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The Truth about Mary Magdalene

By Tal Davis

In a recent article, we discussed Mary the mother of Jesus. We especially examined how the Roman Catholic Church has exalted her in their theological system to an extent far beyond what the Scriptures teach. The Catholic church says she had an "Immaculate Conception" and did not suffer death (see the article here: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2023/11/do-you-believe-in-the-immaculate-conception-tal-davis/>). In any case, we certainly acknowledge that Mary was very important in the life of Jesus.

In this article we are going to look at another Mary who was also significant in Jesus' life and in the history of the Christian movement. This Mary, unlike the mother of Jesus, has not been unduly exalted, but perhaps been unfairly denigrated as to her personal character and morality in the minds of many people over the centuries. So who is this other Mary? She is Mary Magdalene.

In this piece we will detail what we know about Mary Magdalene. Perhaps more importantly, we will look at what we don't know about her and what some have said, and many believe, about her that cannot be substantiated.

First, we know Mary was apparently from the city of Magdala, thus her designation as a Magdalene. Magdala means "Tower" and was a center of the fishing trade located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was on a highway between Tiberias in the south and Capernaum in the north. It sat about fifteen miles northeast of Nazareth on a route Jesus traveled often back and forth to the Sea of Galilee.

Second, we are first introduced to Mary Magdalene in Luke 8 as one of a group of women who were traveling from town to town with Jesus and the disciples.

1 Afterward he was traveling from one town and village to another, preaching and telling the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary, called Magdalene (seven demons had come out of her); 3 Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward; Susanna; and many others who were supporting them from their possessions. (Luke 8:1-3 CSB)

Luke indicates that the women had been healed of various evil spirits and illnesses (presumably by Jesus). He lists three of them by name: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, and Susanna. He parenthetically adds that Mary had been delivered from seven demons (Mark 16:9 also mentions that fact). Luke also mentions that the women were apparently supporting Jesus and the disciples somewhat financially.

At this point many people make a serious mistake concerning who Mary Magdalene was and what she was like. The problem springs from an account given in Luke 7:36-50.

36 Then one of the Pharisees invited him (Jesus) to eat with him. He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 And a woman in the town who was a sinner found out that Jesus was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house. She brought an alabaster jar of perfume 38 and stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to wash his feet with her tears.

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She wiped his feet with her hair, kissing them and anointing them with the perfume. 39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "This man, if he were a prophet, would know who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him-she's a sinner!" 40 Jesus replied to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." He said, "Say it, teacher." 41 "A creditor had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Since they could not pay it back, he graciously forgave them both. So, which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one he forgave more." "You have judged correctly," he told him. 44 Turning to the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she, with her tears, has washed my feet and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in. 46 You didn't anoint my head with olive oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume. 47 Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that's why she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 Those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50 CSB)

In this account a Jesus is enjoying a meal with a group of Pharisees when a "sinful woman" (likely a prostitute) from the town comes into the house. She began to anoint Jesus' feet with perfume and to wash His feet. The self-righteous Pharisees, of course, are incensed that Jesus would allow such an impure woman even to touch Him. Jesus then tells them the story of

the two forgiven debtors and tells the woman her sins are forgiven. There are several important points to notice about this account. One is that the woman's name is not mentioned. Perhaps Luke felt the need to maintain her privacy, or he did not know it. Second, Luke does not say Jesus exorcized any demons from her or healed her of a disease. Third, she is never mentioned again. We can only assume she went on her way and lived a righteous life from that time forward.

Unfortunately, over the centuries, perhaps because of the closeness of the two accounts of Luke 7:36-50 and 8:1-3, some people, including Pope Gregory (AD 590-604), have identified the sinful woman with Mary Magdalene. Thus, many people still assume Mary Magdalene was a prostitute before she met Jesus. This identification is totally without justification. The events chronicled in Luke 7 and 8 are quite distinct in time and place. There is no indication that Mary was a prostitute or an immoral woman, only that she had been healed of demonization.

Others also have tried to identify Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Some popular novel writers, and especially some Mormon theologians, have even tried to claim she was Jesus' wife. None of these can be Scripturally verified.

But this is not the end of the story with Mary Magdalene. She certainly had several key parts to play in Jesus' life.

First, according to Matthew's, Mark's, and John's Gospels, she was a witness of Jesus' crucifixion.

55 Many women who had followed Jesus from Galilee and looked after him were there, watching from a distance. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. (Matthew 27:55-56 CSB; see also Mark 15:40)

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321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail: info@marketfaith.org
Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)
Fax: 850-514-4571

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Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. (John 19:25 CSB)

Second, she witnessed Jesus' burial. She knew for sure that He was dead.

57 When it was evening, a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph came, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. 58 He approached Pilate and asked for Jesus's body. Then Pilate ordered that it be released. 59 So Joseph took the body, wrapped it in clean, fine linen, 60 and placed it in his new tomb, which he had cut into the rock. He left after rolling a great stone against the entrance of the tomb. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were seated there, facing the tomb. (Matthew 27:57-61 CSB; Mark 15:47)

Third, she was one of the women who first saw the empty tomb on the first day of the week.

1 After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb. 2 There was a violent earthquake, because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached the tomb. He rolled back the stone and was sitting on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. 4 The guards were so shaken by fear of him that they became like dead men. 5 The angel told the women, "Don't be afraid, because I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here. For he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there.' Listen, I have told you." (Matthew 28:1-7 CSB)

1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of

James, and Salome bought spices, so that they could go and anoint him. 2 Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they went to the tomb at sunrise. 3 They were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb for us?" 4 Looking up, they noticed that the stone-which was very large-had been rolled away. 5 When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side; they were alarmed. 6 "Don't be alarmed," he told them. "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they put him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there just as he told you.'" (Mark 16:1-7 CSB)

9 Returning from the tomb, they reported all these things to the Eleven and to all the rest. 10 Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them were telling the apostles these things. 11 But these words seemed like nonsense to them, and they did not believe the women. 12 Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. When he stooped to look in, he saw only the linen cloths. So he went away, amazed at what had happened. (Luke 24:9-12 CSB)

Finally, and most significant, Mary Magdalene was the first to see the resurrected Jesus!

11 But Mary stood outside the tomb, crying. As she was crying, she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 She saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus's body had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "Because they've taken away my Lord," she told them, "and I don't know where they've put him." 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing

there, but she did not know it was Jesus. 15 "Woman," Jesus said to her, "why are you crying? Who is it that you're seeking?" Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." Turning around, she said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" - which means "Teacher." 17 "Don't cling to me," Jesus told her, "since I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them what he had said to her. (John 20:11-18 CSB)

The fact that Jesus appeared first to her and the other women adds significant historical credence to the resurrection accounts in the Gospels. In those days women were not allowed to testify in court, but the Gospel writers, based on the testimonies of the Apostles, declared Mary's and the other women's testimonies as true and accurate.

So let's put to rest some of the myths surrounding Mary Magdalene. There is no indication in Scripture that she was a reformed immoral woman or prostitute. She was healed of seven demons. She was not the same as Mary of Bethany. She was not Jesus' wife. But she was a valuable historical witness to the most important event of all time, the resurrection of Christ. For that reason, we should be thankful for her and her testimony.

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