

# Scholars say Bible's Mary Magdalene got a bad rap

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The name Mary Magdalene conjures up a Hollywood image of a voluptuous temptress, possibly a prostitute, who after hearing the message of Jesus of Nazareth sees the error of her ways and repents.

Hers is an inspiring tale of redemption that has been retold in countless works of art, in poetry, sermons and theological treatises.

But there's a problem with that popular image. It's not true.

Look closely at the text, biblical scholars say. There are seven mentions of Mary Magdalene in the four Gospels, and in none of them is there any indication that she engaged in prostitution, adultery or any other sexual misdeed.

Rather, in the Scriptures she is a woman, tormented by seven demons, who is healed by Jesus, becomes one of his followers and is the first person to encounter him after his resurrection.

For the last decade, a new generation of Scripture scholars, spiritual writers and church reformers, many of them women with a feminist outlook, have tried to set the record straight and uncover the real Mary Magdalene.

So how did this woman from Magdala in Galilee get such a reputation?

Part of the problem was her hometown.

"Magdala was known for fabric, feathers, fish and fallen women. It had a very busy red light district," says writer Liz Curtis Higgs, author of "Mad Mary, a Bad Girl from Magdala Transformed at His Appearing." "She was from a bad town, she had this shady history, and she is the only demoniac in the Bible who is named and whose demons are numbered. That's quite significant."

But the main culprit for Mary's reputation, according to tradition, is Pope Gregory the Great. Acclaimed for his church reforms, for Gregorian chant and the Gregorian calendar still followed by the Western world, he unfortunately did Mary Magdalene wrong.

Pope Gregory preached a sermon in the late sixth century that merged Mary Magdalene with two other biblical characters: an unnamed "sinful woman" in the Gospel of Luke who anoints Jesus' feet with perfume poured from an alabaster jar and dries them with her

hair, and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Jesus' friend Lazarus whom he raised from the dead.

Pope Gregory can't get all the blame, says theologian Jane Schaberg of the University of Detroit Mercy.

"The legend had a life of its own" before the pope's sermon, said Schaberg, author of "The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene." "He just puts the cap on it."

From that point, the image of Mary Magdalene as a repentant public sinner became fixed in the imagination of Western Christianity. The mischaracterization, however, never took hold in Orthodox Christianity.

The Vatican formally repudiated the false image of Mary Magdalene in 1969. But that teaching has never filtered down to many of the faithful.

Who, then, was Mary Magdalene?

Higgs argues that the sexy temptress image of Mary in popular culture, in novels such as Nikos Kazantzakis' "The Last Temptation of Christ" or in the musical Jesus Christ Superstar, are off base.

Higgs points out that nine times in the Gospels, Magdalene is included in a list with other women, and in eight of those lists, she is listed first.

"In that day and time, the order of listing indicated the order of importance. Mary had the pride of place every time, above Mary, the mother of Jesus, with the exception of one: when he addresses his mother from the cross."

Because the culture also honored age, Higgs believes Mary Magdalene was probably the oldest women on those lists. "Unquestionably, Mary Magdalene would have been the senior among the women," she says.

Schaberg turns to the Gospel accounts in the New Testament, as well as Gnostic writings from the early church that never made it into the canon of the Bible, like the Gospel of Mary, to draw a portrait of the saint. And her conclusion, one that is shared by several authors of recent works on the misunderstood saint, is that Mary Magdalene held a position of great prominence in the early Christian church.

"Naturally, the uncovering or the reconstruction of a historical person who lived 2,000 years ago, like the search for the historical Jesus, is extremely difficult," Schaberg says. "We can deal only with possibilities and probabilities. But in my book what I present is what I think is the probability that she had a central role in the creation of the Easter faith. Actually, I think it's the central role in the creation of the Easter faith."

Her contention is centered on the fact that Mary is the only figure whose presence is recorded in all four Gospels as being among the first witnesses to encounter Jesus after his resurrection. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, she is among a group of women.

In the Gospel of John, Mary, distraught on discovering the empty tomb, encounters Jesus alone, at first mistaking him for a gardener:

"Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabboni!' (which means teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her."

As the effort to accurately portray Mary Magdalene advances, many women have begun to embrace her as a symbol of feminine religious authority and inspiration. For about the last six years, Sister Chris Schenk, executive director of the Cleveland-based FutureChurch, which advocates a greater role for women in the Roman Catholic Church, has been encouraging women to celebrate Mary Magdalene's feast day on July 22.

"The entire proclamation of Jesus' resurrection depends on (Mary Magdalene's) witness because she and the other women were the only ones who accompanied him to his crucifixion, who saw his death, who saw his burial and who were witnesses to the empty tomb and experienced his risen presence," she said. "In the meantime, the male disciples went to Galilee. So we can say the Easter proclamation came to us through women of faith."