

Mary Magdalene: First Among Apostles

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“Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.” (Matt 26:10)

There are more debates about Mary Magdalene than any other New Testament woman, almost undoubtedly because she developed a close personal relationship with Jesus, which prompts salacious rumours and bizarre theories to flourish. A speculation long growing in popularity is that Mary Magdalene and Jesus married and bore children. It’s not taken seriously in academia, but the idea gained viral traction through the 2003 popular conspiracy novel *The DaVinci Code*,¹ which sold around 80 million copies. The book was fiction – the author made no secret of it – yet many took it as fact.

The Bible is definitive that Jesus did not father children, although few are aware of the proof.

*By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?
(Is 53:8)*

No man is cut off from the land of the living if he has sons and daughters living on after he has departed, and thus Isaiah definitively resolves the question of whether Jesus has a genealogy. He does not. Mary Magdalene is not mother to a neo-divine lineage. But she is far more pre-eminent than many Christian denominations notice, or permit.

¹ Dan Brown, “The Da Vinci Code,” 2003

Mary's Story

We can't learn anything about Mary Magdalene until we know exactly which stories belong to her, and which don't. This is a lengthy exercise, which we distil to a Bonus Material article. In conclusion we find that Mary Magdalene and Mary who is sister of Martha and Lazarus can, from biblical evidence, be confidently shown to be the same person. With that established, we are well placed to hear her story. It is as powerful as it is poignant.

Mary is from Bethany, sister to Martha and Lazarus. Bethany is a poor village on the outskirts of Jerusalem, whose name translates as "house of misery" and "house of poverty." Simon the leper lives there (Mt 26:6), which is logical: a leper was likely shunned from more opulent communities. We conclude Mary and her family were poor.

Luke reveals Mary was a "sinner" (Lk 7:37). The term is so generic we'll never be sure of the precise meaning but, given that it causes Simon the Pharisee to recoil at the idea of her touching Jesus (Lk 7:39), and opportunities for poor women in that society were extremely limited, it's reasonable to conclude, without being derogatory, that it refers to prostitution, as others conclude.²

Mary's prostitution provides a natural solution to the geographical conundrum of whether Mary hails from Bethany or Magdala. Prostitution requires anonymity; one can't practice it in one's home village. Mary needs to move from Bethany to another place, ideally a rich place with a transient population. Magdala is a rich port on the Galilean shore, renowned for both wealth and corruption,^{3,4} making it ideal, as others note.⁵ It's here that Mary makes money. That's how Mary of Bethany could be poor, and yet be the same person as Mary of Magdala, who was rich enough to support Jesus' ministry. In fact, Magdala is likely the place where Mary acquired the alabaster jar of precious ointment. Luke makes clear the ointment belongs to Bethany's Mary alone⁶ – it was not a family heirloom – the Mary who was dirt poor. This will offend some

² Simon Légasse, "Jésus et les prostituées," *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 1976, 7, 2, p145-150

³ Alfred Edersheim, "The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah," 1883, ch 22, i570

⁴ Susan Haskins, "Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor," 2005, p15

⁵ Grenville Kent, "Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the sinful woman of Luke 7: The same person?" *J. Asia Adv. Sem.* 2010, 13, 1, p22

⁶ Luke 7:37

sensibilities, for which I apologize, yet there is no more logical explanation than Mary's time in Magdala to explain how she acquired a vial of ointment which cost a year's wages.

The Hand of God is with Mary because Magdala is in Galilee, where Jesus is about to reveal the wonders of his ministry; and this is undoubtedly where Jesus first encountered Mary. Her life is transformed by meeting God's Son: changed irrevocably and forever.

Real transformation provokes action, and Mary mobilizes herself to form a cadre of similarly impassioned women to support Jesus: emotionally, spiritually, logistically and financially. As Jesus moves to Jerusalem to preach in his Father's chosen city, the women accompany him. This explains why, when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, he immediately finds accommodation arranged for him in Bethany.

And leaving them, [Jesus] went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there. (Mt 21:17)

This verse seems meaningless alone, so much so that it was mocked for its presumed irrelevance in *The Simpsons*.⁷ What value could there be in knowing Jesus left the Jerusalem synagogue and went to Bethany? The answer: it's another clue solving that Mary Magdalene is Mary of Bethany.⁸ When Jesus came to Jerusalem he immediately found accommodation in Bethany because it's Mary Magdalene's family home. She's organized this.

She That Has Ears To Hear

Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and *listens* to his teaching and *hears* it. It's a tragic indictment of humanity that she's unique. Consider the comparison between how Mary received Jesus' words and how the twelve apostles received them.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind

⁷ Matt Groening, "Homer the Heretic," in "The Simpsons," 1992, S4, E3

⁸ Beyond this, Mt 21:17 has great beauty due to the meaning of Bethany. It says, by paraphrase: "When Jesus had finished witnessing to the scribes and Pharisees, who wouldn't listen to him because they already thought they knew everything (v 15-16), he left the big city and its people, and went to the *house of the poor*, because that's where they embraced him and he made a home." It's the principle that the gospel is received preferentially by the poor, which appears elsewhere (Mk 12:37; Jn 2:9).

me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” (Mt 16:21-23)

Peter typifies the response of the twelve. He listens to Jesus’ message about his death, but he can only ‘hear’ this message within his pre-conceived worldview. Peter knows he is loyal and fearless. So all he hears is that Jesus’ life is in danger, which he interprets as Jesus needing a brave, loyal protector – and that’s him! Peter understands the threat on Jesus’ life only in terms of a human assault which he believes can be thwarted by his bravery and physicality. Jesus upbraids Peter for failing to listen, failing to make the necessary gearshift from mortal thinking to hearing the spiritual truth.

Compare this with how Mary listens:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (Lk 10:38-42)

Mary listens, understands, learns, and is impacted enough to respond with loving action from her emotional resonance and deep spiritual understanding of Jesus.

This forms the foundation of Mary as the premier disciple. It has nothing to do with being Jesus’ favourite, or his ‘girlfriend,’ whatever emotional attachments they may have shared. She has ears to hear, and she uses them. This is her pre-eminence.

Why Jesus Wept

When the tragedy of Lazarus’ death strikes Mary’s family, both sisters look to Jesus for counsel and comfort. Both testify his presence could’ve prevented the death. It’s here we encounter the famous Bible verse: “Jesus wept.” Jesus did weep, and Mary is the reason why. But this isn’t obvious without careful reading.

Jesus wept. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” (Jn 11:35-36)

If we read carelessly, we'd believe Jesus wept because he loved Lazarus. But the gospel doesn't say that, it says the Jews *thought* Jesus wept because of Lazarus. The Bible shows that the Jews' predictions as to what Jesus does or says is usually always wrong.

Jesus knew Lazarus was dead before returning to Bethany. He told his disciples obliquely via the metaphor of falling asleep, and this did not cause him to cry. The twelve men, typically, weren't really listening and didn't understand the metaphor, so Jesus told them directly: *Lazarus is dead*,⁹ which didn't cause him to cry either. Days later he returns to Bethany: experiencing the same sights, sounds and smells that he had shared with Lazarus; and still he didn't cry. He meets Lazarus' sister Martha, they discuss his death and the hope of resurrection – still he doesn't weep.

Then he meets Mary. In fact he *calls* for her, which is unprecedented.

Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping... he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled... Jesus wept.
(John 11:32-35)

This is the critical context. Jesus wept when he saw Mary's pain. Seeing Mary heartbroken – with the depth of grief that isn't ever fully mollified even by knowledge of the resurrection – caused his tears. Jesus wept, not because he loved Lazarus, as the Jews wrongly supposed, but because he loved *Mary*.

The Anointing

There are three accounts of the anointing event in Matthew, Luke and John, summarized in Table 1. Some believe that Luke's gospel describes a separate event, which we will not address in depth: the parallels of Table 1 sufficiently demonstrate this idea is simply not credible. Table 2 lists the unique details from each gospel, from which we learn more of Mary's story.

The anointing takes place in Bethany and, since Simon issues the invites, it's logically at his house. Yet since Martha is serving, it's logically her house too, given that we have independent evidence that she serves in her home.¹⁰ Luke also implies Mary lives elsewhere, so this isn't the family home. The solution which fits all the evidence is that Simon and Martha are married and

⁹ John 11:14

¹⁰ Lk 10:38-40, Lk 7:37

	Luke 7	Matthew 26	John 12
Where is this?	Simon's house	Simon's house in Bethany	Bethany
What was poured out?	alabaster jar of perfume	alabaster jar of expensive perfume	expensive perfume
Where was he anointed?	Jesus' feet	Jesus' head	Jesus' feet
Mary then did what?	wiped his feet with her hair		wiped his feet with her hair
Why?		for his burial	for his burial
What reactions ensued?		12 are indignant "give money to the poor" Jesus replies "The poor you have with you always"	Judas is indignant "give money to the poor" Jesus replies "The poor you have with you always"

Table 1. Common details in the three accounts of Mary anointing Jesus

Luke 7	Matthew 26	John 12
Simon is a Pharisee	Simon is a leper	The woman is Mary
Simon invites Jesus => it's his house		Martha serves => it's her house
Mary doesn't live there		
Simon disapproves of Mary, but lets her in		The dinner is given in Jesus' honour
Mary is 'a sinner'		
Costly ointment belongs to Mary	Mary earns an eternal legacy	Mary earns an eternal legacy

Table 2. Unique details in the three accounts of Mary anointing Jesus

this is their house. Simon the Pharisee may have qualified to live in the more up-market parts of the capital, but he is also a leper, and thus he and Martha remain in "the house of the poor," Bethany.

The dinner is Martha's heartfelt effort to honour Jesus for the resurrection of her brother Lazarus, which resolves another issue. Simon disapproves of Mary, and doesn't want her there, but a celebration of Lazarus' resurrection demands both sisters be invited! Luke keeps the tension

alive: Simon is truly uncomfortable that Mary is there, and disturbed that this reputed super-Rabbi Jesus does not seem discerning enough to dismiss her. Simon is a leper, and may have been cruelly ostracized himself, so we might expect him to be sympathetic to others that society self-righteously reject, but he fails, falling back on Pharisaical superiority.

Most importantly: Mary is a guest, not a resident, so how does she have her ointment with her to anoint Jesus? Only one answer is possible: *she's planned this*. Her anointing wasn't just an emotional response triggered in the moment. As much as Martha planned the dinner, Mary planned the anointing. It's a quiet detail, but a powerful one; this is an uncensored outpouring of Mary's love for Jesus, and her reflection of God's grace. Carla Ricci elegantly says that Mary *welcomed Jesus in a deeper sense* than Martha.¹¹

The disciples react in poor spirit to Mary's dedication. They pretend it's the 'wasted' cost of the ointment which troubles them, but Judas complained because he was a thief and planned to sell the ointment and embezzle the takings. The other eleven may have complained because Mary's intimate dedication placed her closer to the Lord than any of them had ever been. Jesus rebukes them, explaining that Mary has excelled, and thereby earned an eternal place in history.

The Misogynistic Trigger

This anointing may be even more significant. It may be the event which triggered Judas to betray Jesus.

We know Judas had decided to betray Jesus before the Last Supper.¹² And we see his frustration at Mary expending the ointment on Jesus because he lost a chance to steal. He lashes out at Mary, criticizing her 'waste.' This is, in the American vernacular, a cheap shot, because women had less of a voice in that society, so publicly scorning a woman was an easy put-down. Judas can expect others to support him, perhaps even 'pile on' against Mary. Yet what does Jesus do? Jesus publicly rebukes Judas and praises Mary!

Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I tell you,

¹¹ Carla Ricci, "Mary Magdalene and Many Others: Women who followed Jesus," 1994, p179

¹² John 13:2

wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” (Mt 26:10-13, NIV)

This is total humiliation for Judas: rebuked by the Master in favour of a lowly woman! A woman with a salacious history at that! Judas’ pride is damaged and, notably, pride is one of the true list of “deadly sins” from Proverbs 6. It’s this sin of pride which may well account for what happens next:

Then... Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” (Mt 26:14-15)

We’ve already argued it’s dangerous to insist on a linear chronology in the gospels. But if this sequence is connected, then Mary’s heartfelt outpouring of love in anointing Jesus for burial forms the actual catalyst for Judas’ decision to betray Jesus! Jesus’ support of women, his refusal to see them demeaned by evil-spirited men, is not only counter-cultural,¹³ but may have been the trigger for his betrayal.

At the Tomb: Vigil, Revelation, Ordination

All four gospels record the crucifixion and the visits to Jesus’ tomb. Creating a single, coherent, storyline of the tomb visits from the gospels is not simple; and any proposal remains subject to uncertainty. I suggest a timeline here.

1. Crucifixion. Attending: Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of Jesus, Mary wife of Cleopas, the mother of James & John, John, Salome, others. Mary is one of the brave handful attending. We shouldn’t overlook how dangerous this was: Romans and Jews together were baying for Jesus’ blood, the chant *Crucify him! Crucify him!* psychologically fed the mob frenzy. To stand in support of Jesus was literally a life-threatening gamble, probably even more so as a woman. Yet Mary Magdalene is there
2. Burial. Attending: Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus. The two men coordinate sealing the tomb with the enormous stone; and then retire. The two women – Mary and Mary – remain

¹³ Ibid., p85

3. First tomb visit. Attending: Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of Jesus, Salome, Joanna, others. They arrive at dawn on Sunday, finding the tomb empty. They return bemused; Mary tells Peter and John.
4. Second tomb visit. Attending: Mary Magdalene, Peter, John. Peter and John run to the tomb. Mary follows: she is at the tomb before Peter and John leave.¹⁴

One fact springs out: Mary Magdalene is the only person present at all four events. She is also always named first in the list of attendees, which itself implies a seniority, as Ricci also notices.¹⁵ She refuses to be separated from her Lord: in life or death.

Resurrected Revelation

Mary is the only one to whom the immortal Jesus first reveals himself: an unparalleled honour. Only a few minutes earlier Peter, John and Mary were all at the tomb, and logically, this seems the perfect time for Jesus to reveal himself, because a trio of witnesses can corroborate each other's testimony to others. But this is not what the Lord chooses. He waits, unseen in the background, until the two men leave.

The honour of revelation was reserved for Mary alone.

Why was Mary elevated above all others? Because she was the only one who listened wholeheartedly to Jesus. Martha had concerned herself with logistics, and the twelve apostles could only hear the words of Jesus within the paradigms of what they already believed, which triggered one misunderstanding after another. But Mary was eternally present with Jesus, she is the "one who remains," when others leave. It's mentioned three times, which suggests to the observant reader that it matters.

*[Joseph of Arimathea] rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb **and went away**. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. (Mt 27:60-61)*
*Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, **and he went away**, wondering to himself what had happened. (Lk 24:12, NIV)*

¹⁴ John 20:10-11

¹⁵ Ibid., p177

*Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb... Then the disciples **went back to their homes**. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.
(John 20:3,10-11)*

Disciples came and went. But Mary stayed. This defines Mary's character in the spiritual realm as well as the physical: she is the one who remains. Her vigil with the Lord is total – I suspect she remained at the tomb for the full 72 hours – and she is the disciple chosen to witness his Rebirth. This extends to a spiritual principle: Jesus reveals himself to the one who stays, more so than to those who come and go. In this sense, Mary is shown to be spiritually superior to even Peter and John, themselves superior apostles of the twelve.

There is a body of thought among analysts and expositors which declares Mary to be the equal of the twelve (male) apostles;¹⁶ occasionally even erroneously named as one of them.¹⁷ The irony is that these misguided efforts to honour Mary end up selling her short. The Bible doesn't *equate* Mary with the twelve apostles, it testifies to the *supremacy* of her response to Jesus above theirs.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (Jn 20:15-16)

Jesus explained his Father's plan for humanity to the twelve, which pivots on the fulcrum hope of resurrection. But they still didn't fully believe, or understand. To Mary, Jesus speaks a single word: her name. With that one word, she understands everything. *Teacher of Teachers!* she cries.

The Disciple of Disciples recognizes the Teacher of Teachers. It's a perfect symmetry.

Let's revisit Mary's name. Fascinatingly, when Mary is alone with Jesus after the resurrection she is once again referred to as Mary Magdalene. This suggests "Mary Magdalene" is her *real* identity. This is not some uncharitable reference to her prostitution in Galilee. Magdala

¹⁶ Ibid., p129

¹⁷ The "DaVinci Code" novel is one basis for this bizarre thought; the story proposes that DaVinci's painting of the Last Supper reveals Mary, not John, is sat next to Jesus, as if a painting made 1500 years after an event provided an infallible photograph. In reality it was fashionable at DaVinci's time to depict saintly men with slightly feminized features, just as it was fashionable – albeit racist – to depict evil men with darker skin, as DaVinci does with Judas Iscariot.

is where she was *transformed*. It's in Magdala that the disciple Mary was forged, partly from her front-line trials in the desperation of the impoverished human condition, but mostly through her burning desire to know God, whom she saw in Jesus. She alone internalized the gospel message to a level which ignited her equally unparalleled response.

Thus, Magdala is a place of great victory for Mary, and Magdalene is the title scripture gives her as she stands with the Lord on that early Sunday morning at the tomb. Bethany was where she was born, but Magdala was where she was reborn, and that second birth holds the true essence of life. Bottom line: Mary of Bethany chose prostitution, Mary of Magdala chose Christ. That's why she's Mary Magdalene.

Parting One More Time

Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father."

(Jn 20:17)

This statement confuses many, who believe, bizarrely, that if Mary touches Jesus physically, she will inflict some impurity upon him that will make him unable to ascend to God's presence. The idea has no foundation in either scripture or science, but it's widespread enough to be worth addressing.

Consider: even when Jesus was mortal, his possession of the Holy Spirit rendered him more powerful than any diseases he encountered. When he touched a leper, not only did Jesus *not* contract leprosy, the leper 'contracted' Jesus' health, and was cured. After his resurrection, Jesus is immeasurably more powerful in his immortal state than his mortal one. Thus, the idea that the immortal Jesus could be damaged, dirtied or incapacitated by mortal touch is simply foolish.

What Jesus is saying is: *Don't get attached to me*. Mary had 'lost' Jesus when he died – and now even his body is missing! – which is why she asks the man she thinks is the gardener where the body has gone. Suddenly, she explodes in joy: her Lord is back! It's reasonable for her to suppose he's back permanently. That's why Jesus explains that – even though he's raised – he's not staying. He's *en route* to the Father. Thus he says: *Do not cling to me*; Mary should not get attached to him.

Apostle to the Apostles

A final prestigious honour is bestowed on Mary: Jesus appoints her to testify to the apostles that he is risen.

...but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' (Jn 20:17)

Consider the importance! The twelve apostles, who should be the spiritually closest to Jesus, have failed to determine why the tomb is empty. Mary has been tasked to teach the twelve men the truth.

Her testimony was not well received:

It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. (Lk 24:10-11, NIV)

Yet again the men aren't listening. They're still trapped inside the paradigms of what they think they know, and the resurrection concept doesn't fit. So they discard Mary's witness.

As a consequence, Mary Magdalene is the sole bearer of the gospel message. Mary will steward, metaphorically gestate, the gospel truth until such time as the men are capable of hearing it. She is the only one who believes the gospel, she forms the narrow bridge from Messiah's ministry to the establishment of the early church. In a manner akin to an Olympic torch bearer, she alone holds the tiny gospel flame aloft.

Mary Magdalene is truly First among Apostles.