

# How Many Marys?

*John Pople*

We can't learn anything about Mary Magdalene until we know exactly which stories belong to her, and which don't. How many Marys are in the gospels? There must be at least three:

*...standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother [Mary] and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. (Jn 19:25)*

At most, there are three more Marys: Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus; Mary the mother of James and Joses and, if this wasn't complicated enough, "the other Mary," who is beside Mary Magdalene at the tomb. It's a somewhat tedious task, trawling the gospels to elucidate if Mary A is the same as Mary B, but it's essential if we're to know which stories belong to Mary Magdalene, and which don't, so we must apply ourselves.

## Mary and Cleopas

Let's start with Mary of Clopas. The facts are these:

- Mary of Clopas was at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:25)
- Clopas is Jesus' uncle: 2<sup>nd</sup> century writings<sup>1</sup> identify him as Joseph's brother, husband of Mary; and Richard Bauckham explains how "of Clopas" is referencing a wife, not a daughter<sup>2</sup>
- Bauckham also shows 'Cleopas' is the Greek equivalent of the Semitic 'Clopas.'<sup>3</sup> Luke, who used 'Cleopas,' is likely to write in Greek: he is not Jewish, he's most likely from Troas (Acts 16:8-10), writing to 'Theophilus' (Acts 1:1) who, with that name, is likely Greek.

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<sup>1</sup> Hegesippus, in Eusebius of Caesarea, "Hist. Eccl.," ~4C AD, Book III, 11

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Gospel Women, Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels," 2002, p205-208

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p211

- Cleopas, one of the two on the Emmaus road, is associated with the women at the tomb (Lk 24:13-24)
- The women at the tomb were largely the same as those at the foot of the cross (Mt 27:55-56, Mk 15:40, Lk 23:49, Jn 19:25 c.f. Mt 28:1, Mk 16:1, Lk 24:10-24, Jn 20:1-2)
- Divine intervention was required to prevent Cleopas and his companion from recognizing Jesus (Lk 24:16, 31 also Mk 16:12). This makes sense if the walkers are Jesus' aunt and uncle, but not two strangers

Thus, Mary of Clopas, Jesus' aunt, is logically one of the walkers on the Emmaus road. I had always assumed that the two walking to Emmaus were both men. Maybe that's just short-sighted male projection, although even the feminist scholar Carla Ricci makes the same assumption.<sup>4</sup> But the facts suggest it is Jesus' aunt and uncle: Mary and Cleopas.

## Mary the Mother of James and Joses

Jesus has four (half) brothers: James, Joses, Simon and Judas (Mt 13:55, Mk 6:3) and the first two names are those by which this Mary is known. This isn't enough evidence to conclude that this Mary is also the mother of Jesus, but there's more.

*...standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. (Jn 19:25)*

Compare this with the witness of Mark and Matthew:

*There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. (Mk 15:40)*

*There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (Mt 27:55-56)*

Assuming Matthew and Mark have not ignored the fact that Jesus' mother is standing at the foot of the cross, which seems reasonable, then it must be Jesus' mother called *Mary the mother of James and Joses* – the first two of Jesus' brothers, with which Ricci agrees.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carla Ricci, "Mary Magdalene and Many Others: Women who followed Jesus," 1994, p71

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p173

Mark specifies that James is *James the younger*, which would make sense: even though James is listed first, he's still the younger, (half) brother of Jesus. Jerome takes a different view: taking the phrase as *James the Less*, thinking that this is James son of Alphæus, who is less than James son of Zebedee, the more prominent apostle.<sup>6</sup> Jerome's tradition is accepted by some modern scholars,<sup>7</sup> but rejected by others,<sup>8</sup> amidst which latitude I continue to suppose that this refers to Jesus' brothers James and Joses, with James being referenced as younger or less than Jesus.

But this raises an obvious question: why refer to Mary that way? Especially as the context is the foot of Jesus' cross: wouldn't it make more sense for Matthew and Mark to refer to her as Jesus' mother, as John's gospel does? Satisfyingly, both Matthew and Mark also include the story that may well explain why.

*While [Jesus] was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Mt 12:46-50, also Mk 3:31-35)*

Jesus' mother Mary and his half-brothers are asserting their presumed privilege of preferential access to Jesus, through family relation. But Jesus' ministry has accelerated into the spiritual arena; he reveals that those closest to him are not determined by DNA, but by responding to his ministry. Jesus is a spiritual leader whose family are defined through spiritual connection (Jn 4:23).

Mary is struggling in her discipleship, temporarily at least, and hence she is depicted as "mother of Jesus' brothers" rather than Jesus' mother. It's a pejorative term, albeit later we see her fully restored to the elevated title "mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14), implying her discipleship came fully back on track.

## The Other Mary

The "other Mary" keeps faithful vigil at the tomb alongside Mary Magdalene.

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<sup>6</sup> Jerome, "The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary," 383 AD, Fragment 15

<sup>7</sup> Peter H. Davids in "New Bible Dictionary," 2nd Ed, Ed. James D. Douglas, 1982

<sup>8</sup> John P. Meier, "A Marginal Jew," 2001, 3, p201

Mary Magdalene and *the other Mary* were there, sitting opposite the tomb. (Mt 27:61, also Mt 28:1). Again, parallel gospel testimonies solve her identity.

*Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James saw where he was laid. (Mk 15:47)*

The “other Mary” is Mary the mother of James and James, whom we have just demonstrated is Mary the mother of Jesus.

Here we discover a spiritual jewel. Jesus’ mother Mary, arguably the most revered woman in history, is referred to as “the other Mary” when in the presence of Mary Magdalene. The Bible wants us to understand that Mary Magdalene is the spiritually senior of the two! Mary Magdalene is more highly elevated, more “blessed among women,” than Jesus’ own mother.

## Mary Magdalene & Mary of Bethany

The largest question remains. Is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, the same person as Mary Magdalene? Jesus is very closely connected to ‘both’ Marys, if indeed there be two.

Translators<sup>9,10</sup> and analysts<sup>11,12</sup> are reasonably united in translating the term “Magdalene” as “of Magdala” – a coastal town on the shores of the lake Galilee – the Darby translation literally names Mary “Mary of Magdala” (Mk 16:1). ‘Magdala’ means tower, so from ancient times it has been suggested she is named ‘Mary the Tower,’ in reference to her towering faith,<sup>13,14,15</sup> which is a very attractive thought, and accurate conceptually, but far from conclusive as the intended translation. Others suggest the term ‘Magdalene’ refers to curling of the hair, and thus culturally indicative of prostitution,<sup>16</sup> although this idea fails, as we shall see. Some notice

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Wilson, “The Emphatic Diaglott,” 1942, p902

<sup>10</sup> James H. Strong, ‘Greek Dictionary of the New Testament’ in “Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible,” 1894, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. reprint 1994, p45

<sup>11</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, “Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend,” 2006, p197

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Casey, “Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian’s Account of His Life and Teaching,” 2010, p193

<sup>13</sup> Jerome, “Letter to Principia,” 413 AD, 5

<sup>14</sup> Susan Haskins, “Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor,” 2005, p406

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Starbird, “The Woman with the Alabaster Jar,” 1993, p50-51

<sup>16</sup> John Lightfoot, “A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica,” 1989, 2, p373

“Mary Magdalene” is a different construction in English from “Jesus of Nazareth,” and suggest that this may mean Magdala isn’t a place, while Nazareth is; but in reality the translations of “Jesus of Nazareth” are completely inconsistent<sup>17</sup> and don’t provide any platform for this suggestion. I will follow the guidance of the bulk of expert testimony, that “Mary of Magdala” is correct.

If one Mary is from Bethany in the south of Israel, and one Mary is from Magdala in the north, the *prima facie* inference naturally leans towards their being two different women. But not so fast. It’s common to be known as hailing from two different places. I lived my first 27 years in England, then relocated to California. Where am I from? Depending on where I am, or who I am with, I am seen as either from California or England, despite those origins being five thousand miles distinct.

Pope Gregory I was among the earliest to believe that Mary Magdalene was Mary of Bethany,<sup>18</sup> although now many modern analyses propose separate Marys.<sup>19,20,21</sup> The consensus view is hard to establish, and seems debated. Peter Ketter declared in 1933 that “the great majority” of expositors agreed with his view of separate Marys,<sup>22</sup> yet Ferdinand Prat wrote in 1950 that the theory of one Mary “is, and will long remain, the most popular in the West.”<sup>23</sup> Ricci promoted two Marys in 1994, believing her view ran counter to the main body of thought,<sup>24</sup> yet in 2012 Mary Beavis perceived her view of two Marys was the consensus.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> There are five different Greek forms of “Jesus of Nazareth,” which are transliterated into four different English clauses. *απο Ναζαρεθ*, is translated “from Nazareth” (Jn 1:45); *Ναζαρηενε* is translated “Nazarene” (Mk 1:24, Lk 4:34); and *τον Ναζωρηγον*, is translated “the Nazarene” (Mk 16:6). Worse, the two most common Greek forms: *ο Ναζωραιος* and *τον Ναζωραιος*, are inconsistently translated either “the Nazarene” or “the Nazarite” (Mk 10:47; Lk 18:37; Jn 19:19; Mt 26:71; Lk 24:19; Jn 18:5,7).

<sup>18</sup> Pope Gregory I, Homily 33, 14 Sep 1591

<sup>19</sup> Marjorie M. Malvern, “Venus in Sackcloth: the Magdalen’s Origins and Metamorphoses,” 1975

<sup>20</sup> Katherine L. Jansen, “The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages,” 2000

<sup>21</sup> Holly E. Hearon, “The Mary Magdalene Tradition: Witness and Counter-Witness in Early Christian Communities,” 2004

<sup>22</sup> Peter Ketter, “Christus und die Frauen,” 1933, p139

<sup>23</sup> Ferdinand Prat, “Jesus Christ: His Life, His Teaching, And His Work,” Tr. John J. Heenan, 1950, p504

<sup>24</sup> Carla Ricci, Op. cit., p36

<sup>25</sup> Mary A. Beavis, “Reconsidering Mary of Bethany,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly 2012, 74, p281

Irrespective of which is the popular view, we'll take this approach: we'll make the best possible case for Mary of Magdala and Mary of Bethany being different people, and then the best case for their being the same. It transpires that one case is far more convincing than the other.

## The Case for Two Marys

Cynthia Bourgeault believes the case for two Marys is clear cut because John's gospel, she claims, directly distinguishes them: "Mary of Bethany is the one who performs the anointing, **named as such**. And Mary Magdalene, **named as such**, is the one who stands watch at the foot of the cross..."<sup>26</sup>

This is simply wrong: the nomenclature "Mary of Bethany" exists nowhere in scripture. John refers to Mary at the cross as "Mary Magdalene" (Jn 19:25) and the Mary anointing Jesus simply as "Mary" (Jn 12:3), devoid of any qualifier. This is no different from when, for example, Job's friend Elihu is named "Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite" (Job 32:2,6), and other times where he is merely listed as "Elihu" (Job 34:1, 35:1, 36:1), without anyone ever suggesting this means they're different men.

This case rests on two pillars. The first is geographical: Mary, Martha and Lazarus live in Bethany, a village outside of Jerusalem. Mary Magdalene, by translation, is from Magdala in Galilee. This naturally suggests they are two different people.

Additionally, these two Marys appear to have very different financial status. "Bethany" translates as "house of the poor"<sup>27,28</sup> or "house of misery"<sup>29</sup> (William Dixon also debunked the erroneous "house of dates" which still appears in some references<sup>30</sup>). This reasonably suggests Mary of Bethany is poor. By contrast, Mary Magdalene is a lady of substance. Luke reveals she is one of the Galilean ladies who banded together to travel south with Jesus and support his

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<sup>26</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, "The Meaning of Mary Magdalene," 2010, p24

<sup>27</sup> William H. Dixon, "The Holy Land," 1866, p214-219

<sup>28</sup> Brian J. Capper, "Essene Community Houses and Jesus' Early Community," in "Jesus and Archaeology," Ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2006, p474-502

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Wilson, Op cit., p874

<sup>30</sup> James H. Strong, Op cit., p19

ministry financially, as well as spiritually (Lk 8:1-3). This contrast also naturally infers two different women.

## The Case for One Mary

Table 1 shows all the interactions between Jesus and Mary, keeping the potentially distinct Marys in separate columns.

Events, in chronological order	Mary 'of Bethany'	Mary Magdalene
Came from Galilee to support Jesus' ministry	-	Lk 8:2-3, Lk 23:49
Listened at Jesus' feet	Lk 10:38-42	-
Was called for by Jesus	Jn 11:28	-
Triggers Jesus' weeping	Jn 11:33-35	-
Anoints Jesus for his death	Jn 12:1-8	-
Attends Crucifixion	-	Mt 27:56
Attends burial at the tomb	-	Mt 27:61
Brings spices for Jesus' body	-	Mk 16:1
Chosen by Jesus to be the first to witness his resurrection	-	Mk 16:9
Appointed by Jesus to witness his resurrection to the apostles	-	Jn 20:18

Table 1. Interactions between Jesus and Mary of Bethany, and between Jesus and Mary Magdalene

If Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany are two different characters, Table 1 requires this to be 'their' history with Jesus:

- Mary Magdalene encountered the revolutionary ministry of Jesus in Galilee, which utterly transformed her. Her keen spiritual perception saw the Son of God, which ignited her discipleship. She mobilized a group of women to travel with Jesus to Jerusalem and support him as needed.
- Upon arrival in Jerusalem, Mary Magdalene completely disappears and isn't seen for the entire three years of Jesus' ministry. She has apparently lost all interest in Jesus and the gospel message, and takes off.

- At the exact moment Mary Magdalene disappears, a new Mary appears, who is a providentially perfect replacement! This Mary is also instantly devoted to Jesus. Even more surprisingly, Jesus immediately moves into her family's house! (Mt 21:17) She sits at his feet and listens whole-heartedly to his teaching, which no-one else does – not even the twelve.
- The relationship between this new Mary and Jesus is so strong that, when Jesus returns to Bethany when Lazarus died, Jesus calls for her specifically (Jn 11:28). This is momentous, because Jesus never requested the company of anyone (bar his Heavenly Father) at any time! It's Mary's grieving that causes Jesus to weep, which shows a unique emotional connection between them.
- Mary's dutiful attention to Jesus means she fully grasps the tragic end of his ministry. She shows her faith in anointing Jesus for his burial; an act so profound Jesus announces publicly that she will be renowned for it for evermore.
- Bizarrely, Mary of Bethany's relationship with Jesus ends here. She has remained loyally by his side to within days of the horrific crucifixion, yet now, jaw-droppingly, she apparently quits, disappearing from the text never to be seen again. She's not at the crucifixion, or the burial, nor does she ever visit the tomb – even though a party of women from her village do!
- Once again, the precise instant that this Mary disappears, the former Mary magically reappears! Having apparently skipped all of Jesus' three-year ministry, Mary Magdalene suddenly rediscovers her faith and interest in Jesus, and attends the crucifixion. She alone accompanies Jesus' mother to the burial and is present at both visits to the tomb: firstly with the women who brought spices, and later with Peter and John, whom she had fetched.
- Most importantly of all, when Jesus is raised, he chooses Mary Magdalene – and only her – as eyewitness to his risen self. Apparently Jesus has no further interest in Mary of Bethany, whose company he once requested, and whose anointing of him had moved him so deeply.
- Jesus appoints Mary Magdalene to witness his resurrection to the remaining apostles. He ordains her as Apostle to the Apostles, sole witness of the gospel's core message: the reality of resurrection.
- Finally, we conclude with amazement how Jesus' two most dedicated disciples, both called Mary, never met. One Mary, and only one, was present to witness every step of his ministry and yet, like Clark Kent and Superman, they never appeared in the same room together



The storyline above, which is what a belief in two separate Marys requires, is preposterous. But the moment one reads the same storyline with the Marys as one person, everything makes sense.

We conclude beyond reasonable doubt that Mary from Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, is one and the same person as Mary Magdalene. She is a faithful disciple beyond all others: ever present at the Master's side in life, death, and resurrection.

We could ask: So why is she referenced differently? Why is she sometimes "Magdalene," sometimes "sister of Martha"? The simple answer is context. When Mary is in Galilee, in Magdala, she is referred to as Mary of Magdala, but when she is with her family at home in Bethany, she is referred to as their family member.

Why is the truth of one Mary not more commonly known? Perhaps, as in my case, we've been too lazy to explore the matter in the required depth before. Or maybe the two titles "Magdalene" and "sister of Martha" proved a distraction. But there is a darker possibility: that the ecclesiastical world isn't ready to recognize that the best biblical example of discipleship was a woman; perhaps that's why the character was broken into multiple parts.

Whatever the reason, we can set the record straight here.