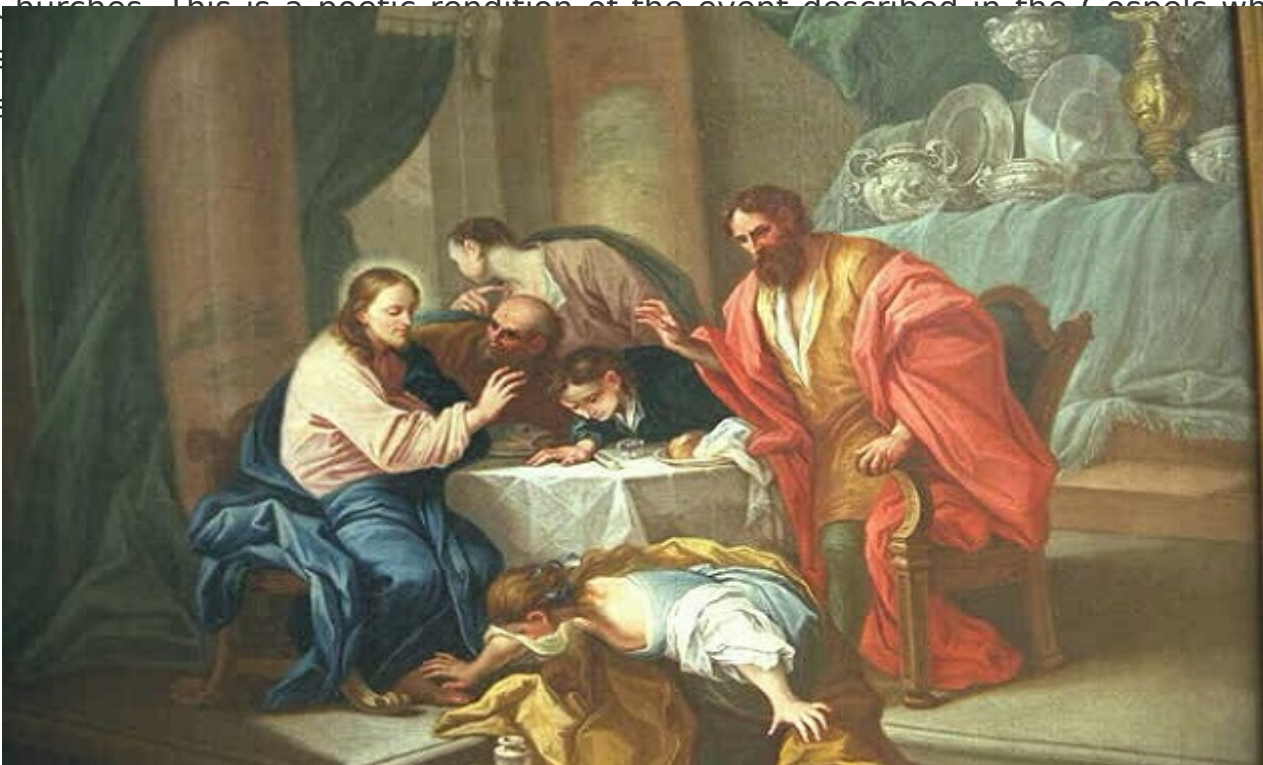


## Do we know who “the woman fallen into many sins” was? (Athanasios Moustakis)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



On Great Tuesday, in the evening, the tropario of Kassiani is sung in Orthodox Churches. This is a poetic rendition of the event described in the Gospel where a sinner anoints Christ with spices.



The woman's action is significant for two main reasons:

- 1. It prepared Christ for burial, since the Jews used to anoint the bodies of their dead with a mixture of resin and spices.**
- 2. The intensity of the scene demonstrates the magnitude of her repentance.**

The particularity of her action has led to associations unrelated to what actually

happened, with the result that a number of myths have been woven around the identity of this woman and her relationship with Christ.

Western Christendom has identified her with **Saint Mary Magdalene**, although there is, in fact, no evidence of this either in the Gospels or in later tradition. This identification may be due to confusion between two different persons mentioned in two separate passages in the Gospel according to Saint Luke. The incident with the sinful woman who washed Christ's feet with ointment and tears and wiped them with her hair is mentioned in chapter 7. In the next chapter, 8, there is a reference to the women who followed Christ on his journeys around the land of Israel. Among these there was also Saint Mary Magdalene, who had previously been cured of demonic possession by Christ[1].

Immediately after the raising of Lazarus, his family and friends arranged a meal for Christ and the apostles as a sign of their gratitude. At the meal, while **Martha** was attending to the needs of the large number of guests, **Mary** performed an action which would usually have fallen to the family servants: she washed the feet of their guest. Expressing her overwhelming gratitude, she poured nard onto his feet instead of water and used her hair instead of a towel.

This incident, which is described by Saint John the Evangelist (12: 1-8) is not the same as that which featured the sinful woman and which is referred to by the person who wrote the hymn for Great Wednesday matins.

Lazarus' sister was expressing her **gratitude**, the sinful woman her **repentance**.

**Saint Kassiani** was a very well-educated Byzantine lady, the daughter of an upper class family, who, at some stage, became a nun, engaging, among other things, in hymn writing. Her most famous work is this tropario, which is known by her name. In it, the Biblical incident is described and there is also an important theological exploration of the problem of sin and the need for repentance. Indeed, sin is linked directly, not with moral issues, but with the fact of the Fall and the breakdown in communion with God.

**It follows, then, that neither Saint Mary Magdalene nor Mary the sister of Lazarus, nor the poetess Saint Kassiani is "the woman fallen into many sins".**

**The name of this woman remains a mystery to us**, since the Gospels preserve and honour her action and her **repentance** but not her name. This woman, who is anonymous as far as we're concerned, is a very powerful model of how we can all change our lives and ways of thinking.

Indeed, it may be that her repentance will be the criterion for our own before the throne of God at the hour of judgement.

[1] Whatever the source of the confusion, it continues to reign. The National Geographic Channel, for example, has a programme with the fatuous title "The Real Mary Magdalene". And to make matters even more confusing, Donatello's famous statue "Magdalene Penitent" actually looks a great deal more like an image of Saint Mary the Egyptian. [Translator's Note]