

PROLOGUE



She came to the sepulchre, laden with perfumes and aromatic herbs to embalm a dead man; but, finding him alive, she received a very different office from that which she had thought to discharge – messenger of the living Saviour, sent to bear the true balm of life to the apostles.

Pseudo-Rabanus, *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene*

Within Eastern and Western Christianity, Mary Magdalene is one of the most important saints. After Mary, the mother of Jesus, she is by far the most important female saint. This was because she was the archetype of the penitent sinner. It was she who most demonstrated to everyone that no one was beyond redemption.

This book tells the story of Mary Magdalene from its beginnings in the New Testament up to the present time. It focuses on the history of the ‘lives’ of Mary Magdalene as they were imagined within the Christian tradition and within the modern secular West. It aims to undermine the simple reading of Mary Magdalene in popular literature, both theological and secular, by demonstrating the complexity of her history. But it also hopes to bring greater clarity to the very complicated mix of traditions that have made up the history of Mary Magdalene over the past two millennia. Thus, this book is a history of the ‘idea’ of Mary Magdalene. It is a history of how and why Christianity, with the minimal historical data at its disposal, created its ideal Christian saint. It reveals how she represented the sinner we should aspire not to be and the saint we should desire to become.

Mary Magdalene

At the centre of the story of Mary Magdalene there lies a paradox. We know virtually nothing of her. The Gospels in the New Testament tell us little. According to them, she had once been possessed by demons, but they had gone from her. She may have come from Magdala. She was probably a wealthy woman who provided for Jesus and his disciples. She was present at the crucifixion and, we are told, she was the first witness to the resurrection. It was she, we read, who informed the disciples of Jesus that he had risen from the dead.

Yet, this very paucity of information made possible and necessary the construction within Christianity of an array of ‘lives’ of Mary Magdalene over the next 2,000 years. She would become a woman for all seasons – available for all times, adaptable to all occasions, and accessible to all people, both men and women. This was because, as we will see, there were many different Mary Magdalenes. She was the penitent prostitute and the woman possessed by seven demons. She was the first witness to the resurrection and the first to inform the disciples of it. She was the wife and lover of Jesus and the bride at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. She was the model for the contemplative monastic life and the solitary desert dweller whose nakedness was covered by her hair. She was a symbol of the ascetic and the erotic. She was the female leader of the early church, the wealthy heiress, and the party girl from Magdala. Symbolically, she was the second Eve and the ‘bride’ of Christ.

That there are many different Mary Magdalenes was also the result of her being identified with other female characters within the New Testament. Within the Eastern Church, she remained the single Mary whose

Prologue

appearances in the New Testament we outlined above. But within the Western Church, from the beginning of the seventh century, she became a composite figure. For it was in the year 591 that Pope Gregory the Great identified her with two other women within the New Testament. On the one hand, she was identified as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. As Mary of Bethany, she had anointed Jesus's feet with a costly perfume of pure nard and wiped them with her hair in the Gospel of John. On the other hand, Mary Magdalene was also identified as the sinful woman of the gospel of Luke. She too had anointed Jesus's feet with ointment from an alabaster jar, had bathed them with her tears, and dried them with her hair. This book adopts the interplay, often tension and sometimes conflict, between the 'idea' of the simple and the composite Mary as the key to untangling her history.

The 'idea' of Mary Magdalene over the past two millennia has been a fluid and unstable one, not least because of her many 'personae' and her dual identity. However, we can identify six key moments in her history that are elaborated on and illuminated in the chapters that follow. First, there was the creation of the composite Mary Magdalene by Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century. Gregory's construction brought to a conclusion some five and a half centuries of discussion and debate about the identity, role, and significance of Mary Magdalene.

Second, this enabled the composition of the first coherent life of Mary Magdalene. Entitled 'A Sermon in Veneration of Saint Mary Magdalene', it was attributed traditionally to Odo, the Benedictine Abbot of Cluny

Mary Magdalene

(879–942). This sermon provided the template for all subsequent accounts of the life of Mary Magdalene up to the time of Christ’s ascension. In the early ninth century, we find the development of the earliest life of Mary Magdalene – the *vita eremitica*. In the eleventh century, a more extensive account of her life after Christ’s ascension developed. The *vita apostolica* included her exile from Palestine, her arrival in France, and her role in the conversion of the French. Then, in the late twelfth century, a detailed account of Mary’s pre-ascension life along with all the features of the post-ascension *vita apostolica* emerged. Finally, there was the *vita apostolica-eremitica* that combined the apostolic and the eremitic lives, exemplified in *The Golden Legend* of the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1230–c. 1298).

Third, from the tenth to the end of the fifteenth centuries, the cult of Mary Magdalene developed around her earthly remains. There was an intricate weaving of her lives with the ‘afterlives’ of her remains within the broader development of the Christian tradition of relics and the cult of the saints. Five narrative traditions grew up around her remains – the Palestine, the Ephesus, the Constantinople, the Vézelay, and the Saint-Maximin traditions.

Fourth, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the debate about the single versus the composite Mary broke out in earnest between Renaissance Humanists, Catholic theologians, and eventually Protestant Reformers and Protestant radicals. This was a debate that threatened the viability of the cult of Mary Magdalene and the veracity of her relics. From this time on, the separation of the penitent prostitute from Mary Magdalene undermined

Prologue

the central narrative within the West of Mary Magdalene as the repentant sinner.

Fifth, the rise of the Protestant traditions aligned with an incipient Western secularization generated a new proliferation of Marys. Now viewed as either the single or the composite Mary, her identity became yet more malleable and indeterminate. Separated from harlotry, she became a model of sanctity. Separated from sanctity, she became profane, sensual, and erotic.

Sixth, and finally, she emerged as the most important modern saint of the last seventy years within the secular West. She became Jesus's wife and lover within a new array of contemporary lives of Mary that began with Nikos Kazantzakis's book entitled *The Last Temptation of Christ* and ended with the apparent discovery of an ancient papyrus in which Jesus called Mary, 'My wife'.

The imaginings of Mary Magdalene detailed in this book have played a decisive role in the shaping of Western and Eastern religious belief and piety. Her history is a history of how her devotees perceived the relationship between the sacred and the profane, how they negotiated the connection between the spiritual and the material realms, how they experienced the transcendent in the everyday, how they thought about the natures of men and women, and how they were inspired by her life to fashion themselves in her image.

Thus, the importance of Mary Magdalene ultimately lies in what she tells us about the religious life of humankind over the past two millennia. Her lives mattered because they were believed by her devotees to capture the truth of the person depicted. And the 'true' events in the life of Mary Magdalene were endowed with

Mary Magdalene

transcendental meaning. Thereby, they created deep meaning in the lives of those living religiously through them. The lives of Mary Magdalene manifested truth. Through her lives, as Paul Ricoeur would put it, ‘new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality And in this way everyday reality is metamorphosed by means of what we would call the imaginative variations that literature works on the real’.¹

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 43.