

The Da Vinci Code: MARY MAGDALENE

AIM:

To look afresh at Mary Magdalene in the light of Dan Brown’s claim that she married Jesus, and to look at the evidence, the different views and the main issues it raises.

NOTE:

The main text is in black. It is interspersed with sections in grey, thus:

[These deal with secondary issues and back-up comments, etc.]

It is hoped that the double format will make it easier to grasp the main points, while placing related material close to them.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dan Brown has extended the fame of Mary Magdalene in his book/film *The Da Vinci Code*. Many folk have heard about her for the first time, while others will be more familiar with her name, but perhaps a little rusty on her history.

St. Mary Magdalene has a crucial role in Dan Brown’s novel.

He makes a claim that Mary Magdalene was ‘*a woman who carried a secret so powerful that, if revealed, it threatened to devastate the very foundation of Christianity.*’ [!] (chap. 56)

The novel’s climax (or is it anti-climax?) is apparently,

‘*...to kneel before the bones of Mary Magdalene.
A journey to pray at the feet of the outcast one.*’

What do we know about this ‘outcast one’?

2. HOW DO WE KNOW MARY MAGDALENE ?

a) The Scene

Various writers in the first, second and third centuries after Jesus Christ wrote about Mary Magdalene.

Christianity spread quickly through the Roman Empire, but then – as now – folk wanted their own, more congenial, version of it.

They wanted a Jesus-flavoured religion, but on their own terms.

The belief that Jesus Christ was *divine*, God himself, visiting us to save us, was the most difficult thing of all. They did not feel in need of ‘rescue’, because they did not want to face the ‘sin’ that made such ‘rescue’ (‘salvation’) necessary. If Jesus was really God, he couldn’t be ignored. But if he was only a man then there was no obligation to ‘follow’ him.

They preferred a Jesus prophet-figure who was just human without all the implications of his being God. So there was an alternative movement to reduce Jesus, as there is today. The idea that by his life and work Jesus actually *revealed* God could enable *anyone* to enjoy fellowship with him. This struck against the strong self-satisfaction of having a religion that enabled a member to be one-up on his/her neighbours. They, like so many today, preferred the smug pride of something exclusive and secret, to the unsettling wonder of something open to all.

So there was a move against acknowledging that God had revealed himself in Jesus in preference for turning his world-wide fellowship into specialist in-groups, with a secret-society

attitude in which only those who gained the right ‘knowledge’ could approach God. Far from enjoying what was revealed they focused on hidden meanings and codes.

Gnosticism

The name of this diluted and diverted Christianity was **Gnosticism**.

The word *Gnosticism* has a silent ‘g’, just as its related word ‘knowledge’ has a silent ‘k’.

Gnosticism borrowed Jesus and refashioned him. The end-product was a person who was only semi-divine. He was not a real human at all, his human appearance was that of a spook, or he simply got-dressed in human form by putting it on like an overcoat as and when he wished.

Gnosticism has the ‘real’ Jesus laughing as he looks down on the body suffering on the Cross!

Gnostics separated God from his world and denied the Christmas reality of God becoming flesh because, in their revised religion, matter was regarded as evil, and only the spiritual was good. A good God couldn’t (in Gnostic thought) become matter. The Cross of Christ was thereby robbed of meaning because hanging on it could not possibly be the Son of God.

The Gnostics had their own writings and interpretation of things and thought themselves ‘Christian’, but it was the religious version of the mint-with-a-hole! It was, at best, what I call Polo-Christianity: Jesus had a place, but the Good News at the centre had been removed. It was anaemic Christianity: Christ’s blood was not shed in sacrifice. It was not Christianity reduced to its bare bones (which could have been no bad thing), but filleted Christianity – its very bones had been removed!

Women: Promoted and Demoted

The contrast between Christianity and Gnosticism was enormous, but each was vast and varied.

Jesus Christ had a much higher view of women than the society around him.

[See: Jesus’ new interpretation of marriage - Mark 10:7,
Jesus & Woman of Samaria - John 4:27,
Little Children - Mark 10:14,
Woman-who-had-sinned – Luke 7:36-50.]

Christ replaced its casual divorce (whereby a wife could be divorced for providing a poor meal!) with something infinitely higher. Jesus’s famous affirmation that *the two should become one flesh* placed the wife at once on a level with her husband.

St. John’s Gospel records how Jesus not only broke with Jewish convention by speaking to a Samaritan, but he talked in public to a Samaritan woman! He spoke to her with both strength and tenderness. Of the disciples we read *they were astonished that he was speaking with a woman*.

The disciples also didn't much like it when Jesus took mothers' toddlers into his arms and blessed them.

Jesus was ready to bring God's forgiveness to the woman-who-had-sinned – which the religious leader thought very suspect!

(See Section 6: Mary Magdalene and the Prostitute.)

In Gnostic circles women could also be treated well, but the following (from a Gnostic Gospel) shows the movement at its worst. It is an important reminder that the mere mention of Jesus in the text is no guarantee whatever that it is in tune with the historic Jesus. Here is an alleged account of a disagreement between Peter and Mary Magdalene in which Jesus features:

Peter says to the disciples.

'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life,'

to which Jesus adds,

*'I myself shall lead her, in order to make her male,
so that she too may become a living spirit,
resembling you males.*

*For every woman who will make herself male
will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'*

One would not have to be pro-Christian or a believer to sense that Gnostic religion could be a 'different world' entirely from that of the New Testament. Its contrast is such that it would usually – to my mind – be misleading and dishonest to call it 'Christian' with a capital 'C'.

Just as you cannot start with a filleted fish and have it develop into a whole fish, so the filleted version of Christianity (Gnosticism) had to *come later* than the whole version of Christianity depicted in the first-century documents of the New Testament.

b) The Sources

The sources for our knowing anything about Mary Magdalene come, therefore, either from the first-century Christian documents or the second and third century Gnostic ones.

Written: between AD 50 – 95	Gospel of Mark Gospel of Matthew Gospel of Luke Gospel of John
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Written: 2nd Century	Gospel of Mary Magdalene
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Written: 3rd Century	Gospel of Philip
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In the next section is a summary of what we learn about Mary Magdalene from these sources.

3. THE MARY MAGDALENE STORY

a) The Earliest Accounts

Outline

The main facts they record are as follows: (Quotes in *bold italic*.)

- Called ‘Magdalene’ because she came from Magdala.
- Being designated by the name of her town not her husband meant that she was probably not married.
- Jesus delivered her from severe demonic possession.
[Because of the six ‘days’ of Creation and the completion on the seventh, the Jews often used ‘seven’ as a number of completeness. Mary Magdalene’s deliverance from ‘**seven demons**’ could indicate something akin to ‘complete’ possession, but whether it does or not, it certainly indicated the seriousness of her condition. See also Matthew 12:43-45]
- She and other women followed Jesus with his disciples in Galilee and *provided for them out of their own resources*, during the second year of Jesus’s public ministry.
- The women consisted of two groups; those whom Jesus had healed and those who were mothers of the Apostles.
Among the healed were Susanna and Joanna (Joanna’s husband had a position at the royal court).
Among the mothers was another Mary.
- Mary Magdalene was among the women who stayed near the Cross when Jesus was crucified.
Other women included Mary the Mother of Jesus, Salome & another Mary. (All the men, except John, fled.)
- When Jesus was laid in a tomb (within a sepulchre, or burial-cave) on Good Friday evening, Mary Magdalene & another Mary watched as Joseph of Arimathea had a huge stone rolled across the entrance.

The rest of Mary Magdalene’s story concerns Easter Day.

- The moment the restrictive regulations of the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday) were over, Mary, with two other women, went to the Sepulchre at dawn on Sunday to anoint Jesus’s body.
- She found the stone of the sepulchre had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. She stayed by it weeping, and the Risen Jesus appeared to her first.
- Jesus told her to go and tell the Apostles that he had been raised from the dead! *Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples ‘I have seen the Lord’...*

This is the gist of what happened. There is some variation between the accounts of the different Gospels, but not in the essentials. [The relevant references regarding Mary and the Resurrection are: Mark 16:1-8 and 16:9-11, Matthew 28:1-10, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-10. For the appearance of the Risen Christ to her: John 20:11-18, see also Matthew 28:9-10.]

b) Dan Brown's Version

Dan Brown's account of Mary Magdalene in *The Da Vinci Code* bears little resemblance to the account above for two reasons.

Gnostic

First, because he used the later Gnostic writings rather than the much earlier Christian Gospels. As a fiction-writer he is quite entitled to do that.

However, he claims that what he writes is factual and takes pains to stress its alleged 'truth' and the apparent support of scholars.

What Brown does – with deliberate dishonesty – is to turn history upside down!

He tries to lead his readers to believe that:

- The Gospels were deliberate lies written in the *fourth* century to give power to the Church by promoting a new idea – that Jesus Christ was divine!

and that -

- The Gnostic writings were written *earlier* than the Gospels and give the 'true' picture of Christ as merely human.

This is the opposite of the truth, which is that:

- Christians were very quickly convinced of Christ's divinity, which was confirmed for them by the Resurrection. They worshipped Christ. It was his divinity that prompted the worship and created the worshipping community (i.e. the Church).
- The Gospels do *not* give Christ's divinity a hard-sell as political propaganda, they present the humanity of Christ quite clearly. He is not the spook of the Gnostics, nor does he wear his human body like an overcoat.

In the Gospels Jesus:

Had a human body – he grew, he could be tired or hungry, he wept and bled.

He had human emotions – he loved, could be angry or sad.

He had human experiences – he obeyed his parents, was tempted, he learned, and worked.

[For Jesus's humanity see, e.g. Matthew 4:2, Mark 1:13, 10:21, 11:15-17, Luke 2:51-52, John 4:6, 11:35.]

Bad Friday

The second reason why Brown's account of Mary Magdalene bears so little resemblance to the Gospels' account is because Brown wants to convince his readers that Christ is not divine, so he has, of course, to **omit Christ's Resurrection!**

As far as the story of St. Mary Magdalene goes that is like blasting a five-foot hole in a four-foot wall! Little remains that is of any use or value. Judge for yourself from this outline of Brown's story of Mary Magdalene.

Outline

- There is a 3rd Century manuscript, the *Gospel of Philip*, which describes Mary Magdalene as the *companion* of Jesus, and mentions him kissing her. This led to the disciples complaining that Jesus loved her more than them.
- Brown uses his character Teabing to make three claims:
 1. **Jesus must have married.**
 2. **‘Companion’ means ‘spouse’.**
 3. **Therefore Mary Magdalene married Jesus.**Each of these topics will be discussed in the next section.
- Since, according to Brown, Jesus was not divine he intended the future Church to worship the ‘sacred feminine’.
- Mary Magdalene fled to France where her daughter **Sarah** was born.
- The Church launched a campaign to ‘demonize’ Mary, and Brown implies that this was done when the Emperor Constantine, in 325 AD, declared her to be the same person as the woman-who-sinned in Luke’s Gospel chapter 7.
- Brown alleges that since the 4th Century the Church has deliberately hidden the truth about Jesus and Mary.
- In 1969 the Roman Catholic Church withdrew its identification of Mary Magdalene with the woman-who-sinned in Luke’s Gospel.
- Mary is the ‘the outcast one’.

4. THE ‘CODE’ AND ITS CLAIMS

Teabing’s claim No. 1 : Jesus Must Have Married.

Teabing asserts that Jewish custom forbade celibacy, *therefore* Jesus must have married.

The Jews did *not* forbid celibacy: it is as simple as that!

St. Paul before his conversion had trained as a strict Jew and Jewish teacher, he claimed that he *advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors...*[Galatians 1:14]

When writing to the Church in Corinth about men and women, he mentioned in passing that he himself was not married [1 Corinthians 7:7].

He makes no great thing of it one way or the other. He does not regard celibacy as odd, but acknowledges celibate states, and actually commends them to those for whom they are suitable.

John the Baptizer was set aside before birth to be a prophet of God, and part of that special calling involved him avoiding strong drink and the usual comforts of clothes and food by living in the wilderness on a diet of locusts and honey. He may well *not* have married, but the point is that the foregoing of some of the ‘usual’ pleasures of life could be regarded by Jews as

a symbol of religious commitment and earn respect, not, as Teabing claims, condemnation. There were Jews of Jesus’s day who admired the celibacy practiced among the Essenes.

In the rich range of Jesus’s teaching there is an emphasis on the freedom to let go of things and the need for full commitment. He does not mention celibacy as such but the principle is in line with it.

Among Jesus’s recorded sayings is this one (when he deliberately used exaggeration to create a verbal ‘bombshell’ to make people sit up and think!)

This teaching trick is called ‘hyperbole’ from the Greek to ‘throw too far’!

‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple’. [Luke 14:26]

Of one thing we can be certain.

If Jesus did not marry it was not because he had a casual view of it. He viewed marriage in the highest possible terms, since, unlike the Gnostics, he did not view the body as evil. His tough line against divorce was a positive stance to safeguard marriage.

This view is still largely held among Christians today – and for the same reason.

Teabing’s claim No. 2: ‘Companion’ means ‘Spouse’

The companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on the mouth.

The above is the translation that Brown used from the *Gospel of Philip*. Unfortunately ants used the page for lunch one day and what actually survives is disappointingly:

*And the companion of the...
Mary Magdalene...
her more than...
the disciples...
kiss her...*

(It is a good job the ants didn’t return for supper, or there’d be nothing at all!)

Brown’s Teabing asserts that ‘companion’ means ‘spouse’, and then tries to give this assertion an aura of academic credibility by adding ‘*as any Aramaic scholar will tell you*’. Brown had not done his homework, so his addition earns him nothing but ridicule!

The *Gospel of Philip* was *not written in Aramaic* (the language Jesus used) but in Coptic (what we would term today as Egyptian).

The word used for ‘*companion*’ was a Greek import, so while it *can* mean ‘spouse’, it is not the normal word for a wife. In the New Testament (which was written in Greek) the word *never* refers to a marital or close relation.

The word translated ‘companion’ in the *Gospel of Philip* means ‘sharing’. It is used by St. Luke to describe the fishermen James and John’s as being Simon’s *partners*. St. Paul used it of Titus when describing him as his *fellow-worker*, and it is the word used by the author of Hebrews to indicate our *share* of the Holy Spirit.

[Luke 5:10, 1 Corinthians 1:7, & Hebrews 6:4.]

Teabing’s claim No.3 : Therefore Mary Magdalene married Jesus.

I have shown you (above) how Teabing’s formula

‘companion’ = ‘spouse’, therefore Christ = married

falls at its first hurdle. Nevertheless I shall press on and comment about the kiss.

If the phrase – even fragmentary – had appeared in the historic Christian Gospels it would have warranted attention.

The kiss in Jesus’s day was a widely used act of greeting, but that is not the answer because there appears to have been no social kissing between the sexes.

The junior kissed the hands of a senior. Judas opted to identify Jesus to the soldiers and police with a kiss – which he knew would not draw anyone’s attention. Judas probably kissed Jesus’s hands (though artists have always assumed otherwise) as it would have been presumptuous had he kissed Jesus anywhere on the head.

The social kiss between the sexes was rare. St. Paul encouraged the social kiss to be used as a greeting within the Christian family: ***Greet one another with a holy kiss***. But Biblical Commentators, I found, believe that it was only male-to-male or female-to-female.

This was the forerunner of the ‘Kiss of Peace’ used among Christians in worship today by which they symbolise God’s acceptance of the other person, and, ideally, also their own.

But with the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* there is no need to treat it as history, since Gnostic writing is not meant to be conventional narrative. It was all symbolic, and operated on the level of allegory, i.e. item A is a symbol for item B.

In the Gnostic context, Jesus’s kiss of Mary Magdalene will have symbolised the imparting to her of divine *gnosis*/knowledge, and have no sexual connotation.

In this section, I have outlined Dan Brown’s version of Mary Magdalene, and have shown how Teabing’s assumptions which ‘prove’ Jesus’s marriage simply cannot stand.

5. THE ‘CODE’ AND THE CHRIST

a) But What if Jesus *had* married?

I can almost hear this question being asked! It is one thing to say that Jesus did not marry – but what if he *had* done?

According to Brown, Mary’s secret, i.e. her marriage to Jesus – if exposed – *would devastate the very foundation of Christianity.*

Well, that’s just hype, and typical of the outrageous claims that Brown makes. The truth is that if Jesus had married, or if it were now discovered that he had, it wouldn’t *devastate the very foundation of Christianity* at all!

Work it out for yourself.

God had a task, and Jesus was the tool. This is neatly summarised in John’s Gospel chapter 3, verse 16 –

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but may have eternal life.

If Jesus was found to have been married, would it alter the ‘Gospel’ message of John’s summary quote above?

No!

Would his marriage alter the Christmas message of God born among us?

No!

Would his marriage alter the Good Friday message, of God dying to save us?

No!

Would his marriage alter the Easter Message that God raised him from the dead and that he lives?

No!

Would his marriage alter the Pentecost message that he breathes his living Spirit to guide and empower his Church?

No!

Would his marriage alter the authority of the Holy Scriptures (which are silent on the matter)?

No!

Would his marriage alter any of the traditional statements of Christian belief, e.g.

That ... ***for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,
Was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
And was made man.***

***For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered death and was buried.
In the third day he rose again...etc.***

No!

Would his marriage undermine the efficacy of the sacraments today?

No!

Would the existence of descendents alter in any way the full and finished work of Christ, or diminish his divinity?

No!

The above answers – which I expect you agree with - indicate that had Christ married it would neither

i) have devastated ‘*the foundation of Christianity*’,

nor

ii) have been such a threat to the Church that it would need to slaughter all who knew about it!

Essentials v. Non-essentials

Christians must distinguish between what is ‘doctrine’ and what is optional opinion.

I am sure there are many Christians who hold a very strong opinion indeed that Jesus never married, but they must beware of upgrading their opinion into a doctrine. Treating any *non-essential* as if it were *essential* – is heresy (as is also the opposite error of treating an essential as a non-essential).

There is a doctrine that Christ was raised from the dead and is alive.

There is a wide-spread opinion that he had long fair hair.

Doctrine differs from opinion!

My Christian faith is grounded on the truth of his Resurrection, but I can remain a Christian minister even if I think that Christ was as bald as a coot!

When Brown states that the knowledge of Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene would ‘devastate the foundation of Christianity’, he is failing to distinguish between doctrine and opinion, and placing centrally what does not belong there.

In stating the Christian position in contrast to Brown’s claims, Christians must be careful not to be tricked into also putting fringe items at the centre – and thereby distorting the truth still further.

The marital status of Jesus is not a doctrine requiring belief – it is a question on which Scripture says nothing specific. It had no need to, because it has no bearing on the saving work of Christ who ‘*died that we might be forgiven.*’

Jesus is the ‘foundation’ of Christianity. No opinion about his marital status – least of all the fictional fantasies of Dan Brown(!) – will devastate Him, or the salvation which he offers, or the world-wide worshipping community who love and serve him as their living Lord.

There are further items of Brown’s life of Mary that deserve comment, before I turn to Mary Magdalene’s being identified with the prostitute in Luke’s Gospel.

b) Constantine and the ‘Close’ Vote

Brown is correct in stating that the Roman Emperor Constantine presided at a grand Council of all the Church leaders at Nicaea in the year 325 AD. But Brown’s ‘cheerful sloppiness’ (to borrow one critic’s phrase) leads to his interchanging words like ‘Rome’, ‘Roman Empire’, ‘Vatican’, ‘Pope’, ‘Catholic Church’, ‘Roman Catholic Church’ regardless of date or place!

There was no *Roman* Catholic Church until 1054 when the Catholic Church split into the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Eastern Orthodox Church. There was no Vatican until over 300 years later.

In Brown’s story of Mary Magdalene it is implied that it was at this great Council that Constantine ‘demonized’ Mary; this was not so. It was not Constantine but the Pope, 250 years later, who did that what Brown describes – though whether it was her ‘demonization’ I rather doubt.

According to Brown, Teabing tells us that one purpose of the Council was to award by vote to the dead (and non-resurrected) man Jesus a 'divine' label to strengthen the church and empire.

There was a vote, true; but it was to confirm the belief in Christ’s divinity that had been held since the first century against the Gnostics and others around the Empire who wanted to dilute it or deny it.

All the Bishops from as far afield as Spain and Egypt gathered. On the matter of the divinity of Jesus Christ – the voting was as follows:

For – **218**

Against – **2**

Brown excels even himself by calling that ‘relatively close’!

Still, Brown seems never much concerned with actual facts; despite his diligence and determination to convince his readers that he is dealing with nothing else!

c) ‘My Lord and my God’

Jews – foremost among all nations – worshipped only the one God, and their Sabbath Day (Saturday) was set aside for his worship.

The earliest Christians were Jews, but when they worshipped they wanted to celebrate the Sunday-Resurrection of their Risen Lord. It was so important to them that they took a very

radical step – they switched their worship from the Jewish Sabbath (the last day of the week) to the ‘*first day of the week*’, because they wanted to celebrate Easter morning every week.

That could not have happened in the *first* century if Jesus’s ‘divinity’ was only a political label promoted in the *fourth*!

St. Paul was martyred in about AD 64. Around AD 55 – less than twenty-five years after Christ’s Death and Resurrection – Paul was writing to the church in Corinth about collecting for the needy and tells them to save up and bring their offering *on the first day of the week*, i.e. when they worship together.

No more than two years later, on Paul’s third Missionary Journey, it was in Troas, in Asia Minor, that Luke recorded *On the first day of the week we came together to break bread.*

[Acts 20:7. The author was Luke and he appears to have been using his diary at this point because of his use of ‘we’.]

In AD 61 at the latest, Paul was composing, or using, a hymn about Christ, which concludes:

*...therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

[Philippians 2:9-11, the hymn begins earlier at v.6.]

‘Doubting Thomas’ as he is usually called, when he finally encountered the Risen Christ said simply: *My Lord and my God* – which is as convenient a summary of first-century belief in Jesus Christ as one could find. [John 20:28.] He did not have to live until he was 400 years old to have it told him by the Emperor Constantine at Nicaea!

[There are endless other references, directly or indirectly, to Christ’s divinity. e.g. 1 Corinthians 8:6 and 1 Colossians 1:15-16 speak of him as the creator. Mark, the earliest Gospel begins: ...**the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God**, and is soon telling of Jesus’s healing the sick, cleansing a leper, and declaring the forgiveness of sins. ‘**Who can forgive sins but God alone**’ exclaimed those present. (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus states that he *does* have **authority on earth to forgive sins.**]

6. MARY MAGDALENE AND THE PROSTITUTE

There is an historical basis to Brown’s assertion that the Church ‘demonized’ Mary Magdalene, but is his interpretation correct? It is, I believe, nothing like as negative as it seems.

a) The Inverted Kingdom

The following story from Luke’s Gospel is of *immense* significance not simply in regards to Mary Magdalene but for an understanding of the Christian Gospel. As you may deduce from my title ‘The Inverted Kingdom’ the Christian understanding of God’s priorities as revealed in Jesus Christ can at times be the very opposite of what we assume is ‘normal’.

The incident and its parable come from St. Luke’s Gospel, chapter 7.

As you read it, note Jesus’s contrasting attitude to the Pharisee (religious teacher) and the woman who had been the sinner. See how Jesus turns upside-down the established order.

Before his birth his Mother has praised God for the very same ‘inversion’:

*‘He puts down the mighty from their seats
and exalts the humble and meek’*

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table.

And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

The custom was to eat reclining and propped-up on one’s left elbow. There was access, therefore, to a person’s feet ‘tucked-up’ from *behind*.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.’

Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ ‘Teacher’, he replied, ‘speak’.

‘A certain money-lender had two debtors, one owed five hundred silver pieces, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?’

Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.’

And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly’. Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon,

‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

‘You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.

‘You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

‘Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven: hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’

But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’

And Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

[Luke 7:36-50. For greater clarity I have made the following changes in the New Revised Standard Version. ‘Creditor’ to ‘money-lender’; ‘denarii’ to ‘silver-pieces’; ‘he’ to ‘Jesus’.]

b) The Sinner’s Salvation

Jesus’s estimate of the upright moral religious leader and the sinful woman is almost the opposite of social expectation and propriety.

The woman is the ‘star’ of the story, and Simon the villain!

Who is the educational ‘star’ pupil at a school – the genius, or the one who manages to ‘travel’ from very poor to very good? In a similar way the ‘star’ at a Weight Watchers is not the lightest person, but the one who has changed most.

In Christ’s view of things (and so in the Christian view of things) the Good News of the Gospel shows itself most fully among those who most need it!

In the Old Testament prostitution has been described as ‘a dark background against which God’s gracious forgiveness and restoration shine bright.’ In the Old Testament three prophets (Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea) each likened the nation to a prostitute for its unfaithfulness to God, but all three offered the promise that God will take the nation back, forgive ‘her’, and establish a new and loving relationship with ‘her’.

[Jeremiah 3:11-18, Ezekiel 16:53-63, Hosea 2:14 – 3:5.]

Matthew introduces his Gospel (in chapter 1) by giving part of Jesus’s family tree. The prostitute Rahab featured importantly in the nation’s history because she had been strategically guided by God in the entry into the Promised Land. Matthew does not *exclude* her, but he actually breaks and expands his sequence (v.5) deliberately to include her.

Matthew’s Gospel records a remark of Jesus to the Chief Priests and Elders no less -

‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you.’ (!) [Matthew 21:31, but see 28-32.]

The woman in the Pharisee’s house wanted to be close to Jesus – who was given the name Jesus because he would *save his people from their sins*. She is the object of God’s love, and being open to God, he was free to work within her.

The Good News of the Gospel cannot touch Simon because of his pride. The only thing Jesus can do is to begin to break his pride so that he can be remade, hence Jesus’s harsh attitude to him. For growth/healing/salvation pride cannot be blessed, it can only be broken.

It was in a sermon, in the sixth century, that the Pope said that Mary Magdalene was the woman in the story above. My suggestion – made in all seriousness, and with considerable experience of preaching – was that he was probably carried away by his excitement at the story you have just read!

Luke has only one reference to St. Mary Magdalene in his first twenty-three chapters, and that single reference occurs in the next-but-one sentence from the end of the account of the woman-who-was-a-sinner.

She is also a woman whose life has been dramatically changed by Jesus, for she is described as ***Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out.***

Some scholars think that the town of Magdala was notorious for its prostitution, and that to be called *Magdalene* might have said more about her source of income than the locality of her home, just as the term ‘Sodomite’ has not always carried its purely geographical meaning. But be that as it may.

c) The Gospel Symbol

If the Pope was not historically right in assuming that St. Mary Magdalene and the woman-who-was-a-sinner were one and the same, it was an easy devotional and pastoral move to want to see in the wonderful story of Mary Magdalene not just deliverance from evil, but also that distinctive heart of God’s rescue-work – the forgiveness of sin.

The Pope’s message that day will most likely have been that no member of his Christian congregation was too ‘bad’ to be forgiven. That is the great appeal of the woman-who-was-a-sinner story.

The Pope may well have wished – and taught – that his congregation should (like the woman) repent, encounter Jesus, receive God’s forgiveness, and then (like Mary Magdalene) go and tell others the Good News of the Gospel.

In aligning Mary with the woman, the Pope almost certainly did not set out to ‘demonize’ Mary Magdalene, but to expound the Gospel message enshrined in the story of the woman.

Anyway, later events do not give the impression that Mary Magdalene was ‘demonized’ by the Church. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* begins its article on her:

‘...one of Jesus’s most celebrated disciples, famous, according to Mark 16:9-10 and John 20:14-17 for being the first person to see the resurrected Christ.’

My impression from the number of churches dedicated to her just in England is that if there was any programme of ‘demonization’ then it was not very effective.

The list of places with churches in honour of St. Mary Magdalene begins – Abingdon, Accrington, Addiscombe, Adlestrop, Alfick, Alsager, Altofts, Arundel, Ashton, Ashton-on-Mersey, etc.

Perhaps the main pictorial logo for Oxford University is the Great Tower completed in 1507 and soaring 144 feet above one of Oxford’s earliest colleges: Magdalen (usually pronounced ‘Mawdlin’)

[The word ‘Maudlin’ reflects the joint-identity of the woman-who-sinned with Mary Magdalene since it means ‘emotionally tearful’ and hence sentimental.]

Statues of St. John the Baptizer and St. Mary Magdalene alternate around the pinnacles of the Great Tower: symbolising the one who first declared that the Christ had arrived, and the one who first declared that he had been raised from the dead!

*

An impressive memorial for Dan Brown’s ‘outcast one’!

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7. WHAT DOES ST. MARY MAGDALENE TEACH US?

Negatively

1. The failure of a male-dominated structure adequately to give full recognition to the women, and the pitiful failure of the Christian Church down the ages – and now – to affirm adequately Jesus Christ’s view of women.
2. The failure of Christians generally to declare by their lives, their words and their actions the revolutionary character of God’s ‘Inverted Kingdom’ which they are commissioned to implement as God’s programme for the saving of his world and its societies.
3. The tendency of Christians, under society’s influence, to ‘go soft’ on sin and thereby to make God’s ‘Good News’ – which they exist to proclaim – seemingly irrelevant to those who need it most.

Positively

4. That deliverance from evil was, and is still, God’s most relevant work to make-free for the abundant life that God promises for those ‘in’ Jesus Christ.
5. That the foundation of the Christian faith, and its community, is nothing less than the reality of the Risen and Living Christ encountered personally and corporately.
6. That God-ward love and proclamation to others belong hand in hand.
‘Do not keep clinging to me, but go and tell...’

[The Greek suggests that Mary kept clinging to Jesus. John 20:17]

The calling of every Christian is also to be, in an important sense, an ‘Apostle’, i.e. – a royal messenger of God’s salvation.

For a complete article on MARY MADGALENE in Leonardo’s *Last Supper* go to the article
DA VINCI CODE: THE LAST SUPPER.
Available on this website.