

Mary Magdalene: A Faithful Disciple
February 14, 2021
Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40; John 20:10-18

It would seem that the last five lessons of this quarter's Bible Study might better be titled, "Women of the New Testament." We've had lessons on Philip's daughters and the Samaritan woman, now Mary Magdalene, and in the coming weeks Priscilla and Lydia. Yes, the word "call" is included in most of these lesson titles (though not this one). All of the individuals we focus on are women. Well, that's not a problem to me. After all, one of the issues of that day is that women were often not given the opportunities and recognition they deserved. That became even more true after the first century, as the church became more structured, and had to deal with issues of heresy. This is especially true for Mary Magdalene.

The lesson writer does a good job of collecting the various Bible passages that directly mention Mary of Magdala. The name Mary and its variations seem to have been a very popular then as now, so it was necessary to distinguish the various Mary's found in the New Testament, despite how few women are actually named. Mary Magdalene is first mentioned as being one of the women who followed Jesus (Luke 8:2). Luke mentions that she had been cured of "seven demons." We don't know any further particulars. Magdala was a predominantly gentile town just three miles north of Herod's capital at Tiberias. It was an agricultural, fishing, shipbuilding, and trading center of considerable wealth. Rabbis later attributed the fall of the city (later) to licentiousness because of its bad reputation. Demon possession was associated with both physical and moral/religious sickness. The mention of seven demons may indicate the seriousness or the recurrent nature of her condition. We really don't know anything more. (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, 1962, p. 288) The idea that Mary's condition was connected with prostitution is unsupported by scripture, and may be an extrapolation from the reputation of the city.

Mary Magdalene and these other women followed Jesus from place to place during his Galilean ministry, and then later even to Jerusalem. We do know that some of the women mentioned, perhaps including Mary, helped support Jesus and his followers from their own resources. So, Jesus and company must have been, perhaps, twenty or more people traveling together? In Galilee they would have been close to the home of one or another of the disciples following. But later?

When we read about Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, his disciples (most likely including some of these women) had gone into town to buy food. We often think of the word “disciples” as being the twelve apostles, but the word is broader, to include all of Jesus’s followers. When on the road, where would all these people have lodged? Most likely in peoples’ homes. We know that Jesus and his disciples stayed at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus when he was in and around Jerusalem, for example. In Capernaum, Jesus seems to have stayed with Peter and his family. There may also have been occasions when they camped along the road in dry weather. The logistics for a traveling band of twenty or more would have been complicated. Who stays where? Very likely it was managed by these women who were among the disciples following Jesus. They likely gave as the need arose. So Mary Magdalene, as well as the others, likely had substantial wealth. Was Peter’s wife among those traveling? She isn’t mentioned. Wives of any of the others? The Bible is silent. The gospel writers just didn’t concern themselves with such “ordinary” things. We do wonder today, though!

The lesson writer mentions imaginings that Mary may have been immoral, or had a sexual relationship or even had children with Jesus. It is difficult to see any possibility of that. Would not Jesus’s critics have pointed to something like that among their various accusations? Such modern speculations are not credible.

It does seem to be the case that Mary did have a close relationship to Jesus. She was there as part of Jesus’s ministry in Galilee through to Jerusalem, the Crucifixion, and to the tomb. It is she to whom he first appears after the Resurrection. Mary’s love for Jesus can be seen in the few words we have, especially the scene in the garden, as reported by John. She was trusted to carry the good news from Jesus to the other disciples. She has been called “The apostle to the apostles,” and the Catholic church recognized that title for her in 2016.

There is a non-canonical “*Gospel of Mary*” which the lesson writer mentions. It is indeed very interesting. I’m going to include here some material from that “gospel.” This *Gospel of Mary* seems to be later than the gospels in our Bible. It reflects the Gnosticism that John, in particular, finds troubling in his gospel and epistles. The material may preserve some authentic memories of Mary Magdalene. Our problem in reading material from this “gospel,” and other non-canonical writings, is that it is difficult to tell what is trustworthy and that which is not. What we have is from a 5th century Coptic translation, plus some 3rd century fragments in the original Greek. Ten pages are missing. I’m presenting excerpts, edited for compactness from <<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelmary.html>>.

Chapter 4 (*Pages 1 to 6 of the manuscript, containing chapters 1 - 3, are lost. The extant text starts on page 7...*) [Seems to be post-Resurrection.]

... Will matter then be destroyed or not?

22) The Savior said, All nature, all formations, all creatures exist in and with one another, and they will be resolved again into their own roots. 23) For the nature of matter is resolved into the roots of its own nature alone. 24) He who has ears to hear, let him hear. ... (omitting 25-39)

Chapter 5 1) But they were grieved. They wept greatly, saying, How shall we go to the Gentiles and preach the gospel of the Kingdom of the Son of Man? If they did not spare Him, how will they spare us?

2) Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren, Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for His grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. 3) But rather, let us praise His greatness, for He has prepared us and made us into Men. 4) When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the Savior.

5) Peter said to Mary, Sister we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of woman. 6) Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember which you know, but we do not, nor have we heard them.

7) Mary answered and said, What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you. 8) And she began to speak to them these words: I, she said, I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to Him, Lord I saw you today in a vision. He answered and said to me,

9) Blessed are you that you did not waver at the sight of Me. For where the mind is there is the treasure.

10) I said to Him, Lord, how does he who sees the vision see it, through the soul or through the spirit?

11) The Savior answered and said, He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but the mind that is between the two that is what sees the vision and it is [...] (*pages 11 - 14 are missing from the manuscript*) [What follows is Gnostic material that developed in parts of the early Church.]

Chapter 8: ... it. 10) And desire said, I did not see you descending, but now I see you ascending. Why do you lie since you belong to me? 11) The soul answered and said, I saw you. You did not see me nor recognize me. I served you as a garment and you did not know me. 12) When it said this, it (the soul) went away rejoicing greatly.

13) Again it came to the third power, which is called ignorance. 14) The power questioned the soul, saying, Where are you going? In wickedness are you bound. But you are bound; do not judge! 15) And the soul said, Why do you judge me, although I have not judged? 16) I was bound, though I have not bound.

17) I was not recognized. But I have recognized that the All is being dissolved, both the earthly things and the heavenly.

18) When the soul had overcome the third power, it went upwards and saw the fourth power, which took seven forms. (skipping 19-24, which are of the same character)

Chapter 9 1) When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Savior had spoken with her.

2) But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, Say what you wish to say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas.

3) Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things.

4) He questioned them about the Savior: Did He really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did He prefer her to us?

5) Then Mary wept and said to Peter, My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?

6) Levi answered and said to Peter, Peter you have always been hot tempered.

7) Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries.

8) But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. 9) That is why He loved her more than us.

Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect Man, and separate as He commanded us and preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said.

10) And when they heard this they began to go forth to proclaim and to preach.

So, what do we make of this? Has Mary reported words spoken to her by Jesus in private during his earthly ministry? Or words received in a vision? These teachings seem very abstract, and Gnostic, in character. Andrew comments at the beginning of Chapter 9, that these words reported by Mary do not seem to ring true. This observation resonates with us too, when we compare these reported words of

Jesus to the words of Jesus reported in the canonical gospels. (For lack of space I only included a fraction of the reported words of what Jesus said. The rest seems just as strange, as does much of the contents of other so-called “Gnostic gospels.”)

Yet, the material of Chapter 5, where Mary addresses the disciples with words of encouragement, may well represent women’s greater participation in Jesus’s ministry and in the early Church than is normally credited. The discussion of the controversy in Chapter 9 likewise may preserve a memory of Mary’s participation in ministry as the disciples began to remember Jesus’s words. Who but Mary Magdalene would have told John, who wrote it into his gospel, about her meeting Jesus in the garden? Yet, in what we have in the existent copies of the Gospel of Mary, we see the work of the Gnostics, more so in the later Coptic translation (more complete) than the earlier Greek fragments. Whatever may have been passed on from Jesus’s day was written and then edited to serve the needs of those writing in a later day. That is also true to some extent of our canonical books as well.

What I take away from my consideration of Mary from Magdala, is that Jesus recognized, loved, and valued her as one of his disciples. Perhaps even especially loved and valued her. He loved her every bit as much as he loves those others of his disciples, either then or now. In that day, men and women had distinctly different roles in society, boundaries that have been blurred and are seen differently in our day. It was in one of those roles that the women went to the garden that Easter morning. It was they who discovered Jesus had risen, and the tomb was empty. Both they and the other disciples did not understand immediately what had happened. But from their earliest witness, we have come to know and understand, “He has risen indeed!” Easter is coming in a couple of months, yes, but Easter is also here with us always. We are Easter people. For most Christians, Sunday is the holy day of the week rather than the Jewish Sabbath, because we in effect celebrate Easter every Sunday.

Prayer: Steadfast God, help us to be faithful witnesses, testifying to our own experiences of your loving way in the world. Amen.