

'Who are you to reject her?'
Looking for the Historical Mary Magdalene.

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*'If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you to reject her?' Levi to Peter in The Gospel of Mary Magdalene.*<sup>1</sup>

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Mary Magdalene has been the interest of many an article, book and, more recently, film. In the homilies of Gregory the Great, the *apostola apostolorum* (apostle of the apostles),² inherits a brother and sister, a past as a sex-worker and is the inspiration for the contemplative life.³ This version of Mary Magdalene has persisted from Gregory the Great's homilies until 1969 where the Catholic church severed Mary Magdalene from Luke's unknown sinner and Mary of Bethany.⁴ But what does scripture and early Christian literature have to say about Mary Magdalene?

As many a scholar has lamented, the New Testament has precious little to say about Mary. In the gospels she suddenly appears at the crucifixion (with a brief introduction from Luke as a woman who was possessed) and remains through to Christ's resurrection. After delivering the Easter message, she promptly melts back into obscurity as quickly as she had appeared. There is no mention of her in Acts.

Ann Brock believes this absence to be something akin to an early church conspiracy to wrench her free of her place as a church leader.⁵ In her very own gospel, Peter is quick to dismiss Mary Magdalene's authority on account of her gender: 'Did he [Christ] really speak with Mary, a woman, without our knowing? Are we to listen to her? Did he favour her more than us?'⁶ Furthermore, Brock goes on to analyse the canonical gospels as evidence of this struggle for authority. The New Testament presents two first witnesses to Christ's resurrection: Mary Magdalene (John 20: 14-17) and Simon Peter (Luke 24:34).⁷ In whichever gospel Peter is presented as a bumbling fool who does not understand Christ, Mary Magdalene is presented as his opposite – we see this most clearly in John where Peter fails to comprehend Christ (John 13:6-9 serves as just one example) whereas Mary Magdalene is 'single-handedly responsible for sharing the resurrection news with the others.'⁸

This struggle for authority is more pronounced in the gnostic gospels. Brock writes that there are two camps within these non-canonical gospels and early church texts. There is a pro-Mary

¹ Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2003), 85.

² *Ibid.*, 60.

³ Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies* trans. David Hurst (Michigan: Cistercian Publications 1990), 268-79.

⁴ Michael Haag, *The Quest for Mary Magdalene: History & Legend* (London: Profile Books, 2016), ix.

⁵ Brock, *First Apostle*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

Magdalene camp (*Gospel of Mary Magdalene, Philip and Thomas*,⁹ and *The First Apocalypse of James*¹⁰) and the pro-Peter camp is shown in later translations and editions of those same early church texts.¹¹ Where Mary Magdalene is presented as a teacher, apostle, leader in one version of those gospels,¹² in other versions her prominent status is replaced, conceded or diminished.¹³ Brock says that it is no coincidence that where Mary Magdalene's role is reduced, Peter's is more prominent.¹⁴

Could it be that Mary Magdalene lost this war for church authority to Peter, and that is the reason for her obscurity? It is nearly impossible to tell two thousand years later. But there certainly seems enough evidence to make it a possibility. This possibility is toyed with in the international best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown.

There is yet more to be gleaned from the few mentions of Mary Magdalene in the New Testament. There is, first of all, her name: Magdalene. Part of what makes Mary Magdalene so fascinating is that her last name does not derive from 'belonging' to man by being either her husband or father.¹⁵

In the original manuscripts, she is not Mary Magdalene, but rather 'Mary called Magdalene, or 'the Magdalene Mary' or 'Mary the Magdalene.'¹⁶ This, suggests Michael Haas, implies that 'Magdalene' was a nickname. Just like Christ gave Simon the nickname Peter (*cephas*) or the brothers John and James 'sons of thunder (*Boanerges*), Haas believes Mary was given the nickname *Migdal* or:

'the watchtower, the lighthouse, the beacon; a powerful name, the woman who helped the Good Shepherd protect his flock; and also a beacon at night, an illuminator, a visionary,'¹⁷

Another theory is the Mary Magdalene got her name from her birthplace: Magdala.¹⁸ Magdala was mentioned in Matthew 15:39 where Christ performed the feeding of the four thousand. Magdala was said to be a bountiful, rich place when described by Josephus.¹⁹ The idea of Magdala being a prosperous place, as well being attached to Mary's name, may have fuelled the medieval belief that Mary Magdalene was a noble woman; ruler of Magdala.²⁰ However, if Mary Magdalene was to be associated with the positive aspects of Magdala she would also be associated with the negative. Magdala was destroyed in AD 75 for 'infamy and the licentious

⁹Ibid., 76.

¹⁰ Ibid., 85.

¹¹ Ibid., 129.

¹² Ibid., 141.

¹³ Ibid., 128-9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 141.

¹⁵ Esther de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1997), 30.

¹⁶ Haag, *Quest*, 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁸ De Boer, *Myth*, 21.

¹⁹Ibid., 24.

²⁰ Jacobus de Vorgaine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 375.

behaviour of its inhabitants,' which may have helped to 'colour' Mary Magdalene's already soiled reputation.²¹

How exactly the image of Mary Magdalene changed to the first apostle to the penitent prostitute is another essay. The biblical and early church texts themselves present Mary Magdalene as a diligent, pious, brave woman, who, perhaps, was in a position to lead the Church beside or even instead of Peter. This may seem like a scandalous idea, but this journal is called *The Heretic*.

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²¹ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 15.