but they must also learn to get along without depending on his physical presence. He still has this lesson to teach, and he would like Mary Magdalene to help him by being independent and faithful enough to go without him to the 'brothers' and tell them what she has witnessed and what he has said.

(Kiely 14)

This line was also misunderstood, and painters have depicted Mary Magdalene as a repentant sinner kneeling, crying, and reaching out for Jesus at his feet. When in reality Mary Magdalene had been chosen to spread the good news and was a close friend to Jesus. "...Jesus chose Mary Magdalene, before all the other disciples, not only to be the first to see him risen from the dead but to act as a teacher to the teachers, apostle to the apostles, apostola apostolorum" (Kiely 16). Artists such as Fra Angelico, Titian, Agnolo Bronzino, and Lavinia Fontana all focus their paintings on the line given by Jesus to Mary Magdalene "Do not touch me." "...The question remains whether it is or has ever been possible to 'recover' a Mary Magdalene not covered in tears and shame; to see her instead as a disciple and friend of Christ's..." (Kiely 19).

Contemporary fiction has also played an important role in the misinterpretation of who Mary Magdalene really was. Dan Brown's novel, *The Davinci Code* portrays Mary Magdalene as the secret wife of Jesus and the mother of his only daughter. "There is no historical or biblical data to support speculation that Mary of Magdala was married to Jesus" ("Mary of Magdala—apostle to the apostles" 4). The Gospel of Philip is the only place in the gnostic writings where Mary Magdalene is introduced as Jesus' companion. According to Carl E. Olson, "...those attempting to construct a picture of early Christianity based on Mary Magdalene as Jesus' wife and head apostle must do so by subjectively picking and choosing elements from second- and third-century writings, then project them back to the first century" (93). Not all of the writings of different gospels contain information that proves Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus. Many argue that her marriage to Jesus was not mentioned in the early texts because of the fear that existed concerning Jewish persecution. This does not necessarily hold up because the gospels were written after the fall of Jerusalem, and there would have been nothing to fear from Jewish authorities. If Mary Magdalene had been the wife of Jesus and the mother of his child, it is unlikely that these facts would have been omitted from the gospels. Also, if Mary and Jesus had been married she would have been known as "Mary the wife of Jesus" not Mary of Magdala. "Literary and social conventions in antiquity dictated that if women were mentioned (a very rare occurrence) they were nearly always named by their relationship to the patriarchal household" ("Mary of Magdala—Apostle to the Apostles" 4).

Many feminist scholars believe that Mary Magdalene's false image was created by the initial church after the death of Jesus. They argue that the male disciples did not want women to rise to power within the church, therefore the slandering and the manipulation of Mary Magdalene's image was done on purpose. "Although Jesus rejected male dominance, as symbolized in his commissioning of Mary Magdalene to spread word of the Resurrection, male dominance gradually made a powerful comeback within the Jesus movement" (Carroll 9). There is evidence even that the Bible was standardized and canonized to exclude Mary Magdalene's gospel. One feminist scholar even states: "I think it was a power struggle and the canonical texts that we have today come from the winners" (Van Biema 4). Many males argue against the point stating that Mary Magdalene is absent from many important biblical scenes involving the male disciples, specifically from the Last Supper, which rules her out as a true disciple of Jesus. However, Van Biema also argues that Mary Magdalene's witness to the resurrection makes a case for a stronger role of women in the church.

L'apparition du Christ a la Madeleine. Laurent de La Hyre – 1656 --- Musee des Beaux Arts, Grenoble, France.

Witness to the Resurrection

Mary Magdalene is redeemed as the most important witness to the Resurrection. She is named in five out of the six gospel narratives and, when mentioned, she is always the first person named. “John’s Gospel names Mary Magdalene the first to discover the empty tomb and who shows the Risen Christ sending her to announce the Good News of his resurrection to the other disciples” (“Mary of Magdala—Apostle to the Apostles” 2). This action of running to tell the apostles of her witnessed account of Jesus’ Resurrection is what gives her the name *apostola apostolorum*, apostle to the apostles. She is the first person to proclaim the kerygma and claim the good news that Jesus had been raised. “It is impossible to relate the story of the Resurrection without including ‘Mary the one from Magdala’” (“Mary of Magdala—apostle to the apostles” 2). In all four gospel accounts she is the only one who realizes that Jesus had been raised, and she is the only one to testify to it. The fact that women were the first to spread the good news of Jesus’ resurrection shows proof of the historicity of the resurrection accounts. Had these accounts been fabricated, women would have never been chosen as the witnesses seeing as Jewish law did not acknowledge the testimony of women. Unlike the men who scattered and ran, who lost faith, who betrayed Jesus, Mary Magdalene along with other women, stayed. Mary Magdalene is the human figure that holds the events of the resurrection together.

Unfortunately, Mary’s act as the first witness to Jesus’ Resurrection not only gets undermined by her false reputation, but also by other biblical scholars. The Church’s faith is based on the resurrection appearances to the future leaders of the Church. Some biblical scholars assert that the women, including Mary Magdalene, were only unofficial witness to the Resurrection of Christ. They believe that the real witnesses were only the male disciples to whom Jesus appeared only after his appearance to Mary Magdalene. Other scholars argue that “the point is still secure: in the tradition women are the first witnesses, regardless of any role that Peter may play or may have come to play in the Church” (O’Collins 637). Indeed, Mary Magdalene is still portrayed throughout the scripture as having the primary role in the resurrection and is considered equal to a male disciple as a witness for the resurrection.

Therefore, Jesus’ initial appearance to Mary of Magdala after his resurrection shows their strong relationship as well as the importance of her resurrection account to the other disciples.

Conclusion

After looking at the evidence where Mary Magdalene is named specifically in the New Testament, we can

conclude that she was a woman of independent means who was faithful to Jesus beyond his death. She faithfully supported his movement and followed his every command. Nowhere in the bible is it ever mentioned that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute or a sinner. Mary of Magdala was a constant figure in Jesus' last days standing near him as he dies and visiting the grave after his death. She was probably one of Jesus' closest friends. She is never in hiding for the fear of Jewish persecution as are the male disciples were. Mary Magdalene is receptive to the news of Jesus' resurrection and is the first to deliver the good news to the disciples proclaiming he has been raised. Mary Magdalene plays a pivotal role in Christianity's most important act, the resurrection.

Mary Magdalene is a true saint, who witnessed the most important Christian act, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. She deserves her title apostola apostolorum, apostle to the apostles, because she was truly one of Jesus' most important disciples and the first to deliver the kerygma. David Van Biema explains that Mary Magdalene, "...plays a crucial—perhaps irreplaceable—role in Christianity's defining moment" (3).

The Catholic Church officially deemed Mary Magdalene a saint in 1969. The church stated that she was not the repentant sinner that early Christianity had made her out to be. It now accepts Mary Magdalene as an important witness to Jesus' resurrection. Women from around the world gather to celebrate her feast day on July 22nd.

Ultimately, she remains an influential and inspiring figure in the Christian faith.



L'apparition du Christ à la Madeleine
Laurent de La Hyre, 1656
Musée des Beaux Arts in Grenoble, France.

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