

MARY MAGDALENE

“This elusive figure is the most famous of Jesus’ women disciples and the one who has been most misinterpreted in Christian history” (Meyers 120). Another author has written, “The whole history of western civilization is epitomized in the cult of Mary Magdalene” (Carroll 108). Mary is the only one of the women identified by her place of birth. Her hometown was probably Magdala (Aramaic) or Migdal (Hebrew), known in Greek as Taricheae (“salted fish”) because that was the major industry in the town. Magdala was located on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee, about three miles north of Tiberias.

The Gospels mention Mary Magdalene by name 14 times. Six times she is mentioned alone in reference to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. She is the common element in all the Gospel accounts of the events surrounding the resurrection.

In the Jewish *Talmud*, the city of Magdala is mentioned as a city with an unsavory reputation. Harlotry was practiced there. The city was destroyed in 75 C.E. because of its infamy and the licentious behavior of its inhabitants (Haskins 15). So, from this tradition and from the fact that Mary Magdalene is named in Luke

(“out of whom Jesus cast out seven devils”), she has been identified as a prostitute (Lockyer 100). Church tradition for nearly two thousand years has perpetuated the image of someone with long, beautiful hair who weeps for her sins, while sitting at the feet of Jesus. In 591 C.E. Pope Gregory the Great (540-604 C.E.) was the first to declare that Mary Magdalene, the Mary of Bethany, and the sinner in Luke were the same woman (Haskins 16). The four Gospels do not support this image of Mary Magdalene as a sinner nor as the other two women mentioned. Yet this was held by the Roman Catholic Church until 1969 when it officially repealed Pope Gregory’s labeling of Mary as a prostitute.

Luke 8, verse 2, tells us: “And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils.” The phrase, “seven devils” indicates an extraordinary situation (Witherington 111). The Gospel record does not go into any detail about her affliction. Mary Baker Eddy opens her chapter, “Christian Science Practice,” with the story in the seventh chapter of Luke’s Gospel when Jesus is the guest of Simon the Pharisee. She writes that “this woman (Mary Magdalene, as she has since been called)

approached Jesus” (S&H 362:11).

The Gospels do support the conclusion that Mary Magdalene became an important contributor to Jesus’ ministry – not only financially, but also in her willingness to leave all and follow the Master. Church tradition places Mary Magdalene among the women at the cross and present at the burial. Early on resurrection morn, Mark and Luke have Mary leading the other women to the tomb to bring burial spices which they had prepared. The Gospel of John has only Mary coming early to the tomb. If John’s version is the more accurate one, think of the moral courage it would have taken to go there by herself!

John 20, verse 1, states: “The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.”

Mary sees that the stone has been rolled away. Instead of looking into the sepulcher at this point, she urgently runs to tell Peter and John that Jesus’ tomb is empty. The two male disciples run back to the tomb together (verse 4). John looks in, sees the linen clothes neatly folded, but somehow feels the reverence for the place and stops short of going further into the tomb. Peter, however, does not hesitate. He rushes past John and goes into the area where the body would have been. He, too, sees the linen clothes lying and the napkin wrapped separately. Everything is in order, but the tomb is empty. John follows Peter. Then we read what the beloved disciple’s reaction is in John 20, verse 8: “... he saw, and believed.” However, Peter and John do not see angels, so they return home.

Mary stays after the male disciples leave the garden. Verse 11 tells us that she weeps as she stoops down to look into the sepulcher. John is the only Gospel which gives us this detail. What does she see? “... two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain” (verse 12). She is asked twice (first by the angels, next by Jesus), “Woman, why weepest thou?” She answers, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him” (John 20:13).

She turns herself back and sees Jesus standing, but she does not know that it is the Master. John 20:15 – Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener and volunteers to take the body if the gardener will tell her where it is. Jesus then addresses her: “Mary” (verse 16). “A highlight of the [narrative] is the tone with which the name of Mary comes from Jesus’ lips, to awaken her faith” (Massey 29). Then she “turned herself” towards the sound of Jesus’ voice. One word, “Mary,”

turns defeat and death into the recognition of Jesus' victory over death and the grave. Her spoken reaction, "Rabboni," that is to say, "Master," is a term of great respect. But maybe it is more than that. Doesn't the word, "master," indicate Jesus has mastered the last enemy called "death?"

Mary attempts to embrace him or seize his feet (as in Matt. 28:9). John 20, verse 17, recounts Jesus' response: "Touch me not." The Greek text (*me mou aptou*) implies, "Do not hold on to me," or "cling to, embrace me." We might say, "Don't hold me back" (Ridderbos 637-638).

In John 20:17 we read: "... go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." Now womanhood is given the assignment to bear witness not only to the resurrection but to the ascension as well. Women in Jesus' day were not allowed to bear witness in a court of law. They were not taught the Torah. They were considered chattel and subordinate to men. Jesus, however, gives this woman the honor and privilege of reporting to the male disciples his victory over death and the grave. Sources:

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