

The Gospel Unashamed

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."

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~ All articles written by Terry Carter unless otherwise stated ~

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Terry Carter, Editor

Was Mary Magdalene a Prostitute?



Mary Magdalene is probably one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented people mentioned in Scripture. There have been several books, TV programs, and even movies portraying Mary in any number of ways that go way beyond (and often contrary to) anything that the Scriptures record about her. This is not new; she has been portrayed in various ways throughout the history of Christianity.

The Scriptures are the only reliable source that we have for discovering who Mary really was and what role she played in the Gospels. Mary is only mentioned in twelve passages in the whole New Testament. While there are some things we learn from these passages, there are many other things that we are simply not told about her. This leads to some

confusion as people are always wanting to invent things to "fill in the gaps".

Another fact that leads to confusion is that there are so many women named Mary that are mentioned in the New Testament. This causes confusion as it is sometimes difficult to know which Mary is referred to in any specific passage. Even attempting to make a list of these women can be difficult to do with certainty.

There are as many as seven different women who are named Mary.

1. Mary the mother of Jesus, **Luke 1:30-31**
2. Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha, **John 11:1**
3. Mary the mother of James and Joses, **Matthew 27:56** (some believe that this is Jesus' mother Mary, **Matthew 13:55**)
4. Mary the wife of Clopas, **John 19:25**
5. Mary the mother of John Mark, **Acts 12:12**
6. Mary a laborer at Rome, **Romans 16:6**
7. Mary Magdalene, **Luke 8:2**

Sometimes Mary Magdalene is equated to, and confused with, one or more of the other women with the same name which leads to even more confusion. When someone calls me and says, "This is Bob," I usually have to ask which Bob I am talking to as I know several. The same thing is true with names like "John", or "Mike", etc.

Here is a list of the twelve passages in the New Testament which certainly mention Mary Magdalene: **Matthew 27:55-56, 27:61, 28:1, Mark 15:40-41, 15:47, 16:1, 16:9-11, Luke 8:2-3, 24:10-11, John 19:25-26, 20:1, 20:11-18**. It is probably worth noting here that she is specifically called, "Mary Magdalene" in twelve of the verses listed above. Although we cannot be dogmatic about this, it seems that she is referred to this way to make it clear which Mary is being referred to. That may indicate that any time we read of "Mary" without the additional designation of "Magdalene" that it is a different Mary being referred to.

From the twelve passages named above, we learn the following things about Mary Magdalene:

1. Jesus cast seven demons from her.
2. She was one of the women from Galilee that ministered to Jesus.
3. This group likely provided financial support.
4. She was at the cross.
5. She was at the tomb as Jesus was buried.
6. She came to the tomb on Sunday morning to finish anointing His body with spices.
7. She was the first witness of the resurrection outside of the soldiers at the tomb.

There are some other observations that we could make from these passages, but these are the main ones for our purpose here. However, there are two things that we do not find in any of these passages which are key to this discussion:

1. There is no mention of her being a prostitute.
2. We do not see her anointing Jesus in any of these passages.

Since the Bible nowhere calls Mary Magdalene a prostitute, why do so many people believe that she was? The answer to this has to do with passages that do not mention Mary Magdalene at all. First is the passage in Luke where a woman anointed the feet of Jesus with fragrant oil from an alabaster flask.

“36 Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat. 37 And behold, a

woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, 38 and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.” **Luke 7:36-38 (NKJV)**

There are two things to notice carefully about this incident:

1. The woman who anointed Jesus' feet is unnamed.
2. Though she is called a sinner, her sin is not specified. She is certainly not called a prostitute. It is possible that that was her sin, but such a conclusion is nothing more than an assumption.

This incident, recorded by Luke, gets associated with Mary Magdalene because people connect it with the incident that John records of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointing Jesus' feet with the costly spikenard.

“1 Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. 2 There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. 3 **Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair.** And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. 4 Then one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, 5 ‘Why was this

fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?’ 6 This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. 7 But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. 8 ‘For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.’” **John 12:1-8 (NKJV)**

John makes it clear that this Mary is the sister of Lazarus.

“1 Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 **It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.**” **John 11:1-2 (NKJV)**

There are some who have tried to argue that this is the same incident that Luke recorded. Their arguments are not convincing but that is a topic for a separate article. However, even if they could prove that Mary, the sister of Lazarus, was the woman in Luke, this still falls short of proving that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute for two important reasons:

1. They would still need to prove that Mary, the sister of Lazarus, is the same person as Mary Magdalene. While some try to argue this, there is certainly no proof.
2. They would have to prove that the sinful woman in Luke was, in fact, a prostitute. This is merely an assumption on their part.

The truth is that none of the women in the New Testament who are called Mary are referred to as a prostitute. The idea that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute seems to have originated from Gregory I in 591 A.D. In a sermon that he preached on Luke 7, he equated Mary, the sister of Lazarus, with Mary Magdalene and the sinful woman in his text. He then concluded that the sin of this woman must be immorality. Though he never called her a prostitute, that seemed to be the implication. This then became the official position of the Roman Catholic Church until the Vatican issued a retraction in 1969. Interestingly, the Eastern Orthodox Church never claimed that Mary Magdalene was the same as Mary the sister of Lazarus.

There is an important lesson in all of this for everyone, but especially for those who teach and preach. Be careful you have your facts straight before you speak.

“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” James 3:1 (NKJV)

While it is easy to pass along common misconceptions, it is not good teaching or preaching. Further, it does injury to the reputation of Biblical figures that they simply do not deserve. Yes, Mary Magdalene had seven demons that Jesus cast out, but she is not called a prostitute in the Scripture.