

Saint Mary Magdalene: The Revision of the Role of a Prominent Apostle

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The years between 1976-1985 were declared by the United Nations to be the “Decade of the Rights of Women”. Within the framework of the related activities which were undertaken at the time, it was claimed, among other things, that religions bore the responsibility for the suppression of women’s rights. In response to this challenge, the Christian world, through the World Council of Churches, (WCC) promoted its own, world-wide decade of “Churches in Solidarity with Women” (1988-1998). But even before then, in its General Conferences and its various distinct activities, the WCC had involved itself with this particular problem. Indeed, between the years 1978-81 a programme of study was arranged, entitled “The Community of Women and Men in the Church”. The culmination of this particular effort was the International Consultation in Sheffield, England, at which the famous “Letter from Sheffield” was drawn up. During the course of all these discussions, the opportunity was given to the Christian academic community to re-examine many related subjects, such as, for example the influences on the social life of the Western world of the theology which was formulated in the West at the beginning of the 5th century, with the theory of original sin, by perhaps the greatest personality of the Western world, Saint Augustine of Hippo. Another very important issue which was examined historically and theologically in the Christian world, for the same reason, was the person of Saint Mary Magdalene.



Outside the Orthodox Church, the name of Saint Mary Magdalene, artistically, philosophically, and, until recently in the West, ecclesiastically and theologically, has been identified, one way or another, with the broader area of eroticism. Various artists or authors of narratives with a mythological veneer, such as, for example, Dan Brown, William Phipps, Chris Gollon, Martin Scorsese and many others, seek, or wish to invent, a mistress for Jesus of Nazareth and curiously, absolutely all of them, latch on to Mary Magdalene. This is not strange, because, for a very long time, even within Church literature, Magdalene was presented as the most attractive and bewitching female personality in the New Testament. Many, indeed, even to this day, think of her as a former prostitute, who, of course, repented as a result of her existential encounter with Christ. In the case of one of the modern British artists, Chris Gollon, whom we mentioned above, in his painting *The Pre-Penitent Magdalene*, Mary is portrayed as a provocative *femme fatale*, adorned with all the trappings you'd expect and heavily made up. On the same wavelength, but with a serious, symbolic, poetic background, there is the short text entitled "Magdalene", in Dinos Christianopoulos' collection *Εποχή των ισχνών αγελάδων* (Thessaloniki, 1950).

And yet, nowhere in the reliable historical sources, particularly the most ancient- that is those of the New Testament- is there any mention of all this. On the contrary, in three of the four canonical Gospels, Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name only in relation to the narratives of Christ's passion and resurrection. In Mark, Matthew and John, she is referred to as a witness of the crucifixion (*There were also women looking on from a distance: among them was Mary Magdalene...*

Mk. 15, 40). In John, she is placed last (*standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene*) and at His tomb (*and Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid*, Mk. 15:47, Matth. 27:61). Above all, however, Mary Magdalene is one of the first witnesses of Christ's resurrection, i.e. of the new tomb, and in John, in fact, the first (Mk. 16, 1; Matth. 28, 9; Luke 24, 1-12; Jn. 20, 14-18).

It is only in Saint Luke's Gospel that the name of Mary Magdalene is also mentioned in relation to the public activity of Christ before the passion and resurrection in all four Gospels. At the beginning of chapter 8 there is a description of how Jesus: "went on through towns and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out... who provided for them out of their resources" (*Luke, 8, 1-3*).

The epithet Magdalene, which always accompanies her name, at least in the Gospels, is an indication that she was not married, because in that case her name would also have that of her husband attached. "Magdalene" shows that this particular Mary came from the commercial town of Migdal (Taricheae) on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee or Tiberias. She must have been a well-to-do woman, provided, of course, we can trust Luke's information, since she played her part with generous material assistance in what was for the age the revolutionary work of Jesus and His twelve disciples. According to the same source, she had had personal experience of the healings powers of Jesus, probably through a kind of exorcism. But on the basis of a strictly historico-critical approach to the evidence in Luke, modern science has reservations, since in this particular Gospel, there is a clear tendency to minimize the role of Magdalene, in stark contrast, in fact, to the other three Gospels. We should note that Luke is the only one of the Evangelists to report that the risen Christ appeared exclusively to Peter (*Luke 24, 34; see also I Cor. 15, 5*). According to Ann Graham Brock (*Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 19-40), there is no reference in Luke to any appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene. It may be then, that the reference to seven demons derives from this prejudice, unless it has symbolic significance.

If this is the picture presented by the original sources of Christian tradition, then it is reasonable to wonder: “How has Magdalene been transformed over time into a penitent harlot and later, with a good dose of imagination into something even more?”

Modern critical research has tended towards the conclusion that this may have happened as the result of conscious efforts on the part of later scholars of the history of the Christian message, to gradually reduce the importance of her role, at least as this was presented in the most ancient sources of the Gospel tradition. How this happened has to do initially with the gradual, and, of course, unsubstantiated identification of Mary from Magdala with other women mentioned in the Gospels. First of all with the anonymous woman from Bethany, who anointed His head with myrrh, an entirely symbolic act recognizing Christ as the Messiah shortly before he was given up to be crucified (*Mk.* 14, 3-9 and *Matth.* 26, 6-13). We should note that this action is interpreted as a “practical” confession of Jesus’ Messianic status, in the same way as Peter’s verbal confession in Caesarea Phillipi: “You are Christ, (the Son of the living God)” (*Mk.* 8, 28).

In the later Gospels, the scene of the anointing of Jesus is brought forward in terms of time to the beginning of His public ministry (by Luke to 7, 36-50) and the most important difference is that it is not Christ’s head which is anointed but His feet (both in Luke and John, who does, however, retain the timing of the event as being with narrative of the passion, though he does identify the unknown woman with another Mary, Lazarus’ sister). Luke adds the motif of her repentance, which is followed by the forgiveness of her sins by Jesus.

The second erroneous identification of Magdalene is with the anonymous adulteress (*Jn.* 7, 53- 8, 11) whom Christ rescues from stoning with His well-known phrase: “Let him among you who is without sin cast the first stone at her” (*Jn.* 8, 7). This was the interpretation accepted by the famous actor and director Mel Gibson, in his contentious film *The Passion of Christ* (For more on this identification, see Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*, New York: Continuum, 2002, pp. 65-77, 82).

This process of gradual redefinition of the apostolic role of Mary Magdalene, with erroneous readings and identification in the texts, was completed when it received Church sanction in the 6th century through Pope Gregory the Great (540-604), who, in a homily presents her as a model of repentance. Pope Gregory understood the anointing by the anonymous woman in a positive way, but also identified the anonymous adulteress with the person of Mary Magdalene and claimed that the

spices she used to rub on Jesus' feet were the same as the ones she had previously used on her own body. At the same time, the seven demons were associated with the seven deadly sins. Poe Gregory wrote characteristically that when Magdalene fell at Jesus' feet, "she transformed the multitude of her sins into virtues so that she could serve God in total repentance" (Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*, p. 82). In this way, the myth of Mary Magdalene as the harlot with the heart of gold was established. This is the motif chosen by Dinos Christianopoulos in the work we referred to above and by a host of other poets and authors until today.

In a really strange, but interesting way, the myth of Mary Magdalene as the penitent harlot appears only in Western Christianity. In the Eastern, Orthodox Church she continues to be honoured for what she was: equal to the apostles, a prominent apostle, an apostle of the apostles, a saint, and witness of the resurrection. There is actually another homily from the 6th century, by a different Gregory, the Patriarch of Antioch, who tells how the risen Christ is supposed to have turned and addressed in these words the women, including Mary Magdalene, who "had run to the tomb": "Tell my apostles the mysteries you've seen. You are the first apostles to the apostles. Let Peter, who denied Me, learn that I'm able to raise women up to be apostles, as well" (On this, see, "Gregory of Antioch: *Homilia in S.Theophania*, CPG 7385-Gleanings of Text and Theme," *JTS* 60 vol. 2 (2009), pp. 531-7).

This patriarch and saint of the Orthodox Church is clearly extending the historical role of Magdalene as apostle, which can be found in John's Gospel and it is naturally equated with Magdalene's experience during the first appearance of the risen Christ ("Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb" *Jn.* 20- 1, 11-19. Verses 2-10 are very clearly an addition to the older core, since they very obviously destroy the structure of the narrative). In contrast to the image given in Luke, the fourth Gospel clearly presents Magdalene as the first witness of the resurrection, the chief event of divine providence.

This positive role which, historically, i.e. on the basis of the historical evidence, Mary Magdalene played in the Gospel according to Saint John, was thereafter reinforced considerably in certain Christian circles, which actually elevated her memory and her honour to a greater degree than was appropriate. The apocryphal *Gospel of Mary*, which was published as late as 1955 is the product of such an ancient- for some, marginal- Christian community. In this apocryphal Gospel, and in other apocryphal texts relating to the New Testament, which retain some core of

historical truth in their narratives (Saint Thomas' Gospel, Saint Philip's Gospel, Faith-Wisdom) the picture of Mary Magdalene is as follows: a) she had a prominent position among Jesus' disciples; b) she survived as a character or a recollection even in an era and culture which were heavily male-oriented and, for many people, intensely patriarchal in ideology; c) she stood out for her courage and spoke freely; d) she clearly played a leading role, even compared to the male disciples (her brothers, as she calls them); e) she was a person blessed to receive and interpret divine visions; f) she was praised for her correct and deep understanding of divine teaching; g) she was designated as a close and familiar disciple of Christ; h) she did not hesitate, when she had to, to oppose and sometimes come into open conflict with one or more of the apostles; and i) Jesus defends her.

Many of these nine characteristics are also to be found in other non-canonical (apocryphal) texts. Of course, in some apocryphal texts of the original Christian tradition her role is altered in a negative way, or her name is expunged from narratives in which she plays a leading role in other versions of the same events. All of this stops after the 6th century, and then, suddenly, in the Middle Ages in the West, there appears the familiar fiction of Magdalene as a symbol of erotic love and sexuality.

The critical question is whether the portrait of Mary Magdalene as a leading figure in the first Church really does reflect historical reality. It is very likely that this is so, especially if we take into account the significant position she continues to occupy in the Eastern liturgical and hagiographical tradition. Indeed some students of the New Testament claim that she may even be included among the leading female figures to whom the Apostle Paul addresses a warm greeting in the famous chapter 16 of his *Epistle to the Romans* ("Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you" 16, 6). That, of course, must remain hypothetical, but there is absolutely no historical evidence, or even a suspicion, that she was ever a harlot, or the mistress or companion of Jesus. On the contrary, it is confirmed beyond doubt that she was a prominent disciple of His, an apostle of the apostles, and these features of her passage through history have been deliberately marginalized or even successfully removed- at least until today, when scientific study has now demonstrated the real importance of the "Magdalene Story".

Note. The facts were drawn from an article by Professor Petros Vasileiadis, of the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, on the web site <http://blogs.auth.gr/moschosg>

