



Introducing the Real Mary Magdalene:¹

By Jaime Clark-Soles

Recently I received an e-mail from A Word a Day, a site managed by Anu Garg. The entry was as follows:

maudlin

PRONUNCIATION:

(MAWD-lin)

MEANING:

adjective: Overly sentimental.

ETYMOLOGY:

After Mary Magdalene, a Biblical character who was a follower of Jesus. In medieval art she was depicted as a penitent weeping for her sins (she washed the feet of Jesus with her tears) and her name became synonymous with tearful sentimentality. The name Magdalene means "of Magdala" in Greek and is derived after a town on the Sea of Galilee. The name Magdala, in turn, means "tower" in Aramaic. So here we have a word coined after a person, who was named after a place, which was named after a thing. In an allusion to her earlier life, Mary Magdalene's name has sprouted another eponym, magdalene, meaning a reformed prostitute.²

This is a perfect example of the problem of *harmonizing*—conflating different stories from the various Gospels to create a single story, though that single *invented* story **does not appear whatsoever** in the Bible! It is extremely important to note that the Bible NEVER associates Mary Magdalene with prostitution or sexual immorality of any kind. Most people don't realize this and, in fact, think that that is her primary memorable feature. Why is it so important to get it straight? Here are just a few reasons:

¹ This article appears in a modified form in Jaime Clark-Soles, *Engaging the Word: The New Testament and the Christian Believer* (Westminster John Knox, 2010).

² Wordsmith.org. April 6, 2009.

1. It's wrong; as such, it misrepresents the contents of the biblical texts.
2. It misrepresents our earliest evidence of the nature of Christianity.
3. It perpetuates the notion that many women in the Bible were sexually immoral or suspect.
4. It belittles the bold, central role that women have always played in Christian history, including our own era.
5. It continues the historical and ongoing tendency to reduce the importance of females in general and restrict them to the limited categories of wife, virgin, mother, or whore. Each of those categories is tied to male control of female sexuality.

Facts about Mary Magdalene (according to the Bible)

So, let's assume that most people have a mistaken notion about Mary of Magdala. But I don't want you to take my word for it; let's walk through all of the data we have about her in the Bible.

Mary Magdalene in Matthew

Mary Magdalene appears first (canonically speaking) in Matthew 27:55-56 along with another Mary and another woman watching the crucifixion: "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were **Mary Magdalene**, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." She appears next with "the other Mary" in Matthew 27:61, "sitting opposite the tomb." Finally, she and "the other Mary" go to the tomb on Easter: "After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb" (Matthew 28:1).

Mary Magdalene in Mark

In Mark, as in Matthew, Mary Magdalene appears only at the crucifixion and tomb:

Mark 15:40: "There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome."

Mark 15:47: "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid."

Mark 16:1: "When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him."

Mark 16:9: "Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons."

Mary Magdalene in Luke

In Luke Mary Magdalene first appears during Jesus' ministry along with the disciples and some other important women:

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources (Luke 8:1-3).

In narrating Easter morning, Luke speaks of unnamed women who go to the tomb, find Jesus risen, and go back to proclaim the gospel to the disciples. It is at that point that Luke names them: "Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles" (Luke 24:10).

Mary Magdalene in John³

Finally, Mary Magdalene appears in a crucial role in the Gospel of John. In John, Mary Magdalene is standing right at the foot of the cross and witnesses the church being born as Jesus gives his mother and beloved disciple to one another:

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son. Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home (John 19:25-27).

As if that were not a powerful enough scene, Mary Magdalene becomes the first to encounter the risen Lord by herself and the first preacher of the resurrection in Christian history, according to John. It is she who proclaims the resurrection of Jesus to the disciples.

John 20:1: 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.

³ For visual images of Mary Magdalene in John, see <http://catholic-resources.org/John/Art20.html>

John 20:11-18: But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary Magdalene: an anointing prostitute? NOT!⁴

You have just read all of the passages in the Bible that refer to Mary Magdalene. Where do you find in these texts any mention of her anointing Jesus' feet or being a prostitute? You don't. Then why is it that if you walk up to most Christians and say, "Quick. Tell me everything you know about Mary Magdalene," you will likely hear all about her prostitute ways and her anointing act (which never appears in the Bible), but nothing about the Bible's testimony to her role in supporting Jesus' ministry (Luke 8), her faithful appearance at the cross, her witness to the resurrection, her role as an apostle (defined as someone who walked with Jesus and was sent to proclaim the good news of his resurrection), and John's designation of her as the first preacher in Christian history?⁵

Harmonization leads to harlotization. The urge to simplify and reduce to a lowest common denominator has led to combining the various anointing stories in the Gospels on the one hand and some of the Marys on the other. Let's sort them out so that we get clear on what the Bible actually says versus what interpreters of the Bible have **said** it says.

⁴ If you do a search on Google images for "Mary Magdalene," you'll get 533,000 hits. How many of them are true to the biblical text?

⁵ For a brief popular article, see <http://www.danbrown.com/media/morenews/time.html>. Note the error present even in this essay indicating that Luke has a "Mary from Bethany"; that's only in John. For a provocative, scholarly treatment of Mary Magdalene, see Jane Schaberg with Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, *Mary Magdalene Understood* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

The Anointings

In Matthew 26:6-13, Simon is identified as a leper. An unnamed woman appears and anoints his **head**. The disciples as a group chastise her (Mark does not name the disciples as those chastising her; John, on the other hand, singles out Judas Iscariot as the culprit). Again, though, the woman is not a prostitute, not a sinner at all, and is not named Mary. She anoints his head; there are no tears and she needs no forgiveness. She has served Jesus; he has not served her.

In Mark 14:3-10, Jesus is in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, as in Matthew:

As he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his **head**. But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.

Notice that the woman is **not** a prostitute, **not** a sinner at all, and is **not** named Mary. She anoints Jesus' head (not his feet); there are no tears and she needs no forgiveness. She has served Jesus; he has not served her.

In Luke 7:37-50, the anointing occurs at the home of a man named Simon, as in Mark, but this Simon is a Pharisee, not a leper. There is no mention of Bethany (the last city mentioned is Nain). An unnamed woman who is labeled a "sinner" (not a prostitute) entered and "stood behind him at his **feet**, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment." Simon is offended so Jesus tells a story that indicts Simon; but Jesus extends forgiveness to the woman saying that her faith has "saved" her. Unlike in Mark and John, this act is not a service to Jesus that foreshadows his death. It is placed far earlier in his ministry and Luke does not tie it to the

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Passion (the Passion refers to the sufferings of Jesus from the Last Supper to his death on the cross). This story has obviously been erroneously imposed upon Mary Magdalene and has given rise to the notion of her as a tearful penitent, a reformed “bad girl of the Bible.”

In John 12 Jesus is in Bethany, the town where the siblings Mary, Martha and the resuscitated Lazarus reside.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' **feet**, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

This Mary is not a "sinner" and is **not** Magdalene. Like the woman in Luke, she anoints Jesus' feet and uses her hair, but there are no tears and it has nothing to do with repentance. As in Matthew and Mark, the woman who anoints Jesus is depicted as one who understands who Jesus is and what fate soon awaits him in a way the disciples do not. In Matthew and Mark the woman is scolded by more than one unidentified person; in John, that role falls upon Judas Iscariot.

Notice: none of these anointers is identified as Mary Magdalene.

The Named Marys

Good luck, reader, sorting out all the Marys!

At least two Marys appear in Matthew: Mary, Jesus' mother (who appears by name at 1:16, 18, 20; 2:11; and 13:55) and Mary Magdalene (who appears at 27:56, 61; and 28:1). In Matthew 27:56 we read: "Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." There are at least two women here, probably three. In Mark, Mary, Jesus' mother, is named as the mother of James and Joses (Joseph), so it's not

unreasonable to assume that this Mary in Matthew 27 is Jesus' mother. The mother of the sons of Zebedee is presumably a third woman. Matthew 27:61 and 28:1 refer to "the other Mary." The only other Mary consistently presented in Matthew and Mark is Jesus' mother, so it seems to be a reference to her. If not, it's a third, mysterious Mary.

Mark has two Marys: Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene. Jesus' mother appears in Mark by name first at 6:3: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary [that makes her Jesus' mother] and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"⁶ So when Mark refers in 15:40 to "Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses," it may indicate Jesus' mother. The same is true in Mark 15:47 where we hear of Mary, the mother of Joses. In 16:1, the author refers to Mary the mother of James; again, perhaps this refers to the Mary first mentioned in 6:3 and then 15:40, Jesus' mother. Mary Magdalene appears at 15:40, 47; 16:1 (and 16:9, if you are a fan of the longer ending).⁷

In addition to Jesus' mother (Luke 1:27, 30, 34, 38, 39, 46, 56; 2:5, 16, 19, 34) and Mary Magdalene (8:2; 24:10), Luke includes Mary, the sister of Martha (10:39, 42). In that story, remember, Martha is engaged in domestic duties while Mary "has chosen the better part" by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening (she does *not* anoint said feet; also there is no mention that Mary and Martha have a brother Lazarus at all). Luke 24:10 speaks of Mary the mother of James, which, as indicated by Mark and Matthew, probably means Jesus' mother. If it's not Jesus' mother, there's a mysterious Mary. So there are at least three Marys in Luke: Jesus' mother; Mary Magdalene; and the Mary who is Martha's sister. None is a prostitute, sinner, or anointer, let alone all three.

John names three Marys: Martha's sister; Mary Magdalene; and Mary, the wife of Clopas. Though Jesus' mother appears in the Gospel, John never names her.

By reviewing the data, we find that there is *no* Mary who is a prostitute, and the only Mary who anoints is not Magdalene but Martha's sister. The harmonizing tendency has created a character who never actually appears in Scripture! In 591 CE that harmonization was made official by Pope Gregory the Great, who declared: "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary [of Bethany], we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected

⁶ She appears unnamed at Mark 3:31-32. But here we are only interested in the appearances of the name Mary.

⁷ Most scholars consider Mark 16:8 to be the original ending of the Gospel of Mark, based upon our oldest manuscript evidence. The "longer ending" refers to 16:9-20 and appears first in the late second century manuscripts.

according to Mark.”⁸ Our poor sixth-century ancestors had no way to fight back, however, since they did not have access to the Bible (or much education) except through church officials. We, on the other hand, have no excuse for tolerating gross misrepresentations of the details of the biblical texts.

One might work through all of this and throw up one's hands and say, "It's too hard to keep all this straight. Who cares?" I would argue that the Bible matters enough to do the work of keeping it straight. I would also argue that laziness should not be a warrant for rewriting the Bible. If one is going to rewrite the Bible by “simplifying” it, why stop there? Why not just scrap the text altogether and write a new, simpler story that one finds easier to deal with and "keep straight"? In other words, making such a move indicates that one does not actually consider the texts acceptable or good enough for one's own (political, spiritual, intellectual, etc.) agenda. The harlotization of Mary Magdalene (not to mention the Samaritan woman of John 4) has done damage to Mary Magdalene and the legacy the authors intended for her and has, at the very least, contributed to the church's ongoing negative view of women, their leadership in the church, and the nature of female sexuality.

In the end, Mary Magdalene is her own person—despite centuries of degradation and subjection to salacious rumors, she still shines through as a person who models real engagement with Jesus. She discerned the signs of the times, chose wisely, ignored those who would limit her, and trusted her gut. In that way she is much like Phoebe (called a “minister” in Romans 16) or Junia (called an “apostle” in Romans 16), or Chloe (who convened a house church in 1 Cor. 1:11), or all of the women I know today who forge ahead and trust in “women's ways of knowing.”⁹

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<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>

⁸Pope Gregory the Great, in a sermon on September 21, 591: *Homily 33*, in *Patrologia Latina* (PL) 76, col. 1239; reported at <http://www.catholic.net/index.php?size=mas&id=2886&option=dedestaca>.

⁹ I refer here to a classic work by Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule called *Women's Ways Of Knowing: The Development Of Self, Voice, And Mind* (Basic Books, 1997) that addresses epistemology (that is, how we know what we know) and its relationship to gender.