

Women's History

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Three Marys In One:

In a 591 Easter sermon, Pope Gregory the Great conflated Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair; a repentant sinner who also anointed and was forgiven by Jesus; and Mary of Magdala. In Luke, Mary Magdalene is an independent woman traveling with Jesus and two other women. They are to have been restored to health by Jesus who cast seven demons from Mary. This may imply they faced social, mental, or spiritual issues, which Jesus helped them address. "Possessed by demons," did not necessarily make Mary a sinner. The Bible references those with mental or physical illness as having "demons."

Mary's life-style and economic means may indicate she is widowed, divorced, or perhaps a self-sufficient woman living independently. She is written as a "strong woman," present at the crucifixion and the tomb of Jesus. In some accounts, the male disciples run away when Jesus is crucified. Peter cowardly denied Jesus 3 times. Mary stood strong at the cross. Most significant about Mary Magdalene is that she is a beloved disciple of Jesus. The First Apocalypse of James claims Jesus had twelve male and seven female disciples and Mary is mentioned by name. Scholars agree little was written about Mary because she was a woman.

Karen King, a historian of early Christianity at the Harvard Divinity School, argues that Magdalene was misrepresented as a prostitute to undermine her authority as a church leader. Reverend Pamela Giese, a Gnostic priest at the Church of the Four Holy Crown Martyrs in Villa Park, notes the strain between Peter and Mary in the Gnostic gospels in which Peter is portrayed as an angry man and offers it was Mary whom Jesus cited as the rock on which to build his church. Concerning the confusion of the Mary's, Rev. Giese told her mother that a lot of history of women in the church had been repressed. Her mother responded: "Pammy, everybody knows that." Marvin Meyer notes that parallel stories in Luke convey a picture of a world divided by gender.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, appear to be the chosen four of many gospels. Thirteen papyrus books bound in leather and discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945, prove to be Coptic translations of ancient gospels other than those in the Bible. Princeton professor Elaine Pagels, of the Harvard doctoral program of the history of Christianity, notes the feminine element of the divine in these gospels suggest women shared with men in positions of authority. The disciples were male and female. God was celebrated as Father and Mother. And, they suggest a "superior" feminine power.

The term prostitute, by which Pope Gregory identified Mary Magdalene in the late sixth century stuck, or was deliberately advanced. Whether a prostitute meant a woman supporting herself or a prostitute as we define the word today, scholarship lacks to identify Mary Magdalene with the unnamed woman in Mark, or with Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus in Luke and John.

Sources

The Five Books of Moses, Robert Alter

Gnostic Gospels & The Secret Gospel of Thomas, Elaine Pagels

The Gospels of Mary, Marvin Meyer.