

WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Mary of Magdala



Image of page 51 of the *St. Albans Psalter*, depicting Mary of Magdala announcing the Resurrection to the Apostles. Produced in England, St. Albans Abbey, ca. 1119–23.

Mary of Magdala: Witness, Leader, Friend & Apostle to the Apostles

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Not a prostitute

Mary of Magdala is perhaps the most maligned and misunderstood figure in early Christianity.

In Christian art and hagiography, Mary has been romanticized, allegorized, and mythologized beyond recognition. Since the fourth century, she has been portrayed as a prostitute and public sinner who, after encountering Jesus, repented and spent the rest of her life in private prayer and penitence. Paintings, some little more than pious pornography, reinforce the mistaken belief that sexuality, especially female sexuality, is shameful, sinful, and worthy of repentance. Yet the actual biblical account of Mary of Magdala paints a far different portrait than that of the bare-breasted reformed harlot of Renaissance art.

First witness to the Resurrection

Nowhere in scripture is Mary of Magdala identified as a public sinner or a prostitute. Instead, scripture shows her as the primary witness to the most central events of Christian faith, named in exactly the same way (*Maria e Magdalena*) in each of four gospels written for diverse communities throughout the Mediterranean world. It was impossible to relate the story of the Resurrection without including “Mary, the one from Magdala.”

Luke 8,1-3 tells us that Mary traveled with Jesus in the Galilean discipleship and, with Joanna and Susanna, supported his mission from her own financial resources. In the synoptic gospels, Mary leads the group of women who witness Jesus’ death, burial, the empty tomb, and his Resurrection. The synoptics contrast Jesus’ abandonment by the male disciples with the faithful strength of the women disciples who, led by Mary, accompany him to his death. John’s gospel names Mary of Magdala as the first to discover the empty tomb and shows the Risen Christ sending her to announce the Good News of his Resurrection to the other disciples. This prompted early church Fathers to name her “the Apostle to the Apostles.”



St. Mary of Magdala Proclaiming the Resurrection. Margaret Beaudette, SC. 2014. Photo by J. Vericker. Used with Permission.

That the message of the Resurrection was first entrusted to women is regarded by scripture scholars as strong proof for the historicity of the Resurrection accounts. Had accounts of Jesus' Resurrection been fabricated, women would never have been chosen as witnesses, since Jewish law did not acknowledge the testimony of women.

Early non-canonical Christian writings show faith communities growing up around Mary's ministry, where she is portrayed as understanding Jesus' message better than did Peter and the male disciples. Scholars tell us that these writings are not about the historical persons Mary and Peter but instead reflect tensions over women's roles in the early church. Prominent leaders such as Mary and Peter were evoked to justify opposing points of view. What is not disputed is the recognition of Mary of Magdala as an important woman leader in earliest Christianity.

What Happened?

Why are contemporary Christians uninformed about Mary's faithful discipleship and prominent leadership role in the infant church? One

explanation is a common misreading of Luke's gospel which tells us that "seven demons had gone out of her." (Luke 8,1-3) To first century ears, this meant only that Mary had been cured of serious illness, not that she was sinful. According to biblical scholars such as Sr. Mary Thompson, illness was commonly attributed to the work of evil spirits, although not necessarily associated with sinfulness. The number seven symbolized that her illness was either chronic or very severe.

Women Leaders Suppressed

In 312, when Constantine made Christianity the religion of the empire, the Christian community was caught in a cultural conflict as it moved from worship in house churches where women's leadership was accepted, to worship in public places where women's leadership violated Roman social codes of honor and shame. In the fourth century, male church leaders at the Council of Laodicea suppressed women leaders because of the belief that women were created subordinate to men. During this same time period, we see the memory of Mary of Magdala changing from that of a strong female disciple

and proclaimer of the Resurrection to a repentant prostitute and public sinner. Scholars such as Dr. Jane Schaberg believe this was done deliberately to discourage female leadership in the church. As knowledge of Jesus' many women disciples faded from historical memory, their stories merged and blurred. The tender anointing of Mary of Bethany prior to Jesus' passion was linked to the woman "known to be a sinner" whose tears washed and anointed Jesus' feet at Simon's house. The anointing texts combined all of these women into one generic public sinner, "Magdalen." Misidentification of Mary as reformed public sinner achieved official standing with a powerful homily by Pope Gregory the Great (540-604).

Henceforth, Mary of Magdala became known in the west, not as the strong woman leader who accompanied Jesus through a tortuous death, first witnessed his Resurrection, and proclaimed the Risen Savior to the early church, but as a wanton woman in need of repentance and a life of hidden (and hopefully silent) penitence. Interestingly, the eastern church never identified her as a prostitute, but honored her throughout history as "the Apostle to the Apostles."

Prominent Female Leader, Not Jesus' Wife

The 2002 publication of *The Da Vinci Code* ignited widespread controversy about the true role of Mary of Magdala. Unfortunately, Dan Brown's book, while an engaging fictional narrative, has done a disservice to the historical Mary of Magdala and other early women church leaders. Though *The Da Vinci Code* conveys a beautiful ideal of the essential unity of male and female, it is ultimately subversive to women's full and equal leadership in the church because it focuses on the fiction of Mary's marital status rather than the fact of her leadership in proclaiming Jesus' Resurrection.

There is no historical or biblical data to support speculation that Mary of Magdala was married to Jesus. The contention that ancient writers didn't mention their marriage and offspring for fear of

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For copies of a liturgical celebration, visit the FutureChurch website:
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Jewish persecution doesn't hold up because John's gospel and most of the apocryphal literature were written after the fall of Jerusalem, when there would have been nothing to fear from Jewish authorities. If Mary of Magdala were Jesus' wife and the mother of his child, it is highly unlikely that these texts would have omitted these important facts, especially since she is prominently portrayed in both as the primary witness to the Resurrection and a female leader who, in many ways, understood Jesus' mission better than did the male disciples.

If Jesus were married, it wasn't to Mary of Magdala, because then she would have been known as "Mary the wife of Jesus," not Mary of Magdala. Literary and social conventions

in antiquity dictated that if women were mentioned (a very rare occurrence) they were nearly always named by their relationship to the patriarchal household, for example: "Joanna the wife of Herod's steward Chusa" (Luke 8,1-3). Atypically, Mary of Magdala was named according to the town she was from, not by her relationship to a man. Biblical scholars believe this indicates that she was probably a wealthy independent woman not bound to the patriarchal household.

Contemporary scholarship has rightfully restored our understanding of Mary of Magdala as an important early Christian leader. Now she becomes the same inspiring role model for twenty-first century disciples that she was for first century Christians.

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