

The much maligned Mary of Magdala

Mary Magdalene has been much maligned by church scholars across the centuries. To understand how this came about it is necessary to dig into their historical and scriptural sources.

Certainly, her name suggested to them that she came from Magdala, a large city on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee that was associated with the salt trade. Furthermore, during the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus she is depicted in the Gospels as watching the proceedings and waiting near the tomb to attend to the body, (*Matthew 27:56-61, John 19:25*), and as the first witness to the Resurrection (*John 20:11-18*). Contrary to subsequent interpretation and reflected in popular belief, there is no evidence from the Gospels that Mary was a prostitute or that she was the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, (*Luke 7:36-38, John 11:1-2*).

An interesting insight into this misinterpretation is evident in John Donne's witty sonnet to the Lady Magdalen Herbert, mother of the Anglican divine George Herbert, on Mary Magdalene's feast day on 22nd July 1607, when he wrote:

*Her of your name, whose fair inheritance
Bethina was, and jointure Magdalo:
An active faith so highly did advance,
That she once knew, more than the Church did know,
The Resurrection; so much good there is
Deliver'd of her, that some Fathers be
Loth to believe one Woman could do this;
But, think these Magdalens were two or three.*

So then, what was it that led the early Church Fathers to confuse Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and the unnamed repentant prostitute in Luke's Gospel who, out of love and remorse, wiped Christ's feet with her hair? Furthermore, what led them to the conclusion that Mary Magdalene was a redeemed whore, embodying the Church's ideas about women, flesh and sin? For example, she became the patron of all sinners in the Middle Ages. In truth, we know very little about Mary Magdalene. Her prominent image through art is of a beautiful woman with long golden hair, weeping for her sins, the very incarnation of the age-old equation between feminine beauty, sexuality and sin.

In the third century, Hippolytus of Rome linked Mary Magdalene with Eve and designated her 'apostle to the apostles' but it was not until the fourth century that the misinterpretation of the three women came under close scrutiny. It was Ambrose who voiced the question. 'Were there Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and Mary Magdalen, or more people?' Augustine of Hippo offered a reply to this question. Although he argued that Luke's sinner could have been Mary of Bethany, who anointed Christ on two occasions, we know from Augustine's sermon on John 20 that he clearly had his doubts about Mary Magdalene's direct association with Luke's sinner. For example, in his work *Harmony of the Gospels* he argued that Mary Magdalene was more ardent in her love than these other women who had administered to the Lord. This would explain why the Gospel of John mentioned her alone and left the others unnamed. Augustine also sustained the link first made by Hippolytus between Mary and Eve. Mary Magdalene's arrival at the tomb before the apostles was prefigured by Eve's role as protagonist in the Fall, resulting in her being the first to lose her relationship with God, while Mary Magdalene was the first to find the risen Christ. However, I can find no

evidence to suggest that Augustine united Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany or with Luke's sinner.

Indeed, there was no fixed ecclesial tradition concerning the unity or plurality of the three women up to the sixth century. Some scholars had identified Mary Magdalene with Luke's sinner, others with Mary of Bethany, still others identified the latter two with each other, but not with Mary Magdalene and, as we have seen, Ambrose and Augustine were clearly undecided. Gregory the Great, however, wrote a sermon on Luke's text in the sixth century and submitted an interpretation of the identity of Mary Magdalene that was to find acceptance in the Church for nearly fourteen hundred years. In effect, he offered Mary as an



Mary Magdalene, by Raphael

example of conversion to the people of Rome who were beset with famine, plague and war, calling each individual to seek redemption from their sins. This resulted in Mary Magdalene being assimilated into the liturgies of Holy Week and Gregory's formulation of the composite Magdalene thus passed into homiletic literature up to and during the Middle Ages.

The transformation of Mary Magdalene was thus complete. From the Gospel figure, with her active role in the proclamation of the Gospel and as the 'apostle to the apostles', she became the redeemed whore and henceforth Christianity's model of repentance. In truth, she became a manageable, controllable figure and an effective weapon and instrument of propaganda against her own sex. In effect, Gregory's untenable exegesis on the identification of the three women served the Church's preoccupation with sexuality and equality. As a model of conversion and repentance, Mary Magdalene became absorbed into the ancient biblical imagery of sin as personified in the symbolism of the Old Testament harlots such as Gomer, the unfaithful wife of Hosea. In terms of the New Testament, she became representative of the pagan and Gentile world converted to the Christian faith. As a moral paradigm she represented all sinners whose repentance led to unity with God. The argument went much deeper than this though because whilst the image of biblical harlotry is allegorical of the people's unfaithfulness to Yahweh, Mary Magdalene's assumed fornication represented the second Eve. Here we come to the nub of what the Church feared and abhorred most, that which is incarnate in the flesh of the woman, her sexuality. Indeed, Mary was still being maligned as late as 1989 during the ecclesiastical argument in both the USA and UK caused by the election in the USA of the first female bishop. For example, a letter to *The Times* read, 'The election of the Revd Barbara Harris to the episcopate is very shocking, almost as shocking as the admission of Mary Magdalene to the inner circle of Christ's disciples'.

There is no evidence to support Mary Magdalene as the reformed prostitute of the Church. Indeed, if the Gospel texts are read through twenty first century eyes then she stands out as a strong woman in a patriarchal culture. Certainly she was a full active member of the revolutionary community created by Jesus who afforded equality for men and women alike. Instead of maligning her we should celebrate her as the unique person that Jesus valued and in whom the life and power of God flowed with the same degree of intensity as it did in Peter, James and John.

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