

MARY MAGDALENE
ALL WE KNOW



BY RANDALL L. ADKISSON



Right: On the Sea of Galilee, Magdala was the hometown of Mary Magdalene. Not much exists today except a couple of lone structures and the footprint ruins of an old house just inside the concrete wall.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/LOUISE KOHL SMITH (33/26/16)

ALL WE KNOW? In fact, biblical scholars know little about Mary from Magdala. She had a prominent place at the foot of the cross. She had seven demons cast from her. She was a disciple of Christ who ministered from her purse to the needs of her Savior.

Certainly, the lack of information recorded about her rather than discoverable evidence has contributed to varied and popular portrayals of Mary from at least the second century. From the heretical *Gospel of Mary*, written in the century after her death, to the modern best seller *The Da Vinci Code*, others have used her name to propound fictional stories and heretical theology.

The Biblical Survey

Only 12 verses in the Bible specifically mention Mary Magdalene. Of these, 11 verses divided among all 4 Gospels speak of her presence during the Passion and Easter events. One other mention is in Luke's Gospel. Therefore, with the scenes of Easter taken as one, in only two specific stories does Mary play a named role in the Gospel accounts. No other part of the New Testament mentions her.

Matthew's only description of Mary is at Jesus' death and resurrection. As a matter of description,

Matthew reported her to be one of the women who had followed Jesus from the time of His Galilean ministry and had, along with other women, served or ministered to Him. The Greek word Matthew used for "ministered," *diakonousai*, means to give practical service (Matt. 27:55).

In chapter 28, Mary was one of the first to experience the empty tomb, the risen Lord, and the call to announce the good news of His resurrection. Perhaps her short introduction yet prominent position in the scenes assumes that Mary is known to the first readers of the Gospel.

Mark also mentioned Mary only at the crucifixion and resurrection. Informatively, he mentioned the presence of many women who followed and ministered to Jesus (15:40-41). Mark's verb tense in 15:41 (the imperfect tense) for both "follow" and "serve" indicates an ongoing relationship. Mark's readers would have understood that these women were consistently part of Jesus's entourage.

Of the Gospels, only Luke introduces Mary before the crucifixion. Using similar words and grammar as Matthew and Mark, Luke indicates that Mary was one of many women who traveled with and gave practical service to Jesus during His Galilean ministry. Luke adds that these women were financial contributors

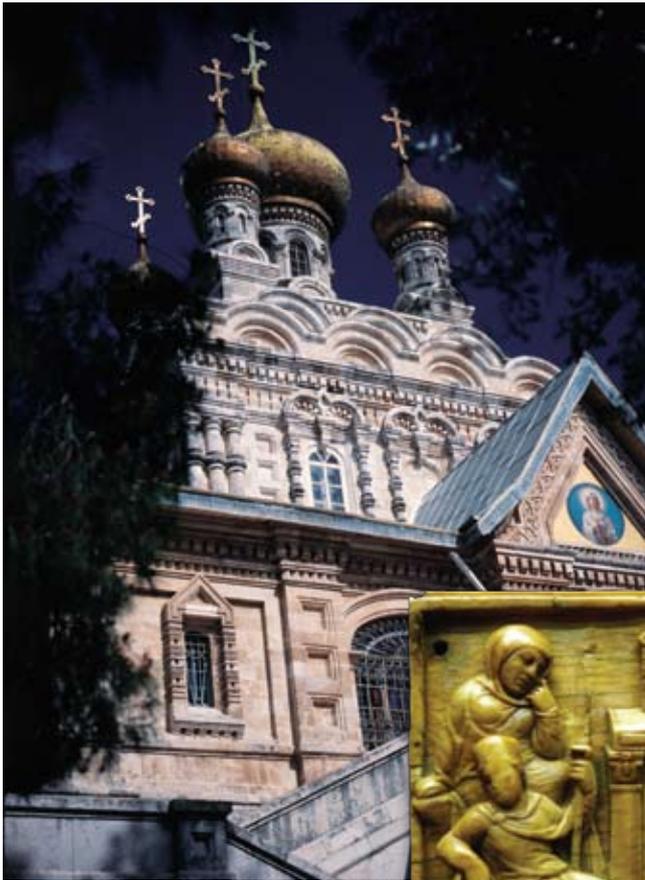
to the itinerant ministry of Christ and His disciples.

Without supplying curious details, Luke also mentions that Jesus had delivered many of these women from illness and demonic oppression. Indeed, He had delivered Mary from the torment of seven demons (Luke 8:2).¹

Luke reported the presence of the Galilean women at the cross, but does so without identifying any by name. Only at the empty tomb did he specifically identify Mary. Even then he mentioned the names of the women only in conclusion and as an aside to the episode.

John's Gospel often relates different episodes than the Synoptics,² but is consistent with them in including Mary Magdalene's story only as it relates to the cross and resurrection. She receives scant mention at the foot of the cross as one of the few disciples who remained to the end.

Yet of the Gospels, John pictures with the greatest detail Jesus's first encounters after the resurrection—and Mary plays the prominent role (John 20:1-18). She was the first to arrive at the empty tomb (v. 1). In stunned disbelief, she told Peter of the stolen body (v. 2). Mary was first to encounter the heralding angels (vv. 11-13). Mary was the first to encounter the risen Lord, coming to full belief



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(vv. 14-16). Finally, Mary was the first disciple commissioned to go and tell (vv. 17-18).

Who and What She Is Not

In the commercially popular Dan Brown books, Mary Magdalene takes on a heretical and historically untenable role as the wife of Jesus. But this modern author is not the only one, inside or outside the church, to ascribe to Mary positions or attributes unwarranted by the evidence.

She was a disciple of Jesus in the broad sense of the term, not an apostle. She was devoted to Him, as were many, but not His wife. She was demon possessed, but not a woman of ill repute. She is a source of inspiration to many, but not a writer of inspired Scripture.³

The name Mary is common in the Bible and therefore subject to confusion. At least three Marys were

Left: One of the dominant structures on the Mount of Olives is the Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene, built in 1885 by Tsar Alexander III in memory of his mother.

Below: Dating to early in the 5th cent., one side of an ivory box with scenes depicting Christ's Passion. In this scene, two Marys and two sleeping soldiers are around the empty sepulcher.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (31/26/22)

present at the cross.⁴ Add to these three Mary the sister of Lazarus and confusion is understandable. Thus Magdalene was added to Mary's name precisely to limit confusion. She is distinct and so designated.

Mary is sometimes identified as a prostitute because her introduction at Luke 8:2 immediately follows the story in Luke 7 of the prostitute who interrupts a Pharisee's dinner party, washing Jesus' feet with her hair (7:36-50). Only conjecture identifies her with Mary, who is named along with others at the beginning of the next episode. Demon possession in the Bible was not associated with prostitution, instead possession usually accompanied physical ailments and mental instability.

Because the prostitute anointed Jesus, she and the Magdalene are sometimes confused with Mary of Bethany, who later also anointed Jesus with perfume (John 12:1-8; Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9). But the repentant prostitute was left unnamed—and the three were clearly distinct persons related only by an interpreter's circular reasoning.

Other Information

Mary was certainly a disciple of Jesus and as such she certifies the munificent attitude that Jesus held toward women, an attitude not mirrored in first-century Jewish life. God favored Mary in the events of the resurrection and in the recounting of them.

Designated as the "Magdalene," she hailed from the city of Magdala, an important crossroads on the western Galilean coast. The city name may arise from the watch-towers by which the area was known. Her city prosperous with industries of fishing, shipbuilding, and dye, Mary is reminiscent of Lydia, the successful business women of Acts 16. Perhaps like her, Mary was a successful lady of industry and as such was able to give generously to Jesus's ministry. Beyond such supposition, we know little of Mary. **B**

1. Perhaps Luke 11:24-28 amplifies the severity of Mary's oppression. We can easily imagine her as the woman who bursts forth in exaltation.

2. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often designated the Synoptic Gospels, "Synoptic" denoting a common view.

3. "The Gospel of Mary" is a heretical writing of the second century that redefines sin and gives Mary a place of prominence among the apostles. See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Apocryphal Gospels" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1979), 186.

4. Mary the mother of Jesus; Mary Magdalene; Mary the mother of James and Joseph.

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