



Mary Magdalene and Orthodoxy: Apostle, Heroine or Feminist?

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Abstract

Mary Magdalene the so-called 'repentant prostitute' who became one of Christ's disciples, has been, and remains a very much debated and enigmatic persona in Christianity from its advent in the New Testament period. She is discussed in current films and contemporary academic and popular media and has been much deliberated upon in feminist scholarship and has even been considered to be the wife of Jesus, thus for some, attaining an almost divine status. There is a preponderance of literature from scholars who view her as a resilient, and liberated woman who buttressed Jesus financially and even spiritually. Her life was part of a social construct, and her story is told and fluctuates to serve dissimilar purposes of recollection, according to diverse social or religious developments. Mary Magdalene has also been the victim of fallacious identification with the adulteress in the Gospel of John 7. The historical Mary Magdalene is thus topical in continuing academic and theological deliberation. In the Gnostic gospel of Mary and the modern feminist movement, she has distinctive roles and is viewed in terms of these. The Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches venerate her as a Saint. This article uses a method of interpretation and exegesis based on traditional and contextual approaches to suggest who Mary Magdalene was and why she is important in the Christian faith.

Key words: Mary Magdalene, Eastern Orthodox Church, feminism, biblical scholars, patriarchy

Introduction

The status of women in New Testament times was decidedly lower to that of men, given the patriarchal nature of society. Jesus thus had a huge impact on what were rigid customs and practices relating to women. Women were to an extent considered to be lesser beings suited only to conducting domestic chores, with little worth and virtually no dignity. In Sirach 42:14, we read 'Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; It is a woman who brings shame and disgrace'. Thus, it is no surprise that in the highly androcentric Holy Bible in the Jewish and Christian traditions in particular, women are not considered to be truly key characters, with the exception of the Virgin Mary in the latter tradition. In the New Testament, The Virgin Mary was to an extent an exception, as the humble, God-fearing "God-bearer" (*Theotokos*) who gave birth to Jesus Christ and she is certainly the most venerated of all Biblical women. Mary Magdalene who was also an intriguing character, recognized the holiness of Jesus Christ and devoted her life to following Him, from city to city. Mary Magdalene's story is a symbol of our journeys with the Lord.

Women like Mary, were generally marginalized and often used as a mere narrative device in Biblical writings. In the Old Testament there are nonetheless, numerous women of importance who had influence in society and played a key role in the Bible. For example, there are inter alia, Eve, Sarah, Jochebed and Deborah, and each of these stood out in the male-dominated social construct. The social construction of gender is in essence a theory in feminism, and sociology about the foundation of gender variance between men and women. According to



this interpretation, society and culture generate distinctive gender roles, which are prescribed as ideal or appropriate behaviour for a person of a specific sex. In the Judaeo-Christian world of the first century, women were considered to be an inferior sex and to an extent marginalised

In the Old Testament, Eve was the original woman, created by God to be a mate and collaborator for Adam, the first man. From the rib of Adam, Eve was fashioned (Genesis 2:22). The rib signposts a lateral and thus equal relationship with Adam as her partner, to labour and to exist, side by side. Sarah was married to Abraham and they moved to Canaan, the land that the Lord gave them for an inheritance and their faith was tested (Genesis 12–14.) Abraham, the patriarch would be “a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4–5, 15) and his 90-year-old wife Sarah would have a son (Genesis 17:16; 18:10). Their son, Isaac, became the father of Jacob, later known as Israel, whose descendants turn out to be the twelve tribes of Israel. Sarah as the wife of Abraham was thus privileged as her progeny became the nation of Israel, which produced Jesus Christ.

Rebekah was barren, just as her mother-in-law Sarah had been. Rebekah married Isaac but was unable to bear a child until Isaac prayed for her. When she delivered twins, Rebekah favoured Jacob, the younger, over Esau, the first-born. Through an elaborate trick, Rebekah helped influence the dying Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. Jochebed, the mother of Moses, influenced history by surrendering what she treasured most to the will of God. When the Egyptians began killing the male babies of Hebrew slaves, Jochebed put baby Moses in a waterproof basket and set it adrift on the Nile River. Despite being taken-up into the Egyptian palace, God nonetheless allowed Jochebed to be the baby Moses’s wet nurse. Moses was specifically chosen to lead his people to liberty. Jochebed’s faith protected Moses to become Israel’s greatest prophet and their lawgiver. Deborah served as the only female judge in a lawless period of Israelite history before the country obtained its first king (Judges 2:7). Deborah recruited the help of Barak to defeat the oppressive general Sisera. Deborah’s wisdom and faith in God was an inspiration for the people and Sisera was defeated (Judges 4–5). Deborah’s leadership role allowed Israel to live in peace for 40 years. Each of these examples and other women of the Bible used her unique character to accept her situation, and we still remember them today despite the downplayed role of women in the Christian tradition.

When people however speak of Mary Magdalene, she is generally considered to be an enigmatic and figure, who is associated with ‘lust, loyalty, belief, prostitution, repentance, beauty, madness, and sainthood’ (Schaberg, 2004). Diverging from such notions to ensuing Christian interpretation, as is reflected in prevalent belief, there is absolutely no evidence that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. However, the image of Mary Magdalene as a profligate, sexualized woman has continued in Western culture, including stigmatizations of her in Jesus Christ Superstar and The Da Vinci Code. The observation that she led a sinful life before she encountered Jesus is due to misperception between her and an unnamed woman who is simply identified as “a sinner” (Beavis, 2012). This woman anoints Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:36-50). An additional Mary who is the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany is the one anoints Jesus’ feet when he visits their home (John 12:1-8). In Luke’s gospel the woman seems to be an uninvited guest at the dinner party in Capernaum (Luke 7:1) which takes place in the house of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36). According to Beavis (2012), the essence of the story is the woman’s faith and the forgiveness of her sins (7:47-50). By contrast, in John’s story, Bethany is the place in which Mary is acknowledged as a treasured friend of Jesus (11:5) who then anoints Jesus in her brother’s home (12:1) as a sign of her gratitude for the raising of Lazarus (Beavis, 2012). Jesus associates her act of dedication with His own imminent burial (12:7).

Mary Magdalene’s designation identifies her as “Mary of Magdala,” (Μαγδαλά) a small town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee and it differentiates her from the other Marys’ in the New Testament. Jesus went to Magdala by ship on the Sea of Gennesaret (Matt. 15: 39). In



many passages in the Talmud and Midrash "Magdala" occurs as an alternative of "*Migdal Zabba'aya*" (tower of the dyers). (Gottheil & Krauss, n.d.). The name Magdala thus means "tower of dyers" and in the time of Christ, it was a prosperous town on the coast of Galilee about five kilometres from Capernaum. The town had dye works and basic textile factories, which supplemented the wealth of the community. Mary Magdalene may well have been connected with the industries of the town since it appears that she was relatively well-off which would have allowed her to serve the Lord.

In the Mel Gibson film *The Passion of Christ*, Mary Magdalene is incorrectly associated with the unidentified adulteress (John. 7, 53-58), whom Jesus saves from stoning by His utterance: "Let him who is sinless among you cast the first stone" (8, 7). It is abundantly clear in scripture that Mary Magdalene was a devotee of Jesus and this has resulted in a tradition emerging which asserts that that she may well have been Jesus' wife and lover. Most early Christian gospels make reference to her and she is viewed as a disciple of Jesus following Him on His journeys. Despite the fact that she was linked with Christ's death and resurrection, Paul does not mention her in the Book of Acts or in any of his numerous epistles. In the view of some non-traditional Christians, Mary is a divine character who is the female counterpart of Jesus Christ and His wife and spiritual partner.

Mary Magdalene is a character who manifests a great deal in the gospels and was also discussed in a range of Christian literature of the fourth and fifth centuries. Little is known about her persona except that she gets conflated with a sinful woman who attended a dinner where Jesus was being entertained at the home of a Jewish leader. Because this woman washes Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair she is termed a sinner. The woman is assumed to be Mary Magdalene who is then presumed to be a repentant prostitute based on an assumption. There is no proof either, that Mary Magdalene should be identified with the women who anointed Jesus' feet (Like 7:36; Matthew 26: 6-13) or for that matter even with Mary of Bethany, who is mentioned in John 11:1-2 and also Luke 10:38) (Overman, 1993).

In Paul's epistles he does not have the women as witnesses to the resurrection while all the gospels have women as witnesses to this exceptional event in history, and Mary Magdalene is prominent among these women. In the spirit of its time (*Zeitgeist*), the transformed status of Mary Magdalene and women in general, as portrayed in her encounter with the risen Lord cannot be underestimated. Mary could only obtain a dependable understanding of her human worth and herself (as could other women) namely the pneumatic, "spiritual", as opposed to their fleshly existence, through an act of grace by the Godman (*Theanthropos*). This invariably came from external actions, namely via her proclamation of the Word (*kerygma*) (van Aarde, 2014).

Mary Magdalene's authority and standing was restricted because of her gender. Both she and Peter play huge roles in the spreading of the gospel. However, whereas Peter denied Jesus three times, he is portrayed as a tough and resilient human being on which the Church was built. Mary's role is diminished due to the inferior role apportioned to women in their patriarchal world, and it is believed that a better understanding of Mary Magdalene can invigorate contemporary Christianity (Bourgeault, 2010: 16).

Mary in the Canonical Gospels

The Gospels as found in the New Testament, were written in Greek based on oral tradition decades after the Jesus's death and by authors who did not necessarily know him. The four gospels of the New Testament namely Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are the foremost source of information on the life of Jesus Christ. Each of the Gospels tell us about of Mary Magdalene's continuous attendance as a disciple, at the crucifixion, and then her journey to the tomb and finally her night watch there while waiting to anoint his lifeless body. She was



also the first to witness the resurrection. Jesus spoke Mary's name first, telling her to spread the news of His Resurrection with the other disciples. In the New Testament period, women enjoyed an elevated status given to them by Jesus and the apostles. It is clear that women played an important part in the ministry of Jesus. Amongst His closest friends and close followers were women (Matthew. 27:55-56; Luke 23:49, 55). Mary Magdalene was clearly on the followers of Jesus occupying an inner circle of space. Mary is mentioned parsimoniously but at critical points in each of the four Gospels.

The first mention of Mary Magdalene is when Jesus is traveling through the various villages, and "proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1). With Him are the disciples along with "some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities," including "Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8:2). Joanna and Susanna, also followed Jesus and Mary is believed to have provided for them out which suggests that she was from a wealthy family background. Mary was thus a woman who fought with illness and malevolence until she met Jesus, and that after He cured her, she spent her life following Him.

We must also remember that women were the last to leave the Lord's cross on Golgotha and the first people to perceive His resurrection (Luke 23:55). Mary Magdalene was present at the time of Jesus crucifixion in Mark 15 which is echoed in Matthew (27: 56, 61), Matthew (28: 1) and also John (19:25). We read that women watched from a distance, and Mary Magdalene was amongst them. "Some women were there, looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joseph, and Salome. They had followed Jesus while he was in Galilee and had helped him" (Mark 15:40-41).

Subsequent to Jesus being wrapped in linen and brought to the tomb sponsored by Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and another Mary saw where Jesus was laid and sat opposite His tomb (Mark 15:47, Matthew 27:61). The ensuing morning, they went to the tomb to anoint His body with spices and they found the tomb empty (Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1, John 20:1). When they saw the stone was rolled away, Mary ran to Simon Peter and "the other disciple" and cried out, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." (John 20:2). The disciples, clearly did not comprehend that Jesus would rise again, and returned to their homes but Mary was resolute and remained behind weeping, and Jesus appeared to her (John 20:8-18).

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:15-17). In the gospel of John then, Mary Magdalene meets with the resurrected Jesus and she says she has seen the Lord (20:18). Mary Magdalene was 'not only the first witness to the resurrection, but the first to announce it publicly. In two of the four gospels this is a charge to which she is specifically commissioned by Jesus himself' (Bourgeault, 2010:10).

This encounter also in Matthew (28:9), demonstrates that Mary was significant character with the authority of an apostle and this is a critically important issue (de Boer, 2004: 176). However it may be argued that since Mary Magdalene asks someone she reflects upon as being a gardener what has happened to the Lord, this may have been written to diminish her stature and make her look foolish. It is almost as though she, as a woman, is incapable of assessing what has transpired. Mary Magdalene is further requested to pass on the information of what she has been informed of, to the men, namely Simon Peter and the other disciples, underscoring the lesser status of the female sex in New Testament society. Mary Magdalene's



worth and authority in the resurrection passages is severely moderated is by presenting her as an untrustworthy source of information. This is not surprising since 'women were regarded as worthless witness' (Wright, 2001: 219). Mary Magdalene as was the case with all women in 'man's world', was likely regarded as untrustworthy and certainly unreliable. Her role in the canonical gospels mirrors much of the opposition towards women playing any sort of leadership role.

Based on literary evidence the apostolic authority of Mary Magdalene increases in the latter part of the first century. In the second century, many considered her to be an apostle. The Gospel of Mary (apocryphal book dated to the 5th-century) and the Sophia of Jesus Christ 3rd century depict her as an apostle. In Matthew's gospel, which was composed between 80 and 90 C.E., or possibility between 70 to 110 C.E., Mary is not viewed as an apostle (Duling, 2010). This is most likely due to the fact that society was androcentric and generally biased towards females. Thus, Mark and the other canonical authors possibly dismissed female-based exchanges out of hand, being as fundamentally less significant (Kinukawa, 2001: 175).

In John's Gospel (1st Century), it is not clear if she is considered to be an apostle, but most likely could have been viewed as such. A Johannine Community, of sorts gave rise to the gospel (Ehrman, 2004) which was one of the most influential of the early Church (De Santos Otero, 1993) and their view was important. By contrast with others John 20:14-18 provides hints that point to a clear apostolic understanding of Mary Magdalene (Schaberg, 2004: 327-339). John ironically also promotes promoting gender equality as he asserts, in John 1:12 that all people, men and women alike, have the opportunity to become children of God. When Jesus appears to a larger group of disciples than just the eleven, Mary was probably present, and a recipient of the Holy Spirit (Hearon, 2004).

Mary Magdalene is only mentioned before Jesus' crucifixion in the gospel of Luke. Thus, Luke downplays her role and possibly does not afford her with any apostolic authority. In Luke 8:2 it is evident that her early appearance does nothing to increase her authority. Luke's understanding of Mary is clear in his narrative. He challenges her persona as he informs us of a woman who was exorcised of evil spirit possession and healed of infirmities- a lesser being (Miller, 2009). He also creates the impression that she follows Jesus out of gratitude as opposed to true devotion to Him and His cause and is nothing more than a simple woman who is incapable of deep spirituality like men. Unfortunately, Jews had a low view of the female sex. A.W. Verral, a British classics scholar associated with Trinity College, Cambridge, has stated that one of the principal diseases of which ancient civilization perished was its low view of women (Deffinbaugh, 2004). This was the patriarchal world into which Jesus was born. Women did not preach when they accompanied Jesus and neither did He select any women as one of His twelve apostles. He did also not summon women to the Last Supper (Matthew 26:20). Women were never placed in any serious position of authority. Matthew does not give Mary any apostolic qualities, but in his gospel he re-counts the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and states explicitly that it is to Mary Magdalene and an additional woman named Mary (Matthew 28:9-10).

The disciples who are men in Matthew's gospel are viewed as key apostles and treated as such in the writing, whereas the women encountering Jesus on the way from the tomb are lesser beings in terms of their importance, and instructed by Christ to impart what they have witnessed to others, and that is that. The women are then merely important based on their sighting of the resurrected Lord and their roles are limited. They were not expected to preach anything. Nonetheless, despite the fact that there were numerous women who shadowed Jesus and contributed to His ministry, it is Mary Magdalene who is undoubtedly the most renowned based on her sighting of Jesus after His glorious Resurrection. Women observed the crucifixion and many followed Jesus from the outset of His ministry. We can thus say they



were disciples since they typified discipleship (De Boer, 2004). In the gospels of the New Testament, Mary Magdalene, appears with other women. However in other writings she acts as one of the disciples, with a special calling to teach and preach. Fiorenza (1992) asserts that Mary was in a 'discipleship of equals', which fashions a basis upon which to rebuild Mary Magdalene as a truly reliable, trustworthy and authoritative disciple of Jesus and also possessed excellent leadership talents.

The Role of Women in the Social Order

Mary Magdalene is also a figurative personality for the renovation of the female identity in what was a highly patriarchal social system in which women were generally considered to be lesser beings. Jesus restored meaning to the lives of all people including women. A woman, was in essence only viewed as a mother and her ability to get pregnant and that gave meaning to her life (Botha, 2000).

People came to Jesus to heal them due to their faith and prayer and the belief that he had divine power and could heal them supernaturally and their mystical experiences provided a foundation for their spiritual healing (Walker & McClenon, 1995). "Jesus went about all Galilee...healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people" (Matthew 4:23). He gave sight to the blind, unstopped deaf ears, cleansed lepers, made the lame to walk, and raised the dead (Matthew 11:4-5). Given these situations, the revelation of Jesus to Mary Magdalene at the tomb could well have been a further spiritual healing event for her based on her mystical experience, which simultaneously elevated the general female status. In the patriarchal context of the social world of the first-century Mediterranean world, the supreme beings were males and fathers (the pater familias), exercised total legal control over his spouse and children. In this rigid system, Mary Magdalene is presented not simply as a mere woman disciple, but as one who holds an honoured position over many other disciples of both sexes. She holds a preeminent status and learned from Jesus through their closeness to Him and is able to transform her life and thus give hope to women in general.

Mary in other writings

The Sophia of Jesus

The Sophia of Jesus Christ (The Wisdom of Jesus Christ) is one of the Coptic Gnostic tractates derived from the Nag Hammadi codices dated to the 3rd century or 4th century C.E. In The Sophia of Jesus Christ, discovered in Egypt in 1945, Mary is viewed as being apostolic in nature. The work bears similarities with the Epistle of Eugnostos, which also derives from the Nag Hammadi codices. The work emanates from two separate copies of the text. The first copy is in Nag Hammadi Codex III (NHC III) with a second copy preserved in the Berlin Gnostic Codex. There is then also a third portion of the text in Greek which was discovered among the Oxyrhynchus papyrus documents. There are then three different copies of this scripture confirmed from three distinct ancient sources, two in the Coptic language, and one in Greek.

Certain scholars contend that the work is a replication of the factual, chronicled, sayings of Jesus Christ, which is a possibility if these are dated to the 1st century C.E. There is another school of thought which argues for a much later date, thus making the work untrustworthy and a mere hearsay secondary source. The Sophia of Jesus Christ does not place Mary above the other disciples and she is not unique in obtaining special teaching. She is rather to be viewed as one who is a group member assigned with a special task. The Sophia of Jesus Christ considers her as having being commissioned by Jesus and relies on her contact with Jesus (Hartenstein 2006: 262-265).



The Gospel of Mary

The Gospel of Mary is an Apocryphal and a Gnostic gospel which was discovered in 1896 in a 5th-century papyrus codex written in Sahidic Coptic. The codex Papyrus Berolinensis 8502 was bought in Cairo by the renowned German scholar Karl Reinhardt (Bernhard, 2006: 2).

The Apocryphal “Gospel of Mary”, which was printed as late as 1955, enlightens us on the early Christian community’s thoughts on Mary Magdalene which are expressed and pay homage to her memory. It offers a convincing view of the constructive role played by her in John’s gospel. The Gospel of Mary is plotted onto the gospel of John’s version of Mary’s meeting with the risen Lord. John’s links with Gnosticism are recognised by many intellectuals including Bultmann (1971). The Gospel of Mary contains numerous dialogues between Mary Magdalene and Jesus and summarises her role in the Gnostic tradition. It is considered to be the perfect gospel in which to study Mary Magdalene’s part in the life of Jesus. The gospel gives the idea that Mary Magdalene was a disciple, selected by Jesus for special teachings. While the disciples are disheartened and inconsolable concerning Jesus’ death, it is Mary who stands out as a comforter reminding them that Jesus’ remains with them despite His death. Peter requests her to enlighten them about what Jesus which said to her. She then claims that Jesus spoke to her the same day in an apparition. The text has a Gnostic origin and stresses infinite and abstract metaphysical truths (Parrott, 2012). It is obvious that the Gospel of Mary was written by an author/s who were cognizant of the canonical gospels and their contents, because it reflects many of the sayings of the Lord in the canonical texts (Tuckett, 2007). Birger A. Pearson states in “From Saint to Sinner”, that the non-canonical Gospel of Mary enhances Mary Magdalene’s role immensely. While her role in the early church is subject to much speculation, she is nonetheless currently receiving greater respect in theological circles, neither for being considered to be the wife of Jesus, nor for being a prostitute, but for being a devoted disciple of her beloved *Rabboni* (teacher and mentor) Jesus Christ (Biblical Archaeology Society, 2018).

In the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, she is a disciple who comforts others and inspires them. She is thus viewed as a special woman. The gospel of Mary accentuates and preserves the apostolic authority of Mary and it begins with the appearance of the risen Jesus to twelve male and seven female disciples. Jesus enlightens them concerning heavenly mysteries and responds to the questions of Mary and four disciples (Parrott, 1979). “The Gospel of Mary is about inter-Christian controversies, the reliability of the disciples’ witness, the validity of teachings given to the disciples through post-resurrection revelation and vision, and the leadership of women.” (King, 1994: 602). The select group ultimately begin to preach what they have learned. They are collectively referred to as “holy apostles” (BG p.114, 12f; NHC III p.112,19f). Thus Mary is considered to be an apostle (King, 2003) who consoles others:

But they were grieved. They wept greatly, saying, "How shall we go to the gentiles and preach the gospel of the kingdom of the Son of Man? If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?" Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren, "Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for His grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather let us praise His greatness, for He has prepared us and made us into men." When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the [Saviour]....Peter said to Mary, "Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Saviour which you remember - which you know (but) we do not, nor have we heard them." Mary answered and said, "What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you." And she began to speak to them these words: "I," she said, "I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him, 'Lord, I



saw you today in a vision.' He answered and said to me, 'Blessed are you that you did not waver at the sight of me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure.' I said to him, 'Lord, how does he who sees the vision see it through the soul or through the spirit?' The Saviour answered and said, 'He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but the mind which [is] between the two - that is [what] sees the vision...' (Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Library in English, 1990).

In the Gospel of Mary it is Peter who opposes Mary's words, predominantly because she is a woman. (De Boer, 2006).

When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Saviour had spoken with her. But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, "Say what you (wish to) say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Saviour said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas." Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Saviour: "Did He really speak with a woman without our knowledge (and) not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did He prefer her to us?"...

Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Saviour? Levi answered and said to Peter, "Peter, you have always been hot - tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Saviour made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why He loved her more than us. Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect man and acquire him for ourselves as He commanded us, and preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Saviour said." ... and they began to go forth [to] proclaim and to preach. (Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Library in English, 1990).

The ultimate scene in the Gospel of Mary offers an indication that Mary is indeed Mary Magdalene. Levi defends Mary and what she has been teaching and says to Peter, that the the Saviour undoubtedly knows her very well which is why he loved her more than the other apostles. Such dialogues are commonly concerned with the notion of the Saviour as a prompt to human beings of their special bond with God and accurate identity, as well as the understanding of the believer that one's redemption entails of atonement and a return to God and freedom from death. There was nonetheless doubt and not all approved of what she said she saw of Jesus after his resurrection:

But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, "Say what you think concerning what she said. For I do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are of other ideas."...Peter also opposed her in regard to these matters and asked them about the Savior. "Did he then speak secretly with a woman, in preference to us, and not openly? Are we to turn back and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"

Generally speaking, an apostle is someone who is commissioned by God to impart knowledge and to preach (Brock, 2003) which is what Mary Magdalene did, even though Valantasis argues that Jesus would not likely have revealed such important teachings to a woman, and in any case, her stature cannot be superior to that of any of the male apostles (Valantasis,



2006). Mary Magdalene's intricate role is in part due to the uncertainty and argument concerning her numerous depictions. Efforts have been made to diminish her importance in some circles, but in others she is highly respected, and plays a critical role in the New Testament and carries to us an indispensable key message of Christianity. Ehrman (2003) states: "Mary (Magdalene) is accorded a high status among the apostles of Jesus." This is backed up by the notion that Levi acknowledges that Jesus indeed loved her more than any of the male apostles. Mary said she had a dialogue with Jesus, but both Andrew the first-called and his brother Peter interrogated this. What transpired is uncertain since a number of pages of the gospel of Mary have never been found. King asserts that the Gospel of Mary offers us a fascinating hint into a unique type of Christianity which was for lost centuries in which the human soul was liberated from materialism and the angst of dying. It was a time in which women played significant leadership roles. She argues that the work is a radical understanding of Jesus' teachings as a pathway to inner spiritual gnosis which discards the Crucifixion as the path to eternal life (King, 2003). Furthermore, the work demonstrates the turbulent times in which Mary lived and calls on us to reconsider the foundations of ecclesiastic authority (Hartenstein, 2006: 326). The Gospel of Mary Magdalene demonstrates a Christian community in which she is viewed as a disciple and a leader, and yet she is confronted and silenced by Peter, since women were not considered able or suitable to play important roles. Peter and Andrew's stance concerning Mary in the Gospel of Mary indicates strong orthodox positions which repudiate the cogency of esoteric revelation and discard the authority of women to teach in the early Christian world (King, 2003).

Schaberg (2004) in her book *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, presents a worthwhile nine-point "profile" of Mary as expressed in the Gospel of Mary. She views Mary as a key follower of Jesus and exists as a character, and also as a memory, in a documented world of androcentric language and staunch patriarchal ideology. She is not afraid to speak her mind and plays a strong leadership role perhaps even stronger than the male disciples. Mary is he is a fanciful character and praised for her superior spiritual insights and understanding. She is also identified as an intimate companion of the Lord and she is opposed by a few of the male disciples. Critically, she is defended by Jesus, demonstrating the desired social status which is borne out of her transformative and life changing encounter with the Lord.

The Roman Catholic Pope, Gregory the Great, considered her to be penitent woman and said of her:

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. What did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? It is clear, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer's feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance (Pope Gregory the Great - Homily XXXIII - cited in Carrol, 2006)

In Susan Haskins' (1995) view, Mary of Magdala, who was a relatively wealthy and influential woman at Jesus' side, was the redeemed prostitute and Christianity's role model of repentance, a controllable and governable figure, and operative weapon and tool of



misinformation against her own gender. However, what most informed the sexualizing of Mary Magdalene was the male need to control women. In many churches, as elsewhere, that need is sadly still being met (Carrol, 2006). Mary's role thus came to epitomize the condition of women in the Church and in society.

Fiction

Ki Longfellow (2007) is one of numerous authors who have written a provocative works of fiction on Mary Magdalene whom she views as the 'more than a favored follower, more even than the Beloved Disciple'. The work challenges the traditional view of events reported in the New Testament, explicitly the ministry of Jesus Christ and his relationship to Mary Magdalene. Once Yeshua (Jesus) is crucified, Mariamne (Mary Magdalene) leaves Palestine and heads for the south of France (*Gallia Narbonensis*). While dying in a cave, she conveys her story to Seth of Damascus, who then writes it all down for her. Longfellow maintains that gnosis as 'knowing' was expurgated from the body of the Church over sixteen hundred years ago. Nonetheless, since the unearthing in 1945 of the Nag Hammadi codices, Gnosis and the true Magdalene are back offering wisdom and hope. She describes how Mary experiences God directly.

Sophia's story is a tale of our mortal selves seemingly doomed to wander alone and lost through the world of matter. We don't know where we're going. We don't know why we're here. We don't even know who we really are. We are frightened. We feel abandoned. We push ourselves even further into matter to escape the terrible feeling that we have lost our Home. We do whatever we can to distract ourselves from this fundamental uncertainty. But Sophia, who is Mary Magdalene, is the Goddess who not only created matter, she lived in it to show us we are not alone in our suffering. And Christ, Her partner and equal, is Gnosis, who comes if we call. He comes so that we know we are much more than we think we are, that we are, in fact, eternal and loved and filled with Spirit, and that we can all go Home again. It's a beautiful story, a profound story—and it is completely misunderstood by those who "borrowed" it from the Gnostic teaching. All Pagan godmen have a female Consort who resurrects Him from the grave. Osiris by Isis. Attis by Cybele. Tammuz by Ishtar. Christ by Mary Magdalene. There is always a female divinity mourning a slain god and seeking his body for anointing...and this part of the story is as old as human time. It's very much a part of the myth of the Goddess and speaks of the true worth of the feminine and her part in the dance of reality. The Christians hid the Consort. They could not lose Her entirely because they themselves did not understand the story they were trying to tell. But they degraded Her. They made her into a penitent, serving only to show us how forgiving Jesus was. They took away Her divinity as they've tried to take it from us. By so doing, they have unbalanced the entire world...because ideas about reality move the entire world (Longfellow, 2007).

Many legends have grown up around Mary Magdalene and will no doubt continue to manifest. However none of these interesting stories has any factual basis when viewed in the light of the New Testament. In a world seeking truths, novels such as Longfellow's draw attention to important themes and issues, however, diverse interpretations of the story of Mary Magdalene's life and the life of Jesus (*Yeshua*) such as this remain nothing more than fiction even though the story sounds possible. In the Christian main-stream there is the belief that the Holy Bible was written by over 40 human authors who we believe were inspired by the Holy Spirit over a large period of approximately 14 to 18 centuries. The work was *Theopneusto*



(Greek - inspired by the Holy Spirit), which means "God-breathed." The Apostle Paul tells Timothy that all Scripture was given as a result of the inspiration of God. The authors of the Bible and in this case the gospel writers wrote spontaneously using their thoughts and experiences while they were influenced and directed by God to do so (Comfort, 1992). The Gnostic Mary Magdalene does not in any manner evade her patriarchal persecutors but her resistance and authority are more transparent.

Mary as Mythic Heroine

Mary exemplifies many of the traits ascribed to mythic heroes. The word hero is derived from the Greek ἥρωας, "hero" (literally "protector" or "defender"), (Liddell & Scott, 1940). Fate, or perhaps even destiny, play important roles in the stories of classical heroes. Such stories played a role of offering examples of moral behaviour. Very often, classical heroes did not exemplify the Christian notion of an ethical or moral person, so in Mary Magdalene's case, she was albeit incorrectly, viewed as a repentant prostitute. Irrespective, she ventured on a search for gnosis of the human 'soul' (Kenyon & Randall, 1997:121). In Luke's gospel, Mary is portrayed a woman whom Jesus had healed and thus divine intervention supports her heroic status. The cultural range of heroic stories necessitates diverse qualities for the genders. Generally heroes were on an ego boosting quest towards the accomplishment of some or other task, whereas heroines were to be selfless and accommodating as befits a female, and incapable of venturing on some or other quest (Gergen & Davis, 2013).

Mary Magdalene ventures on a quest to follow the Lord and support his mission. Very often the deeds of heroes in the Holy Bible or even in mythology, whether male or female, were considered to be of lesser worth, or obtained merely as a result of their love of a particular deity who viewed them in a favourable light. In the typical pattern of a hero as stated by Campbell (1988: 2-35) Mary is separated from her city of Magdala and ventures on a journey following the Lord. In the Gospel of Mary, echoing John 20;11-18 she is a solitary figure at the grave of Jesus weeping for her Lord. She has no voice of her own and is met by two angels. As in the case of most heroes she is transformed mysteriously as she is met by Jesus in a vision and told that she needs to experience Him in an internal and mysterious manner which will lead to her renewal. She is revitalized in a spiritual sense and begins to re-consider her life and move from despair as a woman in a patriarchal society, to being a woman of hope in a society where she now enjoys recognition and has a greater role to play than being merely a subservient sub-species. She is to inform others about the message she has received which will state that renew women and society in general. In a true hero sense, she announces to the disciples her vision and her special experience of the Lord but is derided by them, even though they acknowledge that they will need to go out and preach about the risen Christ.

In John's gospel, she plays a prominent role in the resurrection scenes which diverges with her absence in the other gospels. Mary Magdalene is still discharged as a minor character in the gospels and in how they are interpreted. We are uncertain that Mary Magdalene regarded herself as an apostle and how she was viewed in her society but can say with certainty that Many years after Christ's Resurrection, she was written about and considered to be an apostle by such writers and this a person of stature in society. John is well aware of the encounter of Mary with the risen Jesus, and it recognizes the notion that apostolic authority could be based on an appearance and a retelling of Mary's encounter with Jesus. It is likely that John meant to shift some authority from the apostle Peter to Mary (Hartenstein, 2006:135).

Her story is one of survival in a patriarchal society and ultimately recognition and victory and she is clearly a heroine like a few others in the Holy Scriptures. She is like the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, who when she was just a young girl was informed by an angel that she would bring the Messiah into the world. She responded to her daunting task by praising God and raised Jesus him, even when she had to flee with Joseph to Egypt to protect him (Luke 1:26-56). Mary Magdalene's daunting task was to inform men in a man's world that Jesus had risen



and that they who would doubt her, were to preach this truth to the world. Mary Magdalene showed fortitude like Deborah. When Israel was in a severe crisis, Deborah played a fundamental leadership role as a judge for the people and provided crucial guidance to Barak to go into a battle that would liberate Israel from its oppressors (Judges 4-5). Mary Magdalene provided crucial information on what the disciples were to do. She is like Tabitha who inspired others and offered financial support. Tabitha served the poor and widows in her area, and the story of Peter raising her from the dead enthused many to follow Jesus in the early days of the church (Acts 9:36-43). Assuming Mary Magdalene was a prostitute who repented, she would be like Ruth, the Moabite who overcome her past by giving her life to God and turning from her idolatrous way of life, was able to be used decidedly well by the Lord as the great grandmother of King David (Ruth 4). Mary Magdalene was delivered from a life of demonic oppression and experienced the resurrected Christ and was thus the first to announce the risen Christ.

Generally, heroines' were imbued with feminine traits, for example, maternal love, humility, compassion, faithfulness. Thus the strengths of a heroine were overall not the same as, and considered to be less valuable than those of heroes (Cassagnes Brouquet & Dubesset, 2009). Mary Magdalene breaks this mould somewhat. As a mythic heroine, Mary Magdalene experiences an altered state of value in society. She has taken a vital step on the road to female equality with males and teaches us that it is indeed possible for one to transform oneself and also one's society. She teaches women about themselves and God's plan for humanity. She attracts great attention due to the scenarios in which she is mentioned which are essentially constructed on guesses: as to what would have happened if she had not been alive and if she in fact encountered Jesus after his Resurrection at all. As a mythological character, she opens a new vista which gives us admission to what lies outside of our irreverent reality – the fact that Jesus selected and transformed her into being a fundamental part of the spreading of Christianity. As a female mythic heroine she was obliged to function in a different way to the male disciples, because she was a female and because of the patriarchal nature of the society in which she lived and flourished. Her mythological status, as in all heroes, serves a particular meaning and purpose (Kirn, 1970). The paradox of her life inspires and motivates women today. In some popular interpretations of her, Mary Magdalene has a huge status and to some non-traditional Christians, she is a goddess character, the female complement of Jesus Christ. Tertullian ("the father of Latin Christianity"), [9][10] referred to a woman, most likely Mary Magdalene, whom he called simply, a viper, since she was baptizing people. And he said, "These heretical woman, how audacious they are. I mean they teach, they baptize, they preach, they do all kinds of things they shouldn't do. It's horrible, in short." (Economou, 2007). While such views are devoid of truth, we can say that as a mythic heroine, Mary Magdalene was the product of her society and her actions and experiences serve as an instruction for society today.

Mary in Feminism

Jesus taught that disciples should serve one another' (Phillips, 2001: 227), thus negating the notion of the superiority of one sex of another. When the Lord calls Mary Magdalene by name in John's gospel, He is imbuing her with her divine mission as an apostle to the male apostles. The Lord entrusts her with honoured and special information and gives her a position of power that was not manifested in her gender before. In recent times, a number of feminist theologians and biblical scholars have transformed the character of Mary Magdalene as a repentant, but still saintly prostitute to that of a key disciple of Jesus Christ (inter alia, Ehrman, 2006; Chilton, 2005; Brock, 2003; De Boer, 1997). As a result, Mary's stature has been considerably elevated and to some she is a goddess figure, the female counterpart of Jesus who may even have been married to Him. (Beavis, 2012). Mary Magdalene is as a disciple who holds a very privileged position over many disciples of both genders. She has a preeminent status due to her relationship with Jesus. Jesus is teaching Mary, as He later teaches Thomas, that it is faith in the absence of physical evidence, that is the only important thing' (Kieffer, 2001: 238).



Mary Magdalene's unique knowledge is conveyed to her through a personal vision of Jesus in the Gospel of Mary and she is told to inform the other disciples, thus demonstrates the equal if not superior role she plays as a woman (Schaberg, 2004). In the Gospel of Mary, the spiritual superiority of Mary is evident when Peter: "Tell us the words of the Saviour which you remember, the things that you know and we do not, nor have we heard them" (10:4). She simply states: "What is hidden from you I shall tell you" (10:8). Her unique and special experience and knowledge, imbue her with a transformed sense of female self-assurance that clearly demonstrates her spiritual maturity (LeLoup, 2002).

The Gnostic Gospels, and most notably that of Philip, refers to Mary as Jesus' 'companion' (Gospel of Philip 36). This gospel also asserts that Jesus kissed her often (Gospel of Philip 59). Shaw (2015) states that over time numerous traditional stories have evolved around Mary Magdalene which continue up to the current time. Yet none of these has any basis in the facts as stated in the New Testament. A number of the Gnostic texts depict Mary Magdalene as Christ's most beloved disciple (Shaw, 2015). They state that Jesus often kissed and called her the 'woman who knows all'. It is highly probable that the Gnostic texts have produced these legends.

Mary Magdalene - wife and chalice bearer

One legend in particular is the outrageous notion that Mary was the wife of Jesus and that they had a child together. When Jesus was crucified, Mary fled to Gaul with her daughter, named Sarah. In France during the 4th century CE a legend then developed around the persona of Mary Magdalene. The legend recounts that after the crucifixion three different women named Mary landed at Saintes Maries-de-la-Mere. This tale explains that each settled in a different region of France. Mary Magdalene established a church and lived in a cavern on the hill of Saint Baume, named after the holy balm with which she is identified. Mary Magdalene in due course became the ancestor of the royal bloodline of the Merovingians, whose heredity merges with the royal dynasties of king David (Jesus), and also his predecessor king Saul (Starbird, 2005). The legend also explains that Mary carried with her the earthen vessel that held the blood of Christ. Many believe that Mary Magdalene was in fact the 'earthen vessel bearing Christ's child'.

The Cathars, a Christian sect in the South of France which was at variance with the Church in the 12th and 13th centuries regarded men and women as equals and they sustained their beliefs in mainly Languedoc until they were finally annihilated during the Albigensian Crusades led by the Roman Catholic church (Sackville, 2014). In fact Catholic theologians argued amongst themselves for centuries whether the Cathars were in fact heretics or not Christians in any sense (Mundy, 1985). The Roman Catholic Church still considers Cathar belief to be "the Great Heresy" although the official Catholic position is that Catharism is not in any sense Christian (O'Shea, 2001).

Early Christian tradition maintains that Mary Magdalene collected some of Christ's blood in a sacred vessel after His crucifixion. In this form of the story, the vessel is not the cup of the Last Supper, but an oil or ointment container. The Gospels describe how a certain woman, generally identified as Mary Magdalene, prepared Jesus for his death by anointing him with spikenard which was an aromatic oil or balm, and the container she used to collect Christ's blood, as the legend goes, was the jar that had contained oil (Phillips, 2004, 2018).

In 597 CE, Pope Gregory sought to establish the context within which the person of Mary Magdalene was to be viewed from then on:



She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices?

Mary Magdalene is considered from then on to be the woman of the “alabaster jar”. He defined her by stating:

It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord’s feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer’s feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance.

It should be noted that Pope Gregory did not essentially call her a prostitute, but he rather interpreted the “seven demons” of which she had been exorcised as the sum of her iniquities. He also declared that the ointment she used to anoint Jesus’ feet was formerly used by her to provide scent for her body for corporeal purposes. Since the Jewish Talmud confirms that the town of Magdala had a reputation as an immoral place, and was destroyed because of the harlotry practiced there, it is possible that Pope Gregory misrepresented her.

Initially termed the Marian Chalice, Mary’s sacred vessel was believed to have been stuck down in Jesus’ empty tomb where it remained for almost four hundred years. Once the Roman emperor Constantine the Great converted to Christianity due to the efforts of his mother Empress Helena, in the early fourth century, he ordered the excavation of the Holy Sepulchre, the site of Christ’s tomb in Jerusalem. In the course of exhaustive excavations, a cup was found which many archaeologists and scholars believed to be the Marian Chalice. The vessel was taken to Rome and was thought to have miraculous healing powers. It remained in Rome until the city was sacked by the barbarians in AD 410 and was taken from the city in an armed convoy of carts and brought to Britain, the last outpost of Roman Empire in Western Europe. Nothing further is known as to its whereabouts.

Margaret Starbird, who is a contemporary author seeking spiritual truth from a feminist perspective, challenges biblical scholars to engross themselves with her novel ideas (Starbird, 2005:149). While it may be argued that her methodological approach and even her arguments and conclusions crumble in the face of scholarly examination, a number of her exegetical perceptions are worth some attention. She claims is that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany are the same person (Starbird, 2005), and so she aligns with traditional Catholic view that Mary who anointed Jesus before His crucifixion was Mary Magdalene and also the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This contention has been declared to be invalid in both the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church and rejected outright it 1969 (Starbird, 2005:23).

Mary in Orthodoxy

The notion of Mary as an Apostle, was indeed a threat to the patriarchs in the early Church. They ostensibly denied women any authority in the Church. Furthermore, the identification of Mary with heretical teachings in the first century CE, was contrary to Christian thought. Thus it became expedient to denigrate her as a disciple and eliminate her importance. Consequently, calumnies were cast on her moral fibre. In 597 CE the then Pope Gregory, while preaching to a congregation conflated the persons of Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany,



and the sinful woman of Luke's gospel (7:37). This buttressed her character and role in the Western Church where she was simply a demon-possessed repentant prostitute. In 1969, the identification of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the "sinful woman" was detached from the Roman Catholic Church Calendar. Catholic Western Christianity tended to view Mary Magdalene, who was the sister of Martha and Lazarus, as an attractive, and immoral young woman who was saved from sin by her newly found religious zeal as a follower of Jesus.

"Only in 1969 did the Catholic Church roll back centuries of labelling Mary Magdalene as such, stating she was distinct from the sinful woman mentioned in Luke. Eastern Orthodox Christians never depicted her as a prostitute" (Bernstein and Scharf, 2018). Pope Francis made strides in 2016 in rehabilitating Mary Magdalene's image and he did so by announcing a major feast day in her honour, on June 22. His thus placed her on an equal footing when it comes to the liturgical celebrations of the male apostles. The debate re-emerged during the Protestant Reformation and also among biblical exegetes in the mid-20th century at which time, feminist movements in North America attempted to unshackle Mary Magdalene from her dishonour as a prostitute and then to be counteracted by a changed approach in the Catholic church on her reinstated dignity through "New Life in Christ" (Ristine, n.d.).

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany are viewed as distinctive Saints that have nothing to do with the sinner in Luke's rendition. Saint Mary Magdalene, is termed both Myrrh-bearer and Equal-to-the-Apostle, in the Orthodox Church and she is commemorated on July 22/August 4, and also with the other Myrrh-bearers on the second Sunday after the Paschal feast. Orthodoxy rejects all the legends regarding the life of Mary that originate predominantly from a Western medieval cult view of the saints. As far Orthodoxy is concerned, very little more is known about Mary Magdalene outside of the ambit of the Gospel accounts. Oral tradition asserts that after Christ's Ascension, she went to Ephesus with John the Theologian and spread the news of Jesus until her death. Her relics were taken to Constantinople in 886 CE and were preserved there. During the reign one of the Emperor's named Leo, her relics were transported to the monastery of St. Lazarus, where an annual *synaxis* was celebrated in her memory including the celebration of Vespers, Matins, the Small Hours, and the Divine Liturgy.

Thus, in the Orthodox, Eastern tradition, she endures as a woman who was the equal to the male apostles, the 'apostle of the apostles', and an eyewitness of the glorious Resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Saint Paul in his Epistle to the Romans sends his cordial and loving greetings (16:6) and says: "Greet Mary, who has worked hard among you", it is hypothetical that the reference is to Mary Magdalene. Poulos (1991:51-52) states that: "The biblical account of Mary Magdalene, as with any passage from Scripture, must be read more than once, for in it will be found inspiration for Christian women who can identify with Mary". Mary was truly an *Isapostolos* (Equal to the Apostles). Mary teaches us the need to run towards Jesus as he is the source of our inner comfort.

Conclusion

On a careful reading of relevant passages in the New Testament, the Gnostic Gospels and especially from the Gospel of Mary, it is evident that Mary Magdalene was woman in a highly patriarchal society who followed Jesus devotedly, and was somewhat of a leader of the Lord's disciples. She was undoubtedly very close to Jesus and blessed with being the first person to see Him as a resurrected being. She was a heroine in her time, a dedicated apostle and a feminist of note. While her role is downplayed in certain Christian denominations, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, by means of contrast, Mary Magdalene was, and is still honoured as a witness to the resurrection, and is viewed as an "apostle to the apostles". In testimony to this understanding, there is on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, as well as elsewhere Orthodox and other Churches of Mary Magdalene where she is venerated as a great Saint. Whatever one's viewpoint, Mary Magdalene is an iconic figure and in many ways represents



the struggle of oppressed women and she is a source of encouragement in a world dominated by males.

At the very worst, she was a woman who was possessed and Jesus cast seven demons out of her. Mary Magdalene experienced the healing power of Jesus Christ and consequently became His most ardent follower. Through His divine intervention she became transformed and was provided with apostolic leadership status by the Messiah, and all this in a patriarchal society which diminished the value of the female gender. Mary was willing to follow Christ anywhere and supported His work and because of her strong and overwhelming desire to be with Christ, she was afforded the great honour to be the first to see the Resurrected Lord. Her story teaches us that male and female are equal in God's eyes and each play special roles and are necessary in order fulfil God's purpose for humanity.

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