

# Jesus & DaVinci

Discover the real Jesus

## Mary, Mary Extraordinary Ben Witherington III

Scripture scholar Ben Witherington III is a professor of New Testament interpretation at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky. He has taught at Ashland Theological Seminary, High Point College, Duke Divinity School and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He received an M.Div. from Gordon-Conwell and a Ph.D. from University of Durham, England.

He has written over twenty books, including "The Christology of Jesus." His survey of the contemporary scholarship on the historical Jesus, "The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth" (InterVarsity Press, 1995), was selected as top biblical studies book of 1995 by Christianity Today and the Academy of Parish Clergy.

Witherington has also written for many church publications, including the United Methodist publications Quarterly Review and The Christian Advocate. He has developed material for the International Standard Sunday School Lesson and for the Common Lectionary, and is one of the presenters in the Bible study program Disciple IV.

His television presentations include those on A+E, the History Channel, and various Christian networks. He has taught in Estonia, Russia, Europe, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Australia.

Over the last few years some extravagant claims have been made about Mary of Magdala. Was she really Jesus' paramour? Did she become a famous preacher after the Easter events? Did she later found Christian communities with distinctive theologies--with a feminist or Gnostic tinge?

Just last month, a doctoral thesis came across my desk dealing with medieval stories about Mary of Magdala, which have no basis in the New Testament. This does not necessarily mean they are all false, but they have to be examined with a critical eye--especially when they do not seem to have any analogues or precursors in traditions that go back as far as the second century C.E.

What, then, can we say with certainty about Mary Magdalene? First, her name was not Mary. It was Miriam, as is also true for the mother of Jesus. This means she was named after the Jewish prophetess of the Old Testament (see Ex. 15.20-21). Second, she did not have a last name, 'Magdalene.' Like many ancient Near Eastern people, including Jesus, she was distinguished from others through mention of her place of birth or residence--in this case Magdala.

Magdala was a tiny fishing village on the northwest corner of the sea of Galilee, an area we know Jesus evangelized.

Two of the extraordinary qualities about Jesus, which distinguished him from other Jewish sages, is that he recruited followers, and he was itinerant. What is even more unusual is that he recruited and traveled with both female and male followers. This would have been seen as scandalous by most early Jews, who believed women should only travel with their own kin. Miriam of Magdala was one of Jesus' disciples and traveled with him and the Twelve.

The first real mention we have of Miriam of Magdala in the New Testament is found in a brief passage in Lk. 8.1-3: "Afterward he journeyed from one town and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Accompanying him were the Twelve and some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuzza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources." She is not mentioned in the earliest Gospel (Mark) prior to the stories about the last week of Jesus' life, nor in the second earliest Gospel (Matthew), also prior to the last week of Jesus' life, nor in John's Gospel prior to the crucifixion.

It is important to stress where she first appears in the Gospels, because by the Middle Ages there had long been a confusion about who she was. The anonymous sinner woman mentioned in Lk. 7, who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee, was assumed to be Miriam of Magdala. This is a serious mistake, and it really only became possible to make this mistake once manuscripts of the New Testament began to appear with separations of words, sentences, paragraphs, and then chapters and verses. That process first happened in the early Middle Ages.

But the culture in which Luke wrote his Gospel had a tradition of oral storytelling; documents were mere aids to oral communication. Luke's Gospel was intended to educate a new Christian named Theophilus (see Lk. 1 and Acts 1). Without the textual separation of the Gospel stories, there was no real way to skip ahead in the narrative and learn more about a character in the story who was not named. Put another way, Luke was a careful historian and narrator, and if he had wanted Theophilus, who would only be hearing this document read to him, to think that Miriam of Magdala was the sinner in Lk. 7, he would have named her upon first mention. Otherwise, no one would guess this was the case, since she is not mentioned in Lk. 1-6, even obliquely.

Thus, Lk. 8.1-3 is the first place we hear of Miriam of Magdala. We are told she was a follower of Jesus and was known to have been a person out of whom Jesus cast seven demons. Jesus was widely known, and criticized, for being an exorcist. It is interesting that the most frequently mentioned miracle that Jesus performed in the earliest Gospel, Mark, is exorcism. Luke also speaks of such miracles. It is equally telling that the latest Gospel, John, entirely omits any references to Jesus' being an exorcist. This is probably because exorcism was one of the most controversial aspects of his healing ministry, and it led to the charge that he was in league with Satan (see Mk. 3).

What, then, had happened to Miriam of Magdala when Jesus came into her life? Sometimes modern people have assumed that exorcism texts are simply about people who have mental illnesses or epilepsy. While that is true in some cases, there is also credible testimony across many cultures about the reality of evil spirits, and the practice of exorcism over many centuries, including our own.

Occult and astrological practices existed in Jesus' day and in every century since then; it is precisely these sorts of practices that have led to spiritual problems for their practitioners. Miriam may well have dabbled in the occult and believed in the powers of darkness. Thus, we can't simply dismiss the possibility that Jesus was dealing with a spiritual malady in the woman from Magdala.

Notice that Lk. 8.1-3 says Jesus cast seven demons out of Miriam. Seven was the number of completion or perfection. We are meant to understand that she was particularly captivated by the dark presence in her life and required deliverance by an external power. Demonic possession controls the personality and leads to voices speaking through the person, fits, and acts of unusual power. Jesus delivered Miriam from this condition, which apparently prompted her to drop everything and follow him around Galilee. We are also told in Lk. 8.1-3 that she and other women helped provision the traveling disciples, which may mean she was wealthy. We cannot be sure of this however, because she could have also simply cooked or cleaned for others.

The next place we hear of Miriam is Passion Week. We do not know what Miriam did between the time she was converted and first traveled with Jesus and this last week of Jesus' life in 30 C.E. What Matthew 27.55, however, tells us is that several women, including Miriam, traveled with Jesus and the Twelve to Jerusalem from Galilee for the Passover celebration.

This is a helpful reminder of several things: 1) Jesus continued to travel with women as well as men throughout his ministry, even if this practice scandalized conservative Jews when he went to Jerusalem; 2) it shows just how devoted Miriam and others were to Jesus, and equally it shows how devout she had become, making the long trek to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration.

Neither she nor the others could have realized that dramatic events were about to happen to Jesus. It has often been pointed out that, with the exception of the Beloved Disciple, women were last at the cross, first at the empty tomb, and first to see the risen Jesus on Easter morning. This observation is probably historically correct because it is unlikely that an evangelistic religion like the Jesus Movement would make up the notion that women were key witnesses to crucial events at the end of Jesus' life, in view of the low regard for women's testimony in that culture and the Greco-Roman world in general.

According to Mk. 15.40-41, a group of women watched the crucifixion from afar; the first person mentioned is Miriam of Magdala. We are reminded again in 15.41 that she and other women had followed Jesus while in Galilee and provided for him. While the male disciples had all denied, deserted or betrayed Jesus, the same could not be said about the female disciples--or at

least the three mentioned: Miriam of Magdala, Miriam the mother of James and Joseph, and Salome.

Again at Mk. 15.47 we are told that the two Miriams saw where Jesus was buried, in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Immediately thereafter, we have the brief reference at Mk. 16.1 to their coming to the tomb on Easter morning, to anoint the body and change the linens during the period of mourning. They found instead an empty tomb. Mark recounts an encounter with an angel at the tomb, but he does not tell the story of the appearance of Jesus to these women. That story appears in truncated fashion in Mt. 29.8-10 and in fuller form in the account in Jn. 20.

C.H. Dodd once said that Jn. 20 was the most self-authenticating of all the Easter narratives, because who would make up the notion that Jesus appeared first to a little-known woman from Magdala? It is still a pertinent question. The story reads like a narrative of the progress of a soul going from grief to euphoria.

But there is much more. The story makes apparent that Miriam, like the other disciples, was not anticipating encountering a risen Jesus. This was no dream or wish projection. It was a profound encounter. Part of the transformation that John stresses is that Miriam could no longer cling to the old Jesus, whom she calls Rabbouni, "my teacher" or "my master." She assumed that life would return to normal. But Jesus' command is *not* "touch me not" as some have rendered it, but rather, "don't cling to me." Don't hold on to the Jesus of the past. Rather, she was to go forward, proclaiming Jesus as risen.

One church father called Miriam "the apostle to the apostles." Jesus commissioned Miriam to tell the male disciples where he was going, once he was risen. It is not surprising that many in the Jesus movement thereafter saw this as precedent for women to proclaim the Gospel. In fact, John's Gospel depicts Miriam as not only the first to see the risen Jesus, but the very first to proclaim the Easter message.

The New Testament tells us nothing more of the story of Miriam. Later conjecture about her seems to have little or no historical basis. But we have more than enough to say that she was an important early disciple and witness for Jesus. And we can say with equal certainty that there is absolutely no early historical evidence that Miriam's relationship with Jesus was anything other than that of a disciple to her Master teacher.

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