

An Enduring Icon of Repentance

By Kate Cooper

Mary Magdalene has certainly had an exciting year, especially by the standards of a first-century Galilean peasant. Last autumn, the biblical scholar Karen King announced the discovery of a fragment from a lost gospel which—if authentic—would suggest that she was married, to Jesus of Nazareth no less. In the spring, the composer John Adam premiered an oratorio based on her story, imagining her as a modern social activist running a women’s shelter. Then, in June, the San Francisco Opera brought out Mark Adamo’s thoughtful and disturbing *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, a disturbing exploration of the apocryphal traditions around Jesus and his most outstanding female apostle. It’s unlikely that any of this excitement would turn the Magdalene’s head—after all, she previously enjoyed starring roles in both *The Da Vinci Code* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Why does “the other Mary” still exert such a powerful fascination after all these years? Certainly, part of her magnetism is the thrill of the thought that Jesus had a love interest. This aspect of Mary’s persona has always had staying power. Already in the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great imagined the Magdalene as a repentant prostitute anointing Jesus with her tears in a way that distorted the witness of the New Testament, and in a direction that can only be described as sexually charged (more on this below).

But the Magdalene has also been central to the debate about women’s roles and women’s voices in the early Christian communities—a debate that goes back to the New Testament itself. All four canonical gospels emphasize Jesus’s close relationship to his female disciples. They agree, for example, that Mary Magdalene was one of the group of women from Galilee who travelled with Jesus to Jerusalem, and that she—sometimes along with the other women—was the first to discover the Empty Tomb. In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself tells Mary to announce his resurrection to the other disciples—a prize commission for an aspiring prophet. But Luke remembers a more troubling story. At the tomb, two angels share the news with Mary and her companions that Jesus has been raised from the dead. But when the women rush to tell the male disciples, the men dismiss their announcement as an idle tale.

This tradition was elaborated in the non-canonical Gospel of Mary, a fascinating text which claims to record a debate between the male apostles over whether to listen to what the post-Resurrection Jesus had told the women. Written probably in the second century, the Gospel of Mary offered a bold challenge to the churches at a time when leadership roles were becoming more formal and women’s contribution was being challenged in at least some communities. In the text, the apostle Levi seems to stand in for the author’s own view of the matter when he challenges a suspicious and defensive Peter, “If the Savior made her worthy, who are you then to reject her?” (*Gospel of Mary*, 18).

This is a tradition worth remembering at a time when women’s ministry as priests and bishops is the topic of painful debate. The Gospel of Mary reflects an older and more diverse form of Christianity than many of the New Testament texts. It is sometimes thought of as a “Gnostic Gospel,” but this is a matter of debate. Like the Gospel of John, the Gospel of Mary contains elements that seem to reflect affinities with Gnostic thought. Unlike many of the non-canonical gospels, Mary’s Gospel was never condemned as heretical by the ancient church, and it was transmitted independently of the so-called “Gnostic Library” of the Nag Hammadi codices.

What is most striking about the Gospel of Mary is its evidence of a time when women’s



Albrecht Dürer: *The Elevation of Saint Mary Magdalene*, woodcut, c.1504/1505. National Gallery of Art.

leadership was taken for granted by some Christians, and passionately debated by others. The earliest Christian communities had their base in the households of the faithful; women’s authority reflected their position as homeowners, and they seem to have used their family and business contacts to create networks through which the faith could spread, an “underground railroad” of moral and practical support. Husband-wife teams also played an important role. In fact, there is no reason that Jesus and Mary could not have been just such a team during their years in Galilee and Judaea.

But by the second century, things were beginning to change. The old collaboration between householders who sponsored “meetings” (*ekklesiae*) in their homes—many of whom seem to have been women—and prophets, who travelled from village to village carrying the good news, began to break down. *The Didache*, a church manual written around the year 100, suggested that prophets were to be sheltered, honored, and revered as privileged witnesses to the Gospel—but only if they stayed no longer than three days. In the second century, the role of the householders began to evolve into the first germ of institutional office. By the fourth century, as Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire, women were quietly being side-lined from direct participation in an increasingly institutional leadership.

In this newly imperial environment, women’s still-considerable energies began to be channeled into the ascetic movement. Men and women alike were steeped in the stories of the Egyptian desert, where monks and nuns performed heroic feats of self-denial. A surprising number of these stories involved repentant prostitutes, who were believed to have been among the most courageous saints of the desert. These heroines captured the ancient imagination: their tawdry beauty was made radiant in the love of God, and like snake-charmers, they were able to fascinate and capture lost souls whom others could not reach.

By the time of Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604), the image of Mary Magdalene had begun to seep into that of these desert heroines. During the 590s, the city of Rome was ravaged by a devastating plague, and Gregory was looking for a powerful image of repentance, on the theory that only the people’s repentance could move God to take pity on them. Gregory was an extraordinarily gifted preacher, and in a sermon on the Gospel of Luke, he made an intuitive connection that was the sermonic equivalent of striking gold.

Gregory’s brain-wave was to borrow from another story in the Gospel of Luke (Chapter 7) about an unnamed ‘sinful woman’ who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Although none of the Gospels refer to Mary as having been a sinner, Gregory found something to work with: a hint from the Gospels of Luke and Mark, which remembered the Magdalene as having had seven demons cast out from her. With a single stroke, the gifted preacher found a way to wrap the beloved female disciple, Mary Magdalene, into the romance of the repentant prostitute. The result is a powerfully magnetic female character, a super-charged icon of repentance who could endure across the Middle Ages and into modern popular culture. What remains to be seen is whether our own age will continue simply to re-cycle this medieval version of Mary, or whether we find yet another dimension to her story.

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