

Women in Scripture



A Dictionary of
Named and Unnamed Women in the
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,
and the New Testament



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WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

designating Jesus as messiah ("anointed, king"; Mark 14:3), in the same way that Samuel anointed Saul and David as king. In Luke 7:36–50, a woman sinner washes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with ointment (Luke 7:37–38); Jesus interprets her gesture as signifying love and repentance (v. 47). Features of both of these stories appear in John 12:1–8; John's version could revise both Mark and Luke, or all three might derive from a single older story. The best explanation seems to be that John combines two different traditions that lie behind Mark's and Luke's versions. As in Mark, the story is set in Bethany, close to Passover and Jesus' death (12:1); a contrast is made with the betrayer (v. 6; compare Mark 14:10–11); Mary is said to use pure nard worth three hundred denarii (vv. 3, 5; compare Mark 14:3–4); Jesus defends her with a prediction of his own death (vv. 7–8; compare Mark 14:8–9). Like Luke's anonymous woman, Mary anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair (12:3). No penitence is implied here. Rather, her gesture looks forward to Jesus' washing and wiping of his disciples' feet (13:1). As a task allotted to a wife or a special disciple (*diakonos*; see Davies), it conveys intimacy and service. An atmospheric note follows her gesture: "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (12:3). Coupled with the picture of Jesus reclining for the meal, this observation evokes the voice of the woman lover in Song of Solomon: "While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance" (1:12). The reference adds the messianic overtones of kingly anointing, while retaining and intensifying the erotic charge. Thus Mary's gesture identifies her as disciple, perhaps *diakonos*, and as friend of Jesus, but possibly also as a prophetic figure designating the messianic king.

What then lies behind the two different versions of Mary in Luke and in John? Should one be accepted over the other? The two stories have only a few common features. In both, Mary is designated as "sister," whereas Martha is said to serve or minister (*diakonein*; Luke 10:39–40; John 12:1). Further, Mary is located "at the feet of" Jesus (she "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" in

Luke 10:39; "knelt at [Jesus'] feet" in John 11:32; "anointed Jesus' feet" in John 12:3). These details suggest two aspects of her career. First, this sister may have been famous among later believers as a disciple instructed directly by Jesus himself — "at his feet" and not through other missionaries and disciples. Second, the title "sister," which applies to Martha as well as Mary, may indicate kin, erotic partners, Christians in general, or a specific role in the mission. Like the missionary companions with whom Paul signed his letters (for example, Paul the apostle and Sosthenes the brother in 1 Cor 1:1), Mary worked with Martha in a missionary pair. Similar partnerships appear in Matt 10:1–4 and Romans 16. The latter includes female/male pairs (Prisca and Aquila, Junia and Andronicus, Nereus and his "sister"; Rom 16:3–5, 7, 16) who may have been spouses or lovers, and a pair of women, Tryphaena and Tryphosa (16:12). Thus sisterhood may represent a blood relationship, a shared commitment to the mission, or a commitment to each other.

MARY ROSE D'ANGELO

SEE ALSO Part I: Euodia; Martha; Mary 3; Syntyche; Tryphaena; Tryphosa; Part II: Woman Who Anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3–9); (Luke 7:36–50).

FOR FURTHER READING: D'Angelo, Mary R. "Women Partners in the New Testament."

———. "Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View." Reinhartz, Adele. "From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha."

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Mary 3

(Matt 27:55–56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40–41, 47; 16:1, 9; Luke 8:2; 24:10; John 19:25; 20:1, 11, 16, 18)

This elusive figure is the most famous of Jesus' women disciples and the one who has been most misinterpreted in Christian history. It has been suggested that the epithet *Magdalene* meaning "tower of strength," was given her as a descriptor but it

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much more likely refer to town of Magdala (Aramaic known in Greek as Taricheus) of its major industry. It was on the west side of the "Sea of Galilee" about three miles north of Tiberias. The site was partially excavated in the first century and third century AD. Luke 8:2–3 describes Jesus accompanied by women, all having been freed from various demons: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, wife of Herod, and many others. From an economic or other point of view, forming the *diakonia* of seven demons (Mark 16:9). Due to various causes of such exorcism, perhaps of illness. The Gospel of her conversion. Many of the sole members would survive. Out of the Gospel. The relationship. The

much more likely refers to her provenance, the town of Magdala (Aramaic) or Migdal (Hebrew), known in Greek as Taricheae ("salted fish") because of its major industry. The town lies on the northwest side of the "Sea" of Galilee (actually a lake), about three miles north of Tiberias. It thrived in the first century and through the Byzantine period. It was partially excavated in 1971–74.

Luke 8:2–3 describes a number of women who accompanied Jesus with the twelve in his travels, all having been healed of evil spirits and illnesses: Mary Magdalene, exorcised of seven demons; Joanna, wife of Herod's agent Chuza; Susanna; and many others. From the resources they had, whether economic or other, they functioned as patrons, performing the *diakonia*, or ministry of supplying provisions in the group. That Mary was exorcised of seven demons appears also in the second ending of Mark (16:9). Demons were widely believed to be the cause of various illnesses, both physical and mental; such exorcism is thus another way to speak of healing, perhaps of illness with a mental component.

The Gospels do not explain how Mary or some of her companions came to be traveling independently. Whenever she is mentioned in the company of other women, her name appears first, with the sole exception of John 19:25, where female members of Jesus' family are listed before her. This would suggest a prominent place for her both historically and in the early tradition.

Outside this Lukan passage, Mary appears in the Gospels only in the passion and resurrection narratives. The tradition unanimously places her among the women at the cross. Mark and Matthew also relate that she and the "other Mary" (Matt 27:61), the mother of Joses (Mark 15:47), were present at the burial.

Early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene leads the women who come to the tomb (John whittles down the group to Mary alone). The portrayal of Mary in John 20 as an impetuous and loving disciple has been decisive in the creation of later images of her. Seeing that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb and not understanding what has happened, she immediately assumes that

"they" have stolen the body of Jesus. Her recognition of Jesus, when he speaks her name, echoes John 10:3, in which Jesus' sheep know the sound of his voice. The ensuing conversation between Jesus and Mary in the garden (John 20:11–18) has been thought to evoke the woman's pursuit of her lover in Song 3:1–5. Her testimony to the other disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (v. 18), followed by a report of the things he said to her, gave rise to a rich tradition celebrating her as the first to receive the inside story from the risen Jesus. In keeping with the figure of the beloved disciple in John's Gospel, he becomes the first to believe Mary's news that Jesus is risen.

The later traditions about Mary Magdalene developed in two directions. The earlier tradition, which has prevailed more strongly in the East, concerns her stature as discloser of special revelations from Jesus, as shown in a number of noncanonical Gnostic works. The *Gospel of Philip* interprets the presence of the three Marys in John's crucifixion scene as an expression of their faithful and exemplary discipleship: the three Marys (Jesus' mother, aunt, and Mary Magdalene, his companion) "always walked with the Lord." The *Gospel of Peter* repeats the synoptic scene. Mary — who is here specifically called a disciple (*mathētria*) of Jesus — again leads a group of women, of which she is the only one named. The *Dialogue of the Savior* features three partners in conversation with Jesus: Matthew, Mary, and Judas (not the betrayer, but the other member of the twelve by that name). Which Mary is never specified, but in light of the many Gnostic dialogues in which Mary Magdalene plays a key role, it is surely she. Here she is called "a woman who had understood completely." In the *Pistis Sophia*, Mary Magdalene is again a major speaker, and she and John "the virgin" are said by Jesus to be the greatest of the disciples.

Mary Magdalene's prominent role among the women disciples in the canonical Gospels and as a communicator of revelation in noncanonical tradition leads to the assumption that she was a leader and spokeswoman who held a position of spiritual authority among many Christians. As the figure of

Peter increasingly took on a similar stature, it was inevitable that the two should clash. In the concluding saying of the *Gospel of Thomas*, Peter suggests to Jesus that he get rid of Mary "because women are not worthy of life." Jesus answers according to Neoplatonic and Gnostic gender typology, in which the female is considered inferior to the male because it is associated with earth and matter, whereas the superior male is associated with heaven and spirit: Jesus says that he will make Mary male because every female made male will enter the kingdom of heaven. Though the symbolism sounds strange and offensive to the modern reader, Mary here exemplifies the transformation, according to Gnostic belief, that is necessary for all human believers, whether women or men. She is the prototype of humanity.

The Gnostic *Gospel of Mary* brings the tension between the authority of Mary and that of Peter to its peak. Here Mary is recognized as a privileged recipient of special revelation from the risen Jesus. At a moment of discouragement about their mission, Mary rallies the disciples. Then Peter asks her, as the woman Jesus loved more than any other woman, to tell them some of what she received. When she does, however, Peter and his brother Andrew attack her credibility, questioning whether Jesus would really have spoken with a woman and preferred her to them. Levi rebukes them, warning that the savior both knows and loves her more than them.

By the early third century, Hippolytus (a schismatic leader of the Roman church) would call Mary Magdalene an apostle, and an early medieval tradition referred to her as the "apostle of the apostles," since it was she who brought to the men the news of the empty tomb and her encounter with Jesus. For the most part, however, Western tradition developed a very different perspective on Mary of Magdala. Onto her was projected the male fascination with the repristinated sex object. In spite of a total lack of evidence in the canonical Scriptures or early church tradition, Mary became identified with the woman who "was a sinner" in Luke 7:36-50, who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and

dried them with her hair (perhaps this is because the story occurs immediately before Luke 8:2-3, where she is first named). In the male imagination, only one sin could require such dramatic repentance: she had to be a reformed prostitute. She then became conflated with Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. In the Middle Ages, legend had them emigrate to Marseilles where Mary continued to exercise her spiritual authority by preaching.

In the West, the figure of Mary Magdalene has connoted suppressed eroticism. In circles wherein such can be contemplated of Jesus, a sexual liaison between him and her is suggested. She is represented as young and alluring, yet at the same time she is said to have spent her reformed life in penance and monastic asceticism. In the modern period, paintings of Mary Magdalene usually reflect male fantasies and are intended to titillate. In spite of the ascetic context, such depictions usually include sensually flowing hair and enough clothing carelessly out of place to be provocative. Her name has become synonymous with barely repentant sensuality.

How can Mary Magdalene be restored to her original image as prominent disciple and spokeswoman of the gospel? She is thought of as young and beautiful, though to have had the economic means and social freedom to spend her income and time the way she chose, she is likely to have been widowed or divorced at the time of her encounter with Jesus. To have acquired her reputation for closeness to Jesus, there must have been a certain intimacy in their relationship, which may just as well have been motherly or patronal as anything else. Her unquestioned presence at both the cross and at the tomb on Easter morning, thus involving her in two seminal events of the Christian faith, points up her preeminence as disciple. At the darkest and most uncertain moments, when others had withdrawn — even Jesus' mother, according to the Synoptic Gospels — Mary Magdalene faithfully remained in Jesus' presence. This was a strong woman.

SEE ALSO Part II: Unnamed Women at the Cross (Luke 23:49); Unnamed Companion of Cleopas (Luke 24:13–35).

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Mary 4

(Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1; Luke 24:10)

Variouly called the mother of James and Joses (or Joseph, a manuscript variant in these references — Matt 27:56), mother of little James and Joses (Mark 15:40), of Joses (Mark 15:47), or of James (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10), this otherwise unknown woman is no doubt the same as "the other Mary" (Matt 27:61; 28:1), since she is called by that name only after she has been introduced by her maternal connections, and in passages parallel with Marcan passages that name her as mother (Mark 15:47; 16:1). She is one of the companions of Mary Magdalene present at the cross of Jesus and the empty tomb on Easter morning. Her name does not appear in the group of women disciples mentioned by Luke during the Galilean ministry (Luke 8:2–3). Her sons James and Joses appear elsewhere in parallel passages (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3) among the brothers of Jesus, which would make this Mary also a relative of Jesus. If James and Joses are meant to be true siblings of Jesus rather than cousins, there is a possible conflation in the tradition of this Mary with the mother of Jesus. Some think that this was how the Synoptic Gospels put the mother of Jesus in the death and resurrection narratives, but it is highly unlikely that Luke, who portrays the mother of Jesus as a disciple, would continue this confusion. However, she may be the same as Mary, the wife of Clopas, at the cross in John 19:25.

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SEE ALSO Part I: Mary 5; Part II: Unnamed Women Who Provide for the Jesus Movement (Luke 8:3, etc.); Unnamed Women at the Cross (Luke 23:49).

Mary 5

(John 19:25)

According to John, there were three or four women standing by the cross of Jesus: his mother and her sister, Mary (probably wife) of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. The grammar in Greek is as ambiguous as it is in English: the third named may be the sister of Jesus' mother (who is never named in John's Gospel) or a third woman. She may also be the same as Mary the mother of James and Joses (Matt 27:56, 61) and the mother of James (Luke 24:10). If Clopas is identical to Cleopas, which is possible but by no means necessary, this Mary may also be identified with the unnamed disciple who accompanies Cleopas to Emmaus (Luke 24:13, 18), called variously by her marital or maternal relationship.

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SEE ALSO Part II: Unnamed Companion of Cleopas (Luke 24:13–35); Sister of Jesus' Mother (John 19:25).

FOR FURTHER READING: Daniels, Jon B. "Clopas."

Mary 6

(Acts 12:12)

This Mary, mother of John Mark, was hostess of a house church in Jerusalem where Peter went when he was miraculously released from prison during the night (Acts 12:12–17). The story confirms the early Christian practice of gathering in homes for prayer — especially homes of prominent women believers — as well as the function of women as heads of households even in Palestine and the function of women's homes as centers of hospitality and refuge in time of persecution.

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FOR FURTHER READING: Martin, Clarice J. "The Acts of the Apostles."