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‘Haag – by dint of a heady combination of pure zest, great imagination and refreshing irreverence (even, to be honest, sheer willpower) – drags Mary Magdalene, kicking and screaming, into the very heart of the Biblical narrative. He still leaves elbow room for God and Jesus (of course), but Mary, in his cunning and capable hands, becomes an all-powerful, all-singing and all-dancing Goddess of Light, a second Isis: “the watchtower, the lighthouse, the beacon”.’ Nicola Barker, *Spectator*

‘A well-researched and well-argued exploration of the myth of the Magdalene ... beautifully illustrated’ David V. Barrett, *Fortean Times*

‘Mirroring the title and scope of Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Haag pushes back legend and myth to uncover the real Mary Magdalene ... an exceptional overview of how she has been viewed by various cultures through the ages ... A thought-provoking re-examination of a misunderstood heroine of the Bible’ *Kirkus Review*

THE QUEST FOR MARY MAGDALENE

From the Bible to the Gnostics, Cathars and Feminism:
Mary Magdalene as companion of Jesus, goddess, whore and icon



MICHAEL HAAG

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PALESTINE IN THE TIME OF JESUS AND MARY MAGDALENE



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Introduction



IN 1969 DURING THE PAPACY of Paul VI the Vatican made some discreet alterations to the Latin mass. Until then the reading for the feast day of Mary Magdalene on 22 July was from chapter 7 of the gospel of Luke in which an unnamed woman enters a house where Jesus is a dinner guest and abases herself to him.

And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.
... And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven.

This story was replaced in 1969 by a very different reading, this time from chapter 20 of the gospel of John in which a woman identified as Mary Magdalene commands attention not because of

her supposed sins but because Jesus first reveals himself to her at the resurrection.

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.

Without making an unmistakeable public apology the Vatican was in effect saying that it had got it wrong about Mary Magdalene for one thousand four hundred years, ever since 591 when Pope Gregory the Great delivered his homily which declared that Mary Magdalene was a whore.

Not that anyone was listening to the Vatican's retraction in 1969, or perhaps they simply preferred the whore to the woman who witnessed the resurrection, the event that stands at the centre of the religion that has shaped the history and culture of the greater part of the world for the last two thousand years. Whatever the reason, in 1970, just a year after the Catholic Church changed its mind about Mary Magdalene, she scored a worldwide hit in the *Jesus Christ Superstar* album (followed by the stage musical in 1971 and the film in 1973) when in the person of Yvonne Elliman she sang a torch song, 'I Don't Know How to Love Him', about her passion for Jesus:

I don't see why he moves me.
He's a man. He's just a man.
And I've had so many men before,
In very many ways,
He's just one more.

Since then Mary Magdalene's reputation as a prostitute has grown as film after film presents her as a whore. In Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* Mary Magdalene is the woman taken in adultery in John 8 but is defended from

stoning by Jesus; her repentance is made a driving theme in the film. Even Mel Gibson's 2004 *Passion of the Christ*, though it is set entirely within the week leading up to the crucifixion, feels compelled to include a flashback falsely alluding to Mary Magdalene as the woman taken in adultery.

The public appetite for Mary Magdalene the whore is matched only by that for Mary Magdalene the wife of Jesus and even as the mother of his child. Witness to this is the huge media attention given to Harvard University's professor Karen King's announcement in 2012 of the discovery of an ancient papyrus fragment bearing the words 'Jesus said unto them, "my wife"' – not to mention the vast popularity of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* in which Mary Magdalene flees the Holy Land with her child by Jesus and founds the Merovingian dynasty of French kings.

Certainly in the Middle Ages the Cathars in France saw Mary Magdalene as the wife of Jesus in the divine world and as his concubine in the world of illusion, the world that they believed we inhabit in our everyday lives; while in the early centuries of the Christian era the gnostic gospels portray Mary Magdalene as the 'companion', 'consort' and even 'wife' of Jesus, as the woman he loved more than all the other disciples, their relationship often described in erotic terms. For that matter there are incidents even in the canonical gospels of the New Testament that have suggested to scholars that Mary Magdalene was indeed the wife of Jesus. For some the argument is not whether it was true but why the truth was edited out.

This touches on the larger question of Mary Magdalene's vision, the vision she shared with Jesus – and how much of that was suppressed or lost in the controversies that shaped the new religion which some have described not as Christianity but as Churchianity, an institution utterly alien to the vision of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene is a larger figure than any text, larger than the Bible or the Church; she has taken on a life of her own. In medieval times she was called 'the light-bearer', recalling her gnostic

epithet 'inheritor of light' in her search for the truth. She is the mediator of the divine mystery and she has remained a potent and mysterious figure ever since. In the manner of a quest this book follows Mary Magdalene through the centuries, explores how she has been reinterpreted for every age and examines what she herself reveals about woman and man and the divine.

PROLOGUE

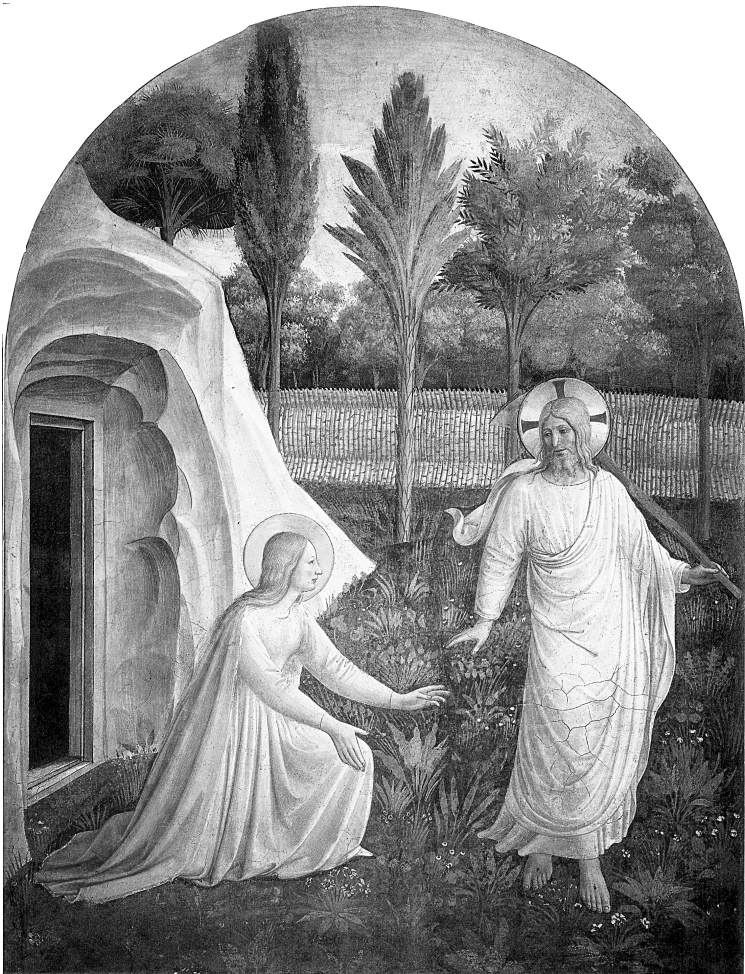
Jesus and Mary Magdalene



MARY MAGDALENE WAS WITH Jesus in Galilee where he preached the kingdom of God to people in their thousands and healed the sick and lame. And she accompanied Jesus as he journeyed to Jerusalem and entered the holy city in accordance with the prophecy, ‘humble and mounted on a donkey’ (Zechariah 9:9), but a challenge all the same, and where multitudes greeted him, waving palm branches and casting their garments before him and calling out hosanna. ‘Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest.’ When he came into Jerusalem, and ‘all the city was moved’, Mary Magdalene was there (Matthew 21:10).

When the Romans nailed Jesus to the cross, abandoned by his disciples, and he cried out, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’, Mary Magdalene was there. And when it was finished, Mary Magdalene followed as they carried his body to the tomb and she watched as the stone was rolled into place.

On the third day Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found that it was empty. 'Mary', said a voice, and she turned and saw that it was Jesus. 'Rabboni', she said, using the familiar Aramaic word for master, and reached out to touch him. 'Touch me not', Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, she who had touched him many times



"Touch me not," Jesus says to Mary Magdalene in the garden of the resurrection, she who had touched him so many times before. *Noli Me Tangere* by Fra Angelico, Convent of San Marco, Florence, 1442.

before. ‘Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God’ (John 12:17).

Passionately and spiritually, Mary Magdalene understood, and following Jesus’ command she faithfully carried his message to the disciples, his apostle to the apostles; Mary Magdalene, witness to the resurrection.

Yet Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name only fourteen times in the Bible – and only in the four gospels, never in Acts or anywhere else in the New Testament. But as little as that seems, it compares favourably to mentions of Mary the mother of Jesus. Apart from the accounts of the nativity and a few stories of Jesus’ childhood, Mary the mother of Jesus hardly figures at all – only seven times, and that includes occasions when she is unnamed. ‘The reader of the gospels’, says *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, referring to the mother of Jesus, ‘is at first surprised to find so little about Mary’.

As Jesus grows up, the role of his mother sharply decreases. She is mentioned in passing as he travels round Galilee where he is dismissive towards her (Matthew 12:47-49 and John 2:1-4), and again at the crucifixion though only in the gospel of John, and once more in Acts in the story of the Pentecost. And that is it for Mary the mother of Jesus. Her fame and the cult that surrounds her, her perpetual virginity, the reports of her Assumption, her title Mother of God, these and much more arose centuries later and are not found in the Bible at all.

Mary Magdalene, on the other hand, though she is mentioned only fourteen times, and though the gospels repeat themselves, telling and retelling their stories so that really she appears only on four distinct occasions – nevertheless, each of those occasions in which Mary Magdalene appears is crucial.

Mary Magdalene is at the crucifixion, she is at the burial, and she is at the resurrection, and before that she is with Jesus throughout his ministry in Galilee. As a woman and companion of Jesus she is the only person close to him at the critical moments that define his purpose, that describe his fate, and that will give rise to a new

religion; she helps support Jesus in his works, she is utterly fearless, and she is a woman of vision. Her character holds the secret of her name. At the beginning there is Jesus and Mary called Magdalene.

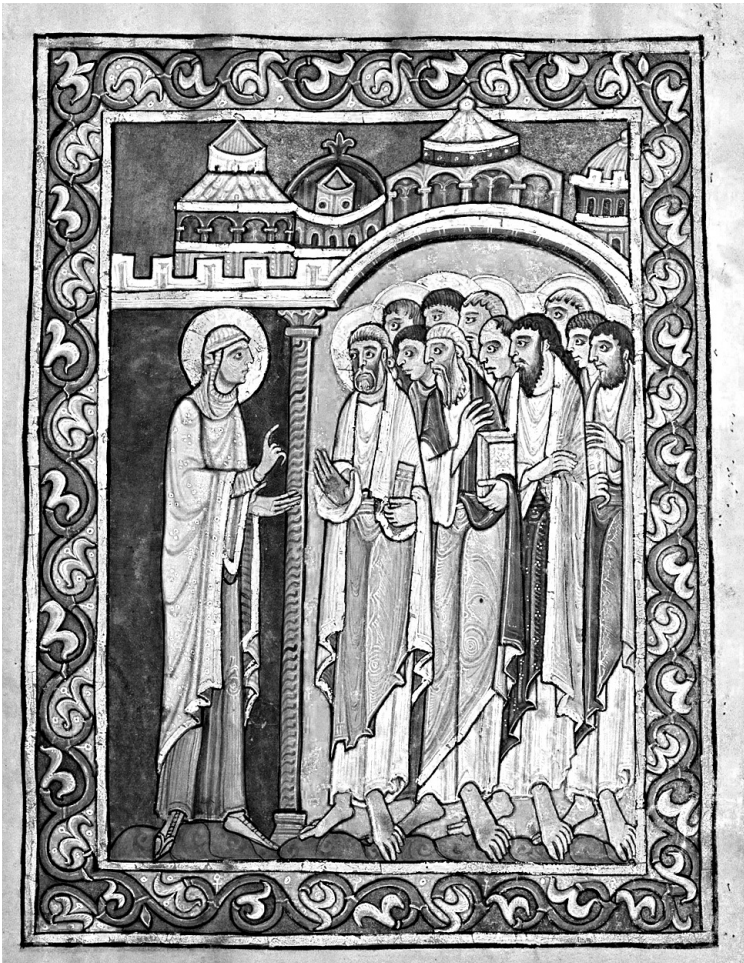
Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus

Mary the mother of Jesus appears primarily in chapters 1 and 2 of the gospels of Matthew and Luke which tell the story of the nativity and the infancy of Jesus – the virgin birth in a Bethlehem manger, the shepherds in the field, the star in the east, the worshipping magi – a story entirely ignored by the gospels of Mark and John which begin with the baptism of Jesus the man by John the Baptist.

Various scholars, among them Geza Vermes, a leading authority on Jesus, consider the birth narratives as legendary and say they were added to Luke and Matthew at a later date. These nativity stories, which in any case contradict one another (for example Matthew has the Holy Family, fearful for Jesus' life, fleeing Bethlehem to Egypt, while Luke has them returning to Nazareth after spending forty days peacefully in Bethlehem and Jerusalem), are unsupported by the other two gospels. Mark and John say Jesus came 'out of Galilee'; Mark makes no mention of Bethlehem while John does not contradict the assertion of the Pharisees that Jesus was born in Galilee, not Bethlehem (John 7:41-42). Apart from these birth and infancy chapters of Matthew and Luke, Mary appears in the gospels only seven times, five of those times described as the mother of Jesus but otherwise unnamed, and once in Acts.

Three of the references to Jesus' unnamed mother relate to one event which is described in Mark 3:31-35, Matthew 12:46-50 and Luke 8:19-21. Jesus has been healing and preaching and driving out devils and has attracted crowds of people up and down Galilee, but his friends and family fear that he is deranged and possessed by Beelzebub and they come for him. Instead he dismissively waves his mother and brothers away, saying his true mother and brothers are those who do the will of God.

The fourth time when the mother of Jesus is mentioned but not named is at the marriage of Cana where again she makes a



Mary Magdalene addressing the disciples – the apostle to the apostles.
From the Albani Psalter, c.1100.

nuisance of herself and Jesus turns on her and says, ‘Woman, what have I to do with thee?’ (John 2:4). For other reasons the marriage at Cana (whose marriage is it?) is an important event and will be mentioned later.

When she appears at the crucifixion in John 19:25 she is likewise not named, only identified as the mother of Jesus. John is the only

gospel which has Mary at the crucifixion of Jesus; she is not at the burial or the resurrection at all.

Mary the mother of Jesus is, however, named in the gospels of Mark and Matthew when villagers in Galilee are irate that Jesus should be preaching at their synagogue. They believe him to be a carpenter, or the son of a carpenter, from Nazareth and do not realise that he is a rabbi: 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us?' (Mark 6:3). Matthew 13:55 also mentions Mary and her sons by name but makes no mention of her daughters.

And finally Mary the mother of Jesus is mentioned by name in Acts 1:14 at Pentecost where after the resurrection the Holy Spirit descends upon those in the Upper Room.

Mary has the distinction of being the mother of Jesus, but there is nothing in their relationship to suggest that she had any understanding of what he was about. In the end there was a reconciliation of sorts when according to the gospel of John, though no one else, Mary came to see Jesus hanging on the cross and he acknowledged her with his dying breath, saying 'Woman, behold thy son!' (John 19:26).

In contrast, Mary Magdalene was Jesus' constant companion throughout his ministry in Galilee and helped organise and finance the scores of people involved in his mission to heal and bring salvation to the sick and the poor (Luke 8:1-3). She came with Jesus to Jerusalem, witnessed his crucifixion (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 20:1), watched to see where his body was laid (Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47), returned to anoint him on the third day and witnessed his resurrection from the dead (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1, 16:9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 20:11, 20:16, 20:18) – fourteen mentions of Mary Magdalene by name, as well as other mentions, as when she is included among 'the women from Galilee'.

Readers will be familiar with the notions of Mary the mother of Jesus as a perpetual virgin, the perfect mother and the Theotokos, 'the mother of God', of having been conceived immaculately, of

ascending into heaven, of being an intercessor between God and man, the one who knows the deepest human suffering, the woman always gentle and obedient to God's will. But nothing of this model of the 'perfect' woman is found in the Bible where she is a somewhat irritating woman who has no comprehension of what her son is about; instead she is an invention who belongs entirely to later centuries, a relatively minor biblical figure who was transformed into a major cult – while Mary Magdalene, the woman who knew Jesus, was turned into a whore.