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MARY MAGDALENE GETS HER DUE

Scholars and laity have new interest in Jesus' follower

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Mary Magdalene was, by one account, loved by Jesus "more than all the disciples, and (he) used to kiss her often on her mouth."

In another, Peter, angry that Mary claims Jesus spoke to her in a vision, lashed out: "Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?"

Saint, sinner or both, Mary Magdalene is a New Testament character about whom little is known but much is speculated.

Mary is said to have been the first to encounter the risen Jesus in the garden near his tomb, and she announced his return from the dead to others. Most scholars agree that she likely was a leading voice in the early church.

"I think she's far more important in the story of Jesus, in the life of the historical Jesus, than the Gospels record," said the Rev. Joy Schroeder of Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Capital University in Bexley. "I think there must have been things about her life and about her that got left out."

Mary Magdalene has received more attention recently as the best-selling book *The Da Vinci Code* has promulgated the notion that she and Jesus were married and had a child.

That contention is among the legends that grew around Mary Magdalene, particularly in southern France, said Schroeder, assistant professor of church history at Trinity and assistant professor of religion at Capital.

One medieval story had Mary fleeing persecution of Christians in Palestine and making her way to France.

Some stories say she arrived there with a daughter named Sarah, whose father presumably was Jesus. Others contend she had companions, including Mary, the mother of Jesus; Lazarus, whom Jesus is said to have raised from the dead; and Joseph of Arimathea, who provided the tomb for Jesus.

Another medieval legend, Schroeder said, claimed the marriage feast of Cana mentioned in the New Testament was celebrating the wedding of Mary and John the Apostle. As the story goes, when Jesus changed water into wine, John was amazed and left his wife to follow the miracle worker; Mary was enraged and became a prostitute.

Still another tale said Mary lived out her life in a cave in France, Schroeder said. It was said her clothes wore out and she remained naked, covered only by her long red hair.

Links to ancient myth

Apart from the Gospels, both those in the New Testament and noncanonical accounts, there is virtually no written record of Mary.

In Luke, she is called a follower of Jesus who was possessed by demons and cured, presumably by him.

She comes to be identified with the "wicked" woman with the alabaster jar who anoints Jesus and dries his feet with her hair, Schroeder said.

By the sixth century, many thought that Mary had been a tramp who was saved by Jesus.

Margaret Starbird, author of *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail* and other works about her, dismisses the prostitute idea. But she is among those who believe that Mary and Jesus likely were married and might have had a child.

Starbird, of Seattle, Wash., said despite what appears to be a number of "Marys" mentioned in the New Testament, there really were only two: Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, Lazarus' sister and the woman with the alabaster jar.

The story of Jesus' Passion bears a striking resemblance to ancient mythological tales of a bridegroom king, she said. In those tales, the king (Jesus in this case) is anointed by his bride (Mary); later he is arrested, tortured and executed, but he rises from the dead on the third day to be reunited with his bride outside the tomb.

"Anyone in the first century hearing the gospel would have said, 'Oh, well, that's exactly like . . . all those other dying-and-rising gods that we've all known about all this time,'" she said. "So they put Jesus in that same category, except that he was a historical figure who embodied the archetype of the bridegroom."

The legends say Mary brought to France the Holy Grail, which in old texts was called the Sangraal. While many traditions say the Holy Grail was the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper, Starbird disagrees.

She contends the likely French spelling was Sang Raal, which translates as "Blood Royal." She believes that the Holy Grail might have been Sarah, believed by some to be the daughter of Mary and Jesus.

"I may be making quantum leaps," she said. "But interestingly enough, they fit. They fit the legend. . . . Could this have been? I'm saying yes."

A worthy apostle

Karen King, Harvard professor of ecclesiastical history and author of *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, doesn't see it that way.

Mary's surname likely only indicated she came from the small fishing village of Magdala, King said.

"She was not Jesus' lover because it would be absolutely unique in ancient literature to have her in the same text as Jesus and refer to her by a place name, instead of in terms of her relationship to him," she said.

Women usually were referred to in terms of a relative, such as a spouse or father, King said.

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene, which was discovered in 1896, is among several other early church texts not included in the New Testament. Others, for instance, include the gospels of Thomas and Philip; it is unlikely any were written by those people, King said.

In the gospels of Mary, Thomas and Philip, Mary is depicted as a prominent leader among Jesus' followers. The reference to Jesus' kissing her comes from Philip.

Mary was an apostle (meaning someone who is sent out to preach) as much as any of the original 12, King said, having been commanded by Jesus at the tomb to spread the good news to others.

When Peter was looking for a replacement for Judas, he said it had to be someone who had traveled with Jesus and witnessed his resurrection, the Book of Acts says.

"What they don't mention is that it has to be a man. But it doesn't say that," King said. "And Mary Magdalene is perfect to fit those qualifications. In terms of the Book of Acts, she has all the qualifications for apostolic leadership."

Women in early church

Most scholars agree that for Mary to have played such an important role in the early church would not have been unusual, said Diane Lobody, church-history professor at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio in Delaware.

Some believe that in the church's infancy, Christians met in homes where the head of the household, in some cases a woman, presided over services, Lobody said.

Christianity appealed to women because its philosophy was "revolutionary" in Roman society, where women were forced to marry and were considered to be the property of their husbands, she said.

The new religion, Lobody said, told women: "You don't have to marry to have value. It says the standards of sexual behavior apply equally to husband and wife. It offers to women alternatives they do not have in wider Roman society."

While women likely had leadership roles in the church, men clearly dominated, she said. Female influence began to wane in the fourth century, in large part because of the emergence of the Roman emperor Constantine and St. Augustine, Lobody said.

Early in the fourth century, Constantine declared Christianity the empire's official religion. With that designation, she said, the movement became closely aligned with a state where women had little power; eventually, that thinking seeped into the church, Lobody said.

Augustine, whose fourth- and fifth-century writings are among the theological standards of the church, led a profligate life before converting to Christianity. That might have colored his view of women, expressed in a letter to a friend: "I fail to see what use woman can be to man, if one excludes the function of bearing children."

His influence contributed to the erosion of female standing in the church, Lobody said.

"I think Augustine, because his own problems with desire for women were so overwhelming and distracting for him, that he continually used this as an example of sin," she said.

"That gets translated pretty darn quickly into not an illustration, but a definition of sin."

By the sixth century, as the church's importance in daily life grew, the influence of women had waned and the prostitute label for Mary was predictable, Lobody said.

"What could you be by the Middle Ages?" she said. "You could be a nun, you could be a mother or you could be a whore. She's not a mother, she's obviously not a nun. She's committed a sin; we're in the post-Augustinian age. What's the worst sin?"

Schroeder agreed that labeling Mary a prostitute might have diminished her status and been part of an effort to solidify male control of the church.

"On the other hand, there's a strong idea in Christianity of the importance of forgiveness and repentance and change of life," she said. "And so, when you have a repentant Mary Magdalene . . . that's another motivation for telling all those stories where she's a prostitute who's amended her life."

A Web site devoted to Mary Magdalene is at www.magdalone.org.

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(2) FILE PHOTO

A statue of Mary Magdalene at an Anglican Catholic church named for her in Orange, Calif.

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