

# Pastor or Prostitute?

## The Battle over Mary Magdalene

By Kendra Haloviak

Recently Mary Magdalene has been the subject of various works in popular culture. Following the success of Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, a *Los Angeles Times* best-seller, other works have come to the forefront, including a best-selling novel by historian Margaret George, *Mary Called Magdalene*, and a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year by Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*.

Last summer, I was astonished to see an entire display at Barnes and Noble dedicated to studies about this character from the time of Jesus. Most suggested that in the fight for control, second-century male leaders of the Christian movement turned her life of pious leadership into scandal, depicting Mary as the repentant sinner rather than as an equal in apostolic witness and ministry. Some of the works on display made Mary the goddess of Christianity, the holder of secret information, the founder of a type of Christianity forced underground.

Then I watched a piece that "60 Minutes" did on the laundries in Ireland set up for wayward girls and unmarried mothers. The film *The Magdalene Sisters* depicts this part of Christian history. Mary the sexual

deviant who repents of her many sins is a model for these young women as they experience the punishment for their sins—exploitation and abuse—while forced into the hard manual labor of the laundries.

The A & E (Arts and Entertainment) cable station presented an hour-long discussion of Mary of Magdala, called "The Hidden Apostle" that considered the controversy her life continues to cause. Saint or Sinner? Model of leadership or model of submissiveness? Pastor or prostitute?

Millions of people are reading these books about Mary and Jesus and thinking about these stories. What do we have to say on the subject? What does the battle over Mary Magdalene have to say about women in leadership.





## What Does the Bible Really Say About Mary Magdalene?

Most information about Mary comes from the cross-resurrection scenes at the conclusion of each Gospel. Mary Magdalene is only mentioned once in the Gospels prior to the cross-resurrection event (Luke 8). Nowhere is she called a prostitute. Luke 8:1–3 reads:

Soon afterwards he [Jesus] 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.

Some people assume Mary is the one in the chapter earlier, the “sinful woman from the city” who enters a meal scene at Simon's home and washes Jesus' feet with her tears. The woman there is the weeping repentant sinner, the woman asking for forgiveness for her sexual sins. However, there are no textual reasons for making this connection. Christian tradition, not Luke's way of telling the story, causes people to make this assumption.

Others collapse the Mary Magdalene character with that of Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. This is also unfair to her character. Mary Magdalene never anointed Jesus. She tried to anoint him on resurrection morning, but his body was gone!

Mary Magdalene is introduced into the narrative in a unique way for a woman. She is Mary Magdalene,

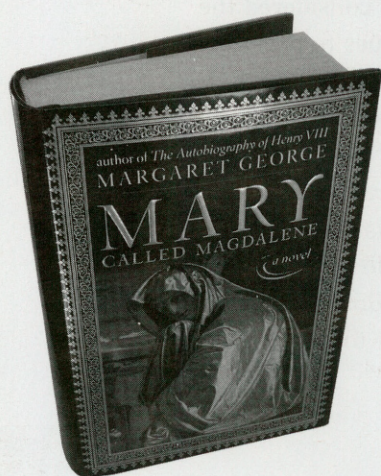
Mary of Magdala, described by her place of origin, much like a man would be, rather than by her father or husband or son or master. Was she from a wealthy home? Was she the widow of a well-to-do husband? We do not know. One thing is for certain: Mary of Magdala had some means that she was able to distribute as *she herself* saw fit—and she used it to support the ministry of Jesus.

This alone would not be entirely unusual, since frequently women supported local rabbis with food and domestic service. However, Mary of Magdala (and Luke tells us other women as well) *joined* the movement that was growing around Jesus. This would be considered scandalous by some in society. Not only did these women fund and support Jesus and his disciples, they themselves *became* disciples.

It would have been risky to join Jesus, to leave the only home she knew, yet she did join the movement. The Romans looked with suspicion upon anyone who gathered groups of people together. Wanting to eliminate any hint of insurrection quickly, the Romans would have eyed the growing movement around Jesus with skepticism. It was a risky movement. However, having received gifts of healing and wholeness, Mary and the other women became benefactors of that ministry, using their resources so that others could experience such wholeness.

It is also important to note that Luke 8:2–3 describes Mary of Magdala as one from whom seven demons had been cast out. This most likely refers to a physical or emotional illness or addiction of some sort (understood by people in her day as uncontrollable demons). Jesus had not only controlled them, he had cast them out of her! Perhaps this had happened during her first encounter with Jesus. Demon possession meant being unclean. So, whenever Jesus healed a person, casting out their demons, he restored them to a state of holiness, purity. Most likely through this encounter with Jesus, Mary of Magdala came to believe that he was the Messiah.

This passage is not suggesting that Mary needed to be healed seven times, as I grew up thinking, any more than the demoniac in the tombs across the sea of Galilee had to be healed of his legion of demons two thousand times. Nor is demon possession ever tied with prostitution. Sexual promiscuity and demon possession were not automatically linked. Again, the male demoniac in the tombs definitely had problems, but we do not think of sexual immorality as one of them.



Demon possession, exorcism, and Mary's struggle between loyalty to Jesus and her daughter, husband, and extended family are central themes in *Mary Called Magdalene*, a book by historical and biographical novelist Margaret George.



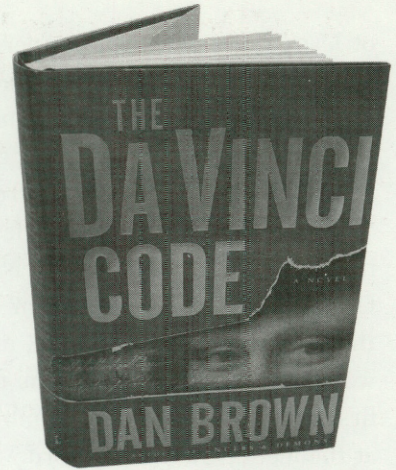
Mary had been healed of her demons and had chosen to follow Jesus as he ministered around Magdala, a fishing village on the edge of the sea of Galilee. Then she continued to follow him around the region of the Galilee, and later as he made his way toward Jerusalem.

She and other women healed embodied the message of faith and wealth so important to Luke's Gospel and to his sequel, the book of Acts, where Christians are to share their goods in common for the spreading of the gospel. It is also interesting that the "service" given by these women was the same work done by the deacons who served the early Christian communities in Acts (6:2). The sharing of the meal, work the women would have performed, became the symbol of the Kingdom of God. Luke suggests, why do Christians share meals? And their resources? And serve on another? Because that's what *Jesus'* ministry was about, a ministry embodied in Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many other women.

Thus, the early Christian churches we see in Acts found their basis in the ministry of women around Jesus in the Gospel accounts. Surrounding the tables of the Christian house churches was the new family of God, where the gifts of men and women were valued and affirmed, where the Holy Spirit came upon all people, and, as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza suggests, "Jesus called forth a discipleship of equals."<sup>1</sup>

All four Gospels mention Mary Magdalene as present

Mary Magdalene is the secret at the center of *The Da Vinci Code*, a whodunit that starts with murder in the Louvre and leads the fictitious modern French-American duo Sophie Neveu and Robert Langdon searching for clues throughout Western art history.



Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him" (16:1).

Given the climate and the condition of the body, and that this was several days after his death, this plan to go into the tomb/cave and care for Jesus underscores their intense devotion. They had cared for Jesus' body in life, and they would take care of it in death. Then, a young man sitting in the tomb told them that Jesus had been raised! The women were told to tell the other disciples this good news—this most amazing of good news. But, according to Mark's earliest ending, the women were afraid. They were full of terror and amazement, and they didn't tell anyone. Yet we know they told someone! Mark's Gospel itself is a witness to their telling this most amazing of experiences.

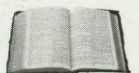
## The sharing of the meal, work the women would have performed, became the symbol of the Kingdom of God.

at the cross scene, and first to the tomb on Sunday morning. Mark, considered by most as the earliest of the four canonical Gospels, mentions her presence at the cross along with other women, all of whom had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him.

They were there at Jesus' cross at great personal risk, as Rome was known to extend a criminal's sentence to include family members and friends. The women were "looking on from a distance," listed with Mary Magdalene first. Mark continues: "These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem" (15:41). Mark mentions that two of the women saw where Jesus' body was laid in Joseph's tomb (15:47). Then, Sunday morning, "Mary Magdalene,

Matthew's Gospel also first mentions Mary Magdalene at the cross: "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" (27:55–56). The women stood witness at the cross, and they were the ones who provided and followed. They also witnessed where Jesus was buried (27:61). Matthew adds that the two Marys "were there, sitting opposite the tomb" (27:61).

Sunday morning the two Marys went to take care





of Jesus' body when they experienced an earthquake, and saw an angel, and the guards shaking with fear. The tomb was opened and empty! Matthew depicts these women as eyewitnesses to Jesus' death, burial, and his resurrection. They were told by the angel to "go quickly and tell his disciples, 'he has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him'" (28:7). Thrilled, they ran to the disciples, and, meeting Jesus along the way, they worshiped him. The two Marys were the first to witness the empty tomb and the first to worship at the feet of their risen Lord.

Luke, who had earlier (chapter 8) mentioned Mary Magdalene and the other women, describes a group of women from Galilee at the cross (23:49), but does not include their names until after the resurrection (24:10), when he says they were: "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women." Luke 23 concludes with the women seeing the body of

Jesus being laid in a tomb, preparing spices and ointments, and then resting on the Sabbath.

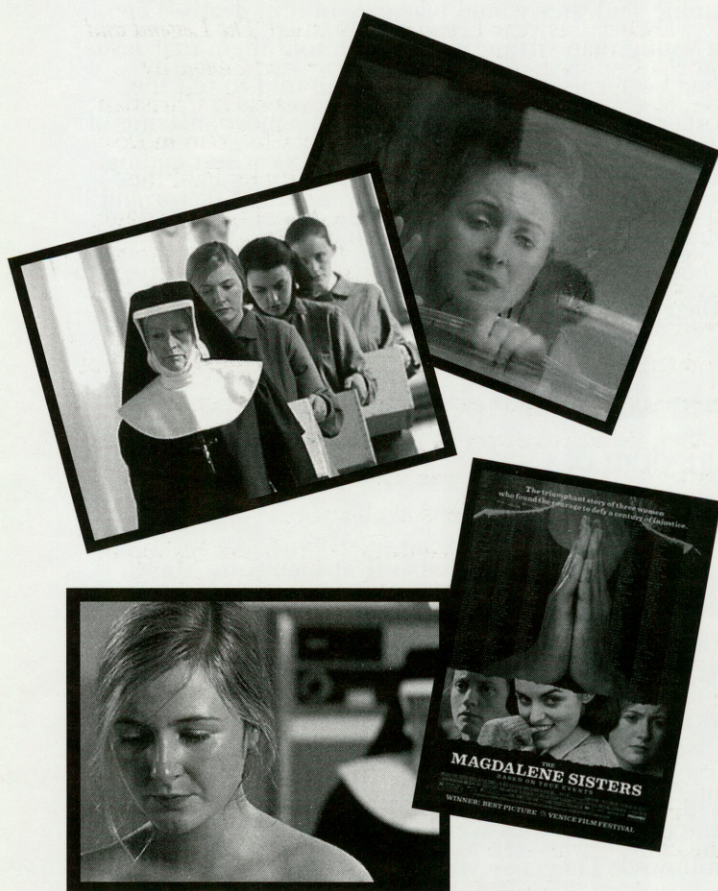
On Sunday morning, they were surprised to find an empty tomb, and two men in dazzling clothes. After being asked by the two to "remember" what Jesus had told them, the women "remembered his words" and told the other disciples. However, "these words seemed to them an idle tale [useless chatter], and they did not believe them" (24:11).

In the first century, the testimony of women was not considered reliable. Jewish historian Josephus declared: "from women let not evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex." In his commentary on Luke, William Lane states: "That the news had first been delivered by women was inconvenient and troublesome to the Church, for their testimony lacked value as evidence. The primitive community would not have invented this detail, which can be explained only on the ground that it was factual."<sup>2</sup> So in Luke's account, it wasn't until Jesus walked and talked with the two going to Emmaus and appeared to the larger group that the disciples as a community celebrated resurrection.

John's Gospel mentions Mary Magdalene's presence at the cross. She was there along with Jesus' mother, and his mother's sister, and Mary the wife of Clopas (19:25–26). Four women were near Jesus as four Roman soldiers divided and cast lots for his clothing. Had these women provided Jesus the very clothes the soldiers divided and gambled for?

The way John tells of Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene went alone, before daybreak, to the tomb. When she saw the stone rolled away, she ran to tell Peter and the disciple Jesus loved that "they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (20:2). While Peter and the other disciple went running to the tomb, then returned to their homes, Mary remained outside the tomb weeping. The word here suggests she was sobbing, wailing like the sadness described earlier before Lazarus's tomb (11:31).

After a conversation with two angels, Jesus himself was there asking her why she was weeping. She didn't recognize him until he spoke her name, "Mary!" Some commentators suggest that here is an embodiment of Jesus' earlier words about being the Good Shepherd and his sheep knowing his voice (10:3–4). Mary was part of the Good Shepherd's flock; she realized it was Jesus, she knew his voice, and then she responded "rabboni," or "my dear master."



Mary's ancient sexual history made her the namesake in Ireland for unwed mothers and the institutions created for them. The recent film *The Magdalene Sisters* tells the story of three modern-day Marys played by Dorothy Duffy, Nora-Jane Nonne and Anne Marie Duff.



## A Look at Christian Tradition(s)

In Eastern Christianity, Mary Magdalene is considered equal to the apostles, an “apostle of the apostles,” since she was the first to tell the good news of the empty tomb. After all, “apostle” means the one who has seen the Lord and been sent to witness to his resurrection. She is considered a leader and teacher. The fourteenth-century work *The Golden Legend* claims a tradition that, after fourteen years in Galilee, Mary Magdalene went to France, where she shared Christianity with the people in village after village.

However, in Western Christianity Mary is portrayed as the penitent sinner. In the sixth century (591), Pope Gregory declared that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the sinner in Luke 7 were all one person. In 1969, this position was reversed. But by the nineteenth century, Mary Magdalene’s mistaken identity was already considered the truth about this woman. Her name is synonymous with prostitution—thus the Magdalene Sisters as the name for the church-sponsored laundries in Ireland where unmarried mothers and wayward girls were placed by relatives.

The question quickly becomes, which Christian tradition?

Some of the books being read today suggest that Mary Magdalene was made into a prostitute to hide her major leadership role as an apostle. The first few centuries of Christianity were a lot messier than we sometimes think. Not only were the controversies over foods and circumcision threatening to divide Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians, other debates also took place. (For example, why is Mary, the first witness of the resurrection, left out of the resurrection account remembered by Paul in I Corinthians 15:5–8 and by Peter in Acts 13:16–31?)

One segment of Christianity, later labeled “Gnostic,” emphasized the ongoing revelatory work of the spirit to a select group of disciples. Many gospels were created by this group of Christians that were not included in the New Testament Scriptures. Two such gospels, the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Philip, suggest that Mary was Jesus’ closest disciple, one who received special truths directly from Jesus before his resurrection, and later through the Holy Spirit. According to these works, Peter was jealous of Mary and her prophetic authority.

Was there tension among the disciples, or later generations of disciples? Did they wrestle with whether or not women could be leaders of the Christian house churches?



The story of Christ cannot be told without Mary Magdalene. Monica Belluci portrayed her in *The Passion of the Christ* (above). At right she is comforted by Mary, the mother of Christ, played by Maia Morgenstern.



Earlier this year I read a book titled *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*, by Dennis MacDonald. The book explores early Christian traditions about a woman in the early Christian movement who was converted to Christianity by Paul the apostle. The story goes that on the eve of her marriage, Thecla heard Paul preach, converted, and desired to focus on spreading the message rather than take on household responsibilities. Twice she was condemned to death, and twice miraculously saved. She eventually joined Paul in preaching the gospel. Many Christian documents refer to her life and ministry as part of the earliest missionary movement. Her story was used to legitimate women taking leadership positions in churches.

During the second century, a Christian bishop in Asia Minor wrote a work called the *Acts of Paul* (some suggest it was initially called the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*), which included stories of Thecla’s ministry. The leader/author loved and admired Paul the apostle, so he gathered stories and legends from the oral traditions about Paul. In Asia Minor, where there was a high concentration of Christian women leaders, the church was seen as an alternative to the household.

Instead of women valued only in the role of wife and mother, young, single women and widows were deeply valued as they led out in the local house





churches. Instead of women taking care of their own children, they were able to spend time taking care of the church members. So, initially, the book *Acts of Paul* was greatly appreciated, reflecting the early Christian movement, its embrace of a new way of thinking about church and family, and leadership.

However, in later years the churches were cautioned against any social behavior that deviated from the norms of the Roman Empire. Social compliance, rather than innovations in ministry, became the emphasis. Tertullian, a Christian leader at the end of the second century, didn't appreciate Thecla's story

run offices and companies and hospital wards. Women who teach in classrooms and at home. Women who are principals and physical therapists and editors and writers. There are retired women who volunteer their time.

If we dissolve the diversity, if we make Mary a composite of all the women instead of letting them stand alone we limit the many witnesses and models of leadership in Scripture: wealthy widows, women preaching and teaching, mothers who joined the movement, healed women who helped others heal.

We need not be nervous about best-selling novels and blockbuster films about Mary Magdalene. These

## The Gospels contain multiple models of women.

being used to legitimate women teaching and baptizing, and fired the author of the book *Acts of Paul*, who had included her stories. It was during this time that the various roles for women in the Christian communities were reduced. Is it during this same time that Mary Magdalene, leader within the Christian movement, became Mary the Whore?

In her book, *The Newly Born Woman*, Catherine Clément states: "Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes, and it is that zone we must try to remember today."<sup>3</sup> Given the struggles within the Christian movement, especially the efforts to suppress the texts reflecting the leadership of women, it is a wonder that the Gospels maintain their witness of the "discipleship of equals" that surrounded Jesus. Mary Magdalene, the woman who was healed, the woman minister, the benefactor of the Jesus movement, witness to the resurrection, first apostle, apostle to the apostle.

## Women in the Gospel

The Gospels contain multiple models of women. Yes, there is the "sinful woman from the city" who anoints Jesus' feet. Her witness is an amazing witness, full of insight and assurance. Yes, there is the woman caught in adultery—a woman Jesus did not condemn, but invited into a new life. Yes, there are women who bring their sick children to Jesus. Such women give courage and hope to those of us fighting illness in our families. Yes, there is the woman who is embarrassed by her bleeding. She is a witness to healing, wholeness, restored purity.

But the Gospels also include the stories of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and other women who

are opportunities to reread the stories of Scripture with new questions, seeing new insights. Such questions help us get a better picture of the new community that formed around Jesus, and was described by him as the breaking in of the Kingdom of God!

The challenges of the books at Barnes and Noble invite us to go back to familiar stories with new questions and perspectives. What does the Bible really say about her? What might have been her role in the early Christian communities? What diverse roles were women and men embracing during this time of newness and insight?

Mary of Magdala, your witness lives on! Because women in leadership continue to change, choose, and commit themselves to the Kingdom of God!

## Notes and References

1. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ann. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 154.
2. Josephus, *Antiquities* 4:8:15/219, quoted in Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 228; William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 589.
3. Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), quoted in Fiorenza, *Memory of Her*, Introduction.

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