

(Note: My encyclopaedia entry is intended to appear in a general encyclopaedia, such as the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Thus the intended audience is those with little knowledge on the subject, and the intention is to provide a foundational level of understanding.)

Mary Magdalene in the Four Canonical Gospels

Introduction

Mary Magdalene is a prominent female figure in the Bible and a significant follower of Jesus. The root of her significance is that in each of the four canonical gospels, she bears witness to several key biblical events, Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Although details in each gospel differ, the fundamental consistency is her presence at each of these monumental events.

It is believed that her name derives from the place she was from, the town of Magdala in Aramaic, or Migdal in Hebrew (Meyers, 2001, p.121). There are many misconceptions surrounding the figure that is Mary Magdalene. Many believe her to have been a prostitute, a sinner, a temptress in love with Jesus. However, there is no biblical evidence to support this characterization (Winkett, 2002, p.20). Subsequently, this raises the question of who was Mary Magdalene, according to the gospels? Her portrayal in each of the gospels is summarised below to provide a picture of her role in the Bible.

Matthew

Chapter twenty-seven of Matthew recounts the trial, death, and burial of Jesus Christ. It describes how many women, who had followed him from Galilee, watched his death, and specifies that “Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee” (Mat 27:56). Mary Magdalene is mentioned first, intimating a sense of significance and importance. She is mentioned again as being present at the burial of Jesus Christ, and verse 27:61 states that she and the other Mary were seated opposite his tomb. Again, Mary Magdalene is first mentioned.

Chapter twenty-eight discusses how Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were the first to witness Jesus’ resurrection. They visited his tomb after the Sabbath, during which an angel descended from heaven and told the women of Jesus’ resurrection. They leave the tomb, overcome with a mixture of fear and joy, when suddenly they meet with Jesus. Upon seeing him, they “took hold of his feet, and worshipped him” (Mat 28:9). Jesus tells them not to be afraid, and to go tell his disciples to meet him in Galilee.

Mark

Chapter fifteen of Mark follows closely the account told in Matthew of Jesus’ trial, death, and burial. Mary Magdalene is again mentioned before the other women as having bore witness to Jesus’ death (Mark 15:40), and again witnessing “where the body was laid” (Mark 15:47).

Chapter sixteen follows the same story of how the women went to visit the tomb, although specifies that their purpose of the visit was to anoint him (Mark 16:1). Another difference in this verse is that they hear the news of Jesus' resurrection from a man dressed in a white robe, rather than an angel (Mark 16:5). He delivers the news, and once again they flee the tomb to tell Jesus' disciples, their emotions described as "terror and amazement" (16:8).

In the longer ending of Mark, verse 16:9 describes how Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene, "from whom he had cast out seven demons". When she goes to tell mourners of the news of his resurrection, they don't believe her (Mark 16:11).

Luke

In the gospel of Luke, Mary Magdalene is first mentioned in the context of accompanying Jesus as he preaches the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 8:1). Once again she is mentioned first as one of many women who have been cured of evil spirits. It is specified that seven demons had been exorcised from her (Luke 8:2). It is mentioned that Mary Magdalene and the other women provided for Jesus and his disciples out of their means (Luke 8:3). This indicates a close relationship between the women and Jesus and his disciples, and one of loyalty and generosity.

Mary Magdalene is mentioned again in the gospel of Luke during Jesus' resurrection, when she and the other women visited the tomb with spices they had prepared (Luke 24:1). Two men remind the women that Jesus had said that "the Son of Man must be

handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” (Luke 24:7).

The women told this to the apostles, who did not believe them (Luke 24:10).

John

Chapter nineteen of the gospel of John tells the story of Jesus’s death and burial. Mary Magdalene is mentioned last, among the women in Jesus’ family, as having stood near the cross during his crucifixion (John 19:25). She is not mentioned as being present at the burial, though she is mentioned again in chapter twenty, as she is the sole person to find Jesus’ empty tomb. It describes how she visited the tomb during the dark of the night, and found it empty (John 20:1). It is Mary Magdalene who tells Simon Peter and the other disciple that Jesus is missing from the tomb (John 20:2), they both check the tomb to find it empty (John 20:7).

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene later in the chapter. As she is standing weeping outside the tomb, two angels appear to ask her why she is crying (Luke 20:12). Mary Magdalene explains that she is crying because her Lord has been taken away and she doesn’t know where he is (Luke 12:13). She then turns to see Jesus, but does not recognise him as Jesus (Luke 20:14). He again asks why she is crying, and she explains (Luke 20:15). Jesus reveals himself to her as he says her name. She turns and says to him “Rabbouni”, meaning “teacher” (Luke 20:16). He then instructs her to give the disciples a message from Jesus stating “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (Luke 20:17). Mary Magdalene then announces his resurrection to the disciples and gives them his message (Luke 20:18).

Conclusion

Perhaps the most significant parallel in each gospel is that Mary Magdalene was a witness to Jesus' resurrection, an event which is a prominent pillar in the Christian faith. As Pope Benedict XVI stated, on Easter Sunday, "Every Christian relives the experience of Mary Magdalene" (Benedict XVI, 2012). This highlights the significance of Mary Magdalene's presence, that every Easter Sunday, every Christian bears witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of faith, just as she did.

It is evident in descriptions of her in the gospels that the emphasis on Mary Magdalene's story is her presence at these key biblical events. She is the only person mentioned in the four gospels as having been present for each paschal event. Her depiction in John places her near the cross during Jesus' crucifixion. This indicates courage, loyalty, love, and a close companionship between her and Jesus. There is no mention of her having been a prostitute or a reformed sinner. Though there is mention that she had been exorcised of seven demons, this does not suggest she was a sinner. Demons were commonly thought to be the cause of mental and physical illnesses at the time (Meyers, 2001, p.121), thus it likely indicates that she was suffering from several illnesses.

Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene in John suggests she may have even been a disciple. Firstly, she refers to Jesus as "teacher", which indicates she had a more prominent connection with Jesus than that of a mere follower (Chalut, 2012, p.82).

Secondly, he instructs her to go and tell the other disciples his message. Although it is never stated that she is a disciple, her close relationship with Jesus and his disciples which is evident in their interactions suggests she may have been. This encapsulates the important role Mary Magdalene has in the bible as a loyal friend and follower of Jesus and a respectable and influential female figure.

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