

Mary Magdalene - Early Christian Leader
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Anyone looking for a first-century role model of Christian spirituality, courage, leadership and devotion to Jesus can find no one more fitting than Mary Magdalene. Her prominence among Jesus' disciples is registered in all four gospels as the first person to learn of Jesus' resurrection. Mary Magdalene is also given distinction among the disciples in several second-and third-century writings that were not included in the church's official canon, the canon being the writings that early church fathers considered dogmatically correct.

Mary is unique in the gospels as the only woman to be distinguished with a first name, followed by a toponym, or place name. Her name means, "Mary, the woman from Magdala." Magdala was a port on the Sea of Galilee, close to Capernaum, Jesus' base of operations, and near to Bethsaida, the home of Peter and Andrew.¹ When we recall that the name "Mary" appears often in the gospels, referring both to Jesus' mother and several other women named Mary, we recognize that Mary Magdalene was so important to the writers and their communities that she has the same identifying name in all four gospels. Her primacy is further highlighted when we consider that most of the women in the New Testament, with the notable exceptions of Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene, are not identified by name.

In Matthew's gospel, written probably in the 80's, we first meet Mary Magdalene observing the crucifixion from a distance with many other women who had followed Jesus in Galilee, including Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (27:55-6). After that, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary watch Joseph

of Arimathea place the body of Jesus in a rock-hewn tomb (27:61). After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week is dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to see the tomb. There is an earthquake, and an angel descends and rolls back the stone. The angel tells them not to be afraid, that Jesus is not there and has been raised. He invites them to see the place where Jesus lay and orders them to go quickly and tell the disciples about the resurrection and to proceed to Galilee, where they will see Jesus. With fear and great joy, they run to tell the disciples. On the way, Jesus greets them. They take hold of his feet and worship him. Jesus then repeats the angel's words by saying, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (28:1-10). According to the last five verses in Matthew (28:16-20), we know that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary followed instructions because Jesus is with his disciples in Galilee. In Matthew, the emphasis is on Mary Magdalene's role as the principal witness to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.² She watches the crucifixion and the burial and is invited by the angel "to see" where Jesus lay. Finally, she sees Jesus on her way to the other disciples.

In Luke, written probably in the 80's, we meet Mary during Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Luke tells us that Jesus was accompanied by the twelve as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna and many others who provided for them out of their resources (8:1-3). Mary's having had seven demons leave her and the possession of resources are uniquely Lukan details. In the Mediterranean world of the first century, most people believed that spirits, both good and bad, existed alongside the material world. Evil spirits caused illness and other

misfortunes. We are not told what illness Mary has been cured of, but there is a strong implication that she was a follower of Jesus because he had cured her and others.

In John's gospel, written probably in the 90's, Mary Magdalene first appears standing near the cross with Jesus' mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and the beloved disciple (19:25). In her second appearance, she has a dramatic encounter with Jesus near the empty tomb. When Mary visits the tomb by herself, she sees that the stone has been removed and, assuming that Jesus' body has been stolen, she runs to share this with Peter and the beloved disciple. The two men race to the tomb, see that it is empty and return home. Mary, distraught at the loss of Jesus' body stays behind, weeping. She sees two angels and explains that she is looking for her Lord. Unfazed by the angels, she turns, sees Jesus, thinks he is the gardener, and asks him where the body is. When Jesus says, "Mary," she responds, "My teacher." Jesus then says: "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary goes and announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord;" and she tells them what Jesus said (20:1-18). This statement makes her the first believer in the resurrection. In John's narrative, then, Mary Magdalene is THE WITNESS to the resurrection and THE ANNOUNCER of the ascension. Her statement, "I have seen the Lord," is an apostolic declaration. In 1 Corinthians 9:1, Paul asks, "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" If Paul is apostle to the gentiles, then certainly, Mary is apostle to both the twelve and other disciples of the Lord.

In summary, we have seen that Mary Magdalene witnesses the crucifixion, the burial and the empty tomb. In Matthew and John, she meets the risen Lord and is

entrusted with announcing the resurrection. Additionally, she is the leader of Jesus' female disciples. Her name is consistently listed first among the Galilean women, and hers is the only female name that is the same in the four gospels. This is very significant because the names of her companions differ in all the gospels.³ Therefore, in the canon, Mary Magdalene is credited with being a very important member of the early Christian community as both apostle and leader.

Mary's prominence in Jesus' community was recorded in some second and third-century texts that are not in the canon. In an early second-century text, *The Dialogue of the Savior*,⁴ the Savior converses about the present life and life after death with Mary Magdalene, Judas and Matthew. In this work, Mary hails her brothers, Judas and Matthew (131.25), and the Lord calls her "sister" (131.26). Mary speaks "as a woman who had understood completely" (139.53) what the Lord taught. In addition, the Lord answers a question from Mary with "you make clear the abundance of the revelation" (140.61). Further on, Mary says, "Everything established thus is seen." The Lord answers: "I have told you that it is the one who can see who reveals" (142.79-80). Therefore, in *The Dialogue of the Savior*, Jesus credits Mary with perception and revelation.

Another second-century text, entitled *Pistas Sophia* or *Faith Wisdom*, is an eleven-year, post-resurrection discourse on esoteric wisdom between Jesus and his disciples.⁵ After a long opening soliloquy by Jesus, Mary is the first disciple to ask permission to speak. Jesus responds with, "Mary, thou blessed one. . . whose heart is raised to the kingdom of heaven more than all thy brethren." Mary then goes on to interpret Jesus' prior teachings.⁶ Throughout this very long text, Mary takes the lead in

posing questions and offering interpretations. This angers Peter who complains to Jesus that Mary is dominating the conversation. Jesus rebukes Peter by saying that whoever understands his teaching should come forward and speak.⁷

Another work, the second-century *Gospel of Mary*,⁸ opens with a conversation about sin with Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Peter and other disciples. When Jesus charges them to preach the gospel and then leaves them, the disciples weep and express fear for their lives. Mary stands up and says, "Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for his grace will be entirely with you and will protect you" (9:14-19). Peter then asks her to share the special knowledge that Jesus gave only to her in a vision. Mary does so and is confronted by Peter and Andrew with fabricating the vision. After she refutes that charge, Levi supports Mary by saying, "If the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us" (10-18:15).

In conclusion, just as in the canon, the extra-canonical literature records Mary Magdalene as a disciple and, in fact, a leader of the disciples. She is an exceptionally quick study and understands Jesus' teachings far more than the others, both men and women. As such, she emerges as a wisdom figure, a Sophia who accompanied and pleased Jesus, very much like an early Christian replica of Lady Wisdom, who is the co-worker and delight of the Creator in the sixth-to-fifth-century BC Book of Proverbs. Mary Magdalene is the most outstanding and fascinating woman in early Christian literature. Her intelligence, courage, leadership and faith stand as inspirations to us in the 21st century.

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¹ Mary R. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala, Apostle and Leader* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), p. 27-8.

² Ibid., p. 43.

³ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴ James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), p. 244-55.

⁵ G.R.S. Mead (trans.), *Pistas Sophia* (London: John M. Watkins, 1963), p. xli.

⁶ Ibid., p. 20-2.

⁷ Ibid., p. 46-7.

⁸ Robinson, p. 523-7.