

Mary Magdalene

-a regular feature by Jane Peters



Mary Magdalene's story is intimately linked with Jesus and plays a role in one of the most powerful and important scenes in the Gospels.

When Jesus was crucified, Mary Magdalene was there supporting him in his final moments and then mourned his death. She discovered the empty tomb, was a witness to the resurrection and was present at the beginning of a movement that was going to transform the World. In art, she is often semi-naked or portrayed as an isolated hermit, repenting in the wilderness as an outcast. Her primary link with Jesus is as the woman washing and anointing his feet. The life of Mary Magdalene in historical terms is the subject of ongoing debate. The whole story of Mary as a prostitute, who is fallen and redeemed, is a very powerful image of redemption and a signal that no matter how low one has fallen, one can be redeemed.

Powerful as this image may be, it is not necessarily the true story of Mary Magdalene. Mary is mentioned in each of the gospels in the New Testament, but not once does it mention that she was a prostitute or a sinner. It is thought that at some point Mary Magdalene possibly became confused with two other women in the Bible: Mary, the sister of Martha and the unnamed sinner from Luke's gospel (7:36-50) both of whom wash Jesus' feet with their hair. In the 6th Century, Pope Gregory the Great made this assumption official by declaring in a sermon that these three characters were actually the same person of Mary Magdalene, the repentant saint. Protestant critics believe, however, that there are two or three distinct and different women. The Catholic Church did later declare that Mary Magdalene was not the penitent sinner, but this was not until 1969. After several centuries, the reputation still lingers.

Although we know something about Jewish society in ancient Palestine, we know very little about Mary herself. The Bible provides no details of her age, status or family. Her name, Mary Magdalene, gives us the first real clue, suggesting that she came from a town called Magdala, 120 miles north of Jerusalem on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. There was also an ancient place called Magdala found in literature, appearing in the New Testament and also in Jewish texts. Its full name is Magdala Tarichaea - Magdala probably means tower, and Tarichaea means salted fish. If the name of the town was 'Tower of Salted

Fish', it is fair to assume that its main business was fishing. As a woman living in Magdala, Mary may have worked in the fish markets.

One Jewish text which mentions Magdala, called 'Lamentations Raba', says that Magdala is judged by God and destroyed because of its fornication. It is possible that the description of Magdala as a place of fornication is the origin of the idea that arose in western Christianity that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.

The Roman conquest, and then the Roman Imperial Rule, would have made quite a dramatic impact on Galilee. Economically it would have brought the people greater and greater tax burdens, and that would have put pressure on families. When tax burdens were at their worst and a family could no longer pay off its debts, children were sometimes given up as slaves. Perhaps this was Mary Magdalene's fate. With such a tough background, it's not hard to imagine that Mary might have been a prostitute, but this evidence is purely circumstantial. However, her name, Mary 'of Magdala', could suggest that she was unmarried, as a married woman would have carried her husband's name and Mary didn't. There is nothing in the limited amount of material we have about Mary in the Gospels to suggest that she is married, she is never described as a widow and she is not said to have any children. During these times an unmarried woman was viewed with suspicion. Perhaps this isolated Mary but it would not fully account for her negative image.

There is another facet of Mary's life that may have made her an outcast. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus cast seven evil spirits out of Mary. (Luke 8:2) Whatever the cause of her possession, this act of healing led her to join up with the missionary circuit of Jesus . The message that Jesus preached had a particular appeal for people on the margins of society and Luke tells us that Mary was one of Jesus' followers who travelled with him.

Her feast day is 22nd July.