



Women in the Bible

New Testament: Mary Magdalene

Matthew 27:55-61, 28:1-10; Mark 15:40–16:8; Luke 8:1-3, 24:1-11; John 19:25, 20:1-18

After Jesus' mother Mary, Mary Magdalene is arguably the most famous female in the New Testament. But which Mary is she? The four gospels are full of women named Mary. Who is Mary Magdalene? She has been sensationalized from the time Gregory the Great declared her a "sinful woman" in the sixth century until Dan Brown perpetuated the myth that she was Jesus' wife in *The Da Vinci Code*.

Which Mary?

First, let's determine which Marys we are *not* talking about. Jesus' mother Mary was discussed in the lesson prior to this one. Mary of Bethany is the sister of Martha and Lazarus (see Luke 10:38-41, John 11–12:3). Then there is "the other Mary," who many assume is the same as Mary the mother of James and the wife of Cleopas. None of these is to be confused with Mary, the mother of John Mark, who is mentioned just once in Acts 12:12. And none of them is Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene is also not – or at least not explicitly – the "sinful woman" from the dramatic story found in Luke 7:33-50. In that passage, a woman enters a dinner Jesus is having at the house of a Pharisee. She throws herself at his feet, bathing them with her tears and drying them with her hair. This woman is often believed to be a sex worker, though the text does not say this. That interpretation comes from the comment of the Pharisee: "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). This story has sexual overtones with the woman washing and anointing Jesus' feet and then drying them with her hair. Many people understand the combination of the above factors as meaning that her sins were of a sexual nature, though that is not the only possibility.

The Real Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene, who is first introduced in Luke's gospel in chapter 8, is distinct from the above Marys. There, the author specifies that traveling with Jesus, among other women, is "Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8:2). It is conceivable that Mary is the woman in Luke 7, but even if she is, her status as a sex worker is not scriptural.

If we read only the passages that specifically name Mary Magdalene, we arrive at a simpler picture than we might imagine from the way people talk about her.

Matthew first mentions her at Jesus' crucifixion, where she watches from a distance with two other women (one of whom is, of course, also named Mary). Here the gospel mentions that "they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him" (Matt 27:55). That they had provided for him is an interesting detail we will take up in the next section. Her other appearance in Matthew is at Jesus' empty tomb, when an angel sends her "and the other Mary" to tell the disciples the good news. Jesus meets them on the road before sending them to continue their mission (Matt 28:1-10).

Mark has the exact same references as Matthew, with one difference: Jesus does not meet them on the road; the two Marys run from the tomb, "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8). These are the last words of what is believed to be the original ending of Mark's gospel.

Luke first names Mary in a list of women "who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities" and who may have been financial supporters of Jesus' ministry (Luke 8:1-3). In this list, Luke specifies that Mary is the one "from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8:2). This is the only biblical reference that explicitly associates the demonic with Mary's name. Like Matthew and Mark, Luke lists her among the women who arrive at Jesus' tomb only to find it empty and become charged with telling the apostles (Luke 24:1-11).

And finally, in John, we see a portrait of Mary Magdalene more like the ones we find in Matthew and Mark. She is at the cross for Jesus' crucifixion and the first at the tomb after his resurrection. In John, Jesus appears to Mary in a more detailed scene than in Matthew; they have an entire conversation (John 20:11-18). Jesus famously, and enigmatically, says to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17) then instructs her, as in Matthew, to go share the good news.

The gospels seem to agree that Mary:

1. was one of the people who supported Jesus' ministry financially
2. was at his crucifixion
3. was among the first to see him resurrected and was charged with sharing the good news.

None of them names her as a sex worker or even declares her sexually promiscuous.

"Prostitute"

In the Hebrew Bible, the word we usually see translated as harlot or prostitute is *zonah*. Dr. Vayntrub teaches us that "prostitute" narrows the meaning of the word. In reality, *zonah* is broader, meaning a woman who is acting outside of patriarchal control. It can refer to a sex worker, then, but it need not. The father has the right to control a woman's sexual life by brokering marriage. In his absence, a brother takes control. A woman who has taken control of her own sexual destiny could be considered a *zonah*, whether becoming a sex worker or refusing to marry the man her father chooses.

There is a similar narrowing of meaning from the Greek. The word usually translated as prostitute in the New Testament is *porne*, and the related act is *porneia*, usually translated as "fornication." But

fornication in English does not have the same implications as *porneia* had in Greek. Dr. Lin explains that *porneia* was a sexual act, almost always by a woman, that goes against social restrictions.

She again notes the double standard between the sexes in the Bible. On the one hand, a man who has sex with a woman who is unattached to another man (like a sex worker) is not considered to be committing adultery. But at the same time, a woman is considered to be committing adultery whenever she has sex outside of marriage.

Is Mary Magdalene a prostitute? Not according to the Bible. But is she a *porne*? By some definitions, she could be. She is traveling with a man to whom she is not married or related, which flies in the face of the social restrictions of her culture. And she seems to be able to support herself (and Jesus!) independent of a husband or father. In any case, she is certainly bucking convention.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org