



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Who is Mary Magdalene?
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 23-29)

Suggested Article:

📖 The First Witness
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 52-53)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2013 The Center for Christian Ethics

Who is Mary Magdalene?

The traditional image of the Magdalene as a repentant prostitute, not to mention the contemporary speculations about her being a priestess or goddess figure or bride of Christ, are quite mistaken. They fail to do justice to the biblical woman behind the legend.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: John 20:1-18

Responsive Reading

Why did Jesus choose Mary Magdalene to carry the good news of the resurrection to his disciples?

In her, perhaps Jesus saw the blending of strengths: the strengths of openness, receptivity, and the willingness to be a cooperative and pliable witness of the Mystery, and the strengths of courage, boldness, and action.

With these strengths blended, balanced, and manifested in the appropriate measure, a man or a woman expresses more fully the image of God.

Reflection

On "To Tell the Truth," a popular TV game show from 1956 to 2002, a real central character (whom the audience really wanted to know) and two impostors tried to fool the viewers. Celebrity judges asked questions of the contestants, who won prizes by convincing them to vote for an imposter as the real person. At the end of the game the host would famously ask, "Will the real [person's name] please stand up?"

The search for the real Mary Magdalene can seem like an episode from the game show: the real person would be a wonderful model for discipleship, were it not for the misconceptions about her in church tradition and popular culture. Mary Ann Beavis helps us separate the biblical Mary from the legends and mistaken identities, noting that "the Gospels portray her as a faithful follower and supporter of Jesus, chosen by the risen Christ to proclaim the good news to the other disciples." She uncovers the stories behind these "imposters." Is the real Mary Magdalene...

- ▶ *a repentant prostitute?* A Western church tradition conflates Magdalene with an unnamed "sinner" who anoints Jesus' feet at a Pharisee's banquet (Luke 7:36-50) and with Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany, who anoints Jesus' feet during a meal in their home (John 12:1-8). The real Magdalene was cured of "seven demons" (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9), but there is no reason to connect these to sexual sin.
- ▶ *a Gnostic disciple?* Some ancient documents (e.g., *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and *Pistis Sophia*) portray "Mary" with unusual insight into Jesus' teachings and especially loved by him. But, many of the references do not call her "Magdalene." Beavis concludes, "The Gnostic Mary is actually a composite figure who partakes in characteristics of both Mary Magdalene – faithful disciple and resurrection witness – and Mary of Bethany, who learns at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:38-42), is beloved by him (John 11:5), and is commended by him (Luke 10:42; John 12:7-8)."



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2013 The Center for Christian Ethics

- ▶ *the wife of Jesus?* This sensational claim in popular scholarship, novels, and films appeals to Gnostic sources (above) and doctrines attributed to the medieval sect of Cathars (“Pure Ones”) by their detractors. However, Beavis notes, since they preferred celibacy to marriage and believed Christ was a purely spiritual being who remained in heaven, “it is unlikely that the Cathars viewed the relationship between Jesus and Mary as a paradigm for human marriage affirmative of sexuality, or that they believed the couple had children.”
- ▶ *a pagan priestess or a female deity?* There is no biblical or historical evidence in Gnostic or Cathar sources for these extreme views, Beavis writes. However, we should honor feminine metaphors for God — e.g., as a woman in labor (Isaiah 42:14), a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15), a midwife (Psalm 22:9-10), a mother hen (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34), or a bakerwoman (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). Also, divine Wisdom is personified as a woman in the biblical Wisdom tradition.

Study Questions

1. Consider Mary Magdalene’s role earlier in Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:2-3, John 19:25, and Luke 23:50-24:10). How do these stories ‘fit’ with the events in John 20:1-18?
2. What might explain the western church tradition of viewing Mary Magdalene as a repentant sinner? Why is this tradition unfair both to her and to Mary of Bethany?
3. Discuss Mary Ann Beavis’s view that “an issue that begs for redress is that after twenty-five years of feminist theology, the significance of Mary of Bethany in early Christianity has been eclipsed by the enthusiasm for Mary Magdalene.”
4. Compare how Mary Magdalene is depicted in C. Austin Miles’s hymn “I Come to the Garden Alone” and Bronzino’s painting *Christ Appears to Mary Magdalene (Noli me tangere)*.

Departing Hymn: “I Come to the Garden Alone”

I come to the garden alone,
while the dew is still on the roses,
and the voice I hear falling on my ear
the Son of God discloses.

*And he walks with me, and he talks with me,
and he tells me I am his own;
and the joy we share as we tarry there,
none other has ever known.*

He speaks, and the sound of his voice
is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
and the melody that he gave to me
within my heart is ringing.

Refrain

I’d stay in the garden with him,
though the night around me be falling,
but he bids me go; through the voice of woe
his voice to me is calling.

Refrain

C. Austin Miles (1913)
Tune: GARDEN

Who is Mary Magdalene?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To recover the biblical and historical Mary Magdalene as a model for discipleship.
2. To consider how she has been depicted in popular scholarship and art.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “I Come to the Garden Alone” locate the familiar tune GARDEN in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

There is a faithful, but subtle, allusion to Mary Magdalene in the final scene of *Places in the Heart* (1984), Robert Benton’s haunting film about his hometown Waxahachie, TX, during the Great Depression. Throughout the story the characters’ lives are being pulled apart by the failing climate, tragic misunderstandings, and cruel violence. In the opening scene Royce and Edna Spalding are trying to gather their family for the Sunday meal when gunshots ring out and Royce, the young sheriff, must leave the table to investigate. He is accidentally killed by Wylie, a young black boy who is firing his pistol in a drunken rage. Edna is more distraught when Klu Klux Klan members display Wylie’s dragged corpse as a trophy at her front door. She barely manages to keep the farm going with motley helpers – Moze, a black drifter, and Mr. Will, a blinded veteran whom the banker forces her to take as a border. Klan members return one night to kill Moze, Mr. Will manages to prevent his murder, but Moze must leave town forever for his safety.

The final scene is another meal. A pretty sparse group attends the local church service. When the Lord’s Supper is served, the camera follows the tray of plastic cups as each member sips the holy drink and with a glance of blessing passes it to the next. We are amazed to see the pews are filled now with characters that were torn asunder – unfaithful spouses, Klan members and their victims, the greedy banker and farmers he ruined. In the Spalding’s pew, Moze is sitting next to Mr. Will, and next to Edna and her children sit Royce and his killer Wylie. The last words of the film belong to Wylie, who turns to Royce, smiles, and says, “Peace of God.”

Where is the Magdalene in this powerful scene? She is in the music. The choir sings Austin Miles’s gospel hymn “I Come to the Garden Alone” as the pastor reads the words of institution, “On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took the cup....” Miles’s lyric about Mary’s encounter with Jesus signals no maudlin religious individualism here; rather it recalls the risen Christ’s love that can gather friends and enemies, dead and alive, into his own Body. Mary was the first witness of this love, and she passed the news to the disciples.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to engender in members the trust and courage of Mary Magdalene, the first witness to the risen Christ.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 20:1-18 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Mary Ann Beavis notes how Mary Magdalene's discipleship has been distorted in two venues – western church tradition and popular culture. Through more careful readings of Scripture, feminist biblical scholars recently have clarified the important role she actually played in Jesus' ministry. Reflecting on the errors uncovered in the reception history of Mary Magdalene's story should remind us to turn a more critical eye on how we read the stories of women in the Bible.

Study Questions

1. Form study groups to look for clues in the scripture passages about the Magdalene's role. She followed Jesus and supported his group with her personal wealth; she was exorcised of demons by Jesus; she was present at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother; and she witnessed the burial of Jesus. Do these stories suggest Mary would have the means and opportunity to attend to Jesus' body on Sunday morning, that Jesus would speak tenderly to her in the Garden, that he would entrust to her the news of his resurrection, that he could expect the other disciples to receive her witness, and so on?
2. Mary Ann Beavis explains how the unnamed sinful woman who anoints Jesus' feet in Luke 7:36-50, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene gradually became identified. This was the teaching of Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century. The idea that (the conflated) Mary's chief sin was sexual and that she was a prostitute is a later elaboration. The traditional view seems to be an attempt to tidy up the story of Jesus – to harmonize similar Gospel stories (Mary of Bethany=the sinful woman, because each one anoints Jesus' feet) and connect passages into a continuous story (Mary Magdalene=the sinful woman, because Luke mentions the Magdalene's exorcism in the section after the woman anoints Jesus' feet). The connections are implausible, and they minimize the leadership of both Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany in the early Christian community.
3. Beavis worries that once again a biblical woman's story has been ignored or misunderstood in the western church tradition. She writes, "Not only was [Mary of Bethany] merged early on with Mary Magdalene and subsequently labeled as a prostitute, but her role in extra-biblical tradition as one of the women at the tomb was forgotten in western Christianity (although it is remembered in the Orthodox tradition, which regards Mary and Martha of Bethany as among the 'Holy Myrrh-Bearers' at the tomb). Although Mary Magdalene was often called 'the apostle to the apostles' by medieval theologians, the earliest use of this title is found in an early Christian homily where it refers to the Bethany sisters, Martha (who is mentioned first) and Mary (Hippolytus of Rome, *On the Song of Songs* 25.6)." [For more about the importance of Mary of Bethany, see Beavis's article "Reconsidering Mary of Bethany," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74:2 (2012), 281-297.]
4. The risen Christ's special attention to Mary Magdalene is highlighted in Bronzino (in Christ's glance) and Miles (in their extended conversation). Bronzino depicts other women disciples in the Garden (as in the Synoptic Gospels), but Miles focuses on Mary alone (as in John's Gospel). Mary's desire to linger with or hold onto Christ, and his resistance to this effort are clear in each work; Miles alludes to Christ's instruction to Mary to be witness to his resurrection ("but he bids me go"). How do you interpret the last line of Miles's lyric, especially the word "through"? Do we hear Christ's comforting words during our woe? Or do we hear Christ's call to ministry via the voice of woe? Either would be consistent with and an extension of Mary's experience in the Garden.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.