

Was Mary Magdalene Wife of Jesus? Was Mary Magdalene a Prostitute?

How did her reputation evolve “from saint to sinner”?

BAS Staff March 26, 2026

When novelists and screenwriters try to insert something salacious into the life of Jesus, they focus on one woman: [Mary from Magdala](#). Was Mary Magdalene a prostitute? Was Mary Magdalene the wife of Jesus? Birger A. Pearson addresses these popular notions in the article “From Saint to Sinner” below.

As Pearson notes, there’s no substantial evidence to either of these theories. As for her being named in the New Testament, none of the Gospels hints of her as being Mary Magdalene, wife of Jesus. Three Gospels name her only as a witness of his crucifixion and/or burial. All four Gospels place her at the scene of Jesus’ resurrection (though Luke does not list her as a witness). Only in the Gospel according to Luke is there even the slightest implication that she might have had a past life that could raise eyebrows and the question: Was Mary Magdalene a prostitute? Luke 8 names her among other female followers and financial supporters and says that she had been released from the power of seven demons.

Theologians in later centuries consciously tried to downplay her role as an influential follower of Jesus. She became identified with the “sinful woman” in Luke 7 whom Jesus forgives as she anoints his feet, as well as the woman “taken in adultery” whom Jesus saved from stoning. In the sixth century Pope Gregory preached of her being a model penitent.

Only the Western church has said that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. The Eastern church has always honored her as an apostle, noting her as the “apostle to the apostles,” based on the account of the [Gospel of John](#) which has Jesus calling her by name and telling her to give the news of his resurrection to the other disciples.

As Birger A. Pearson sets forth in “From Saint to Sinner” below, a noncanonical Gospel of Mary enhances her role to a greater proportion. Her ongoing role in the early church is subject to speculation, but she is indeed getting more respect in theological circles, not for being Mary Magdalene wife

of Jesus nor for being Mary Magdalene a prostitute but for being a faithful follower of her Rabboni—her teacher.

“From Saint to Sinner”

By Birger A. Pearson

Dan Brown, William Phipps, Martin Scorsese—when looking for a lover or wife for Jesus, they all chose Mary Magdalene. It’s not surprising. Mary Magdalene has long been recognized as one of the New Testament’s more alluring women. Most people think of her as a prostitute who repented after encountering Jesus. In contemporary British artist Chris Gollon’s painting of *The Pre-penitent Magdalene* (above), Mary appears as a defiant *femme fatale* adorned with jewelry and make-up.

Yet, the New Testament says no such thing. Rather, in three of the four canonical Gospels, Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name only in connection with the [death](#) and [resurrection](#) of Jesus. She is a witness to his crucifixion (Matthew 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; John 19:25) and burial (Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47).¹ She is one of the first (the first, according to John) to arrive [at the empty tomb](#) (Matthew 28:1–8; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–10). And she is one of the first (again, the first, according to John) to witness the risen Christ (Matthew 28:9; John 20:14–18).

Only the Gospel of Luke names Mary Magdalene in connection with Jesus’ daily life and public ministry. There, Mary is listed as someone who followed Jesus as he went from village to village, bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. “And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means” (Luke 8:1–3).

The epithet “Magdalene,” used in all the Gospels, indicates that Mary came from [the mercantile town of Migdal](#) (Taricheae) on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.² She must have been a woman of some means, if Luke’s account can be trusted, for she helped provide Jesus and the twelve with material support. She had also experienced [Jesus’ healing power](#), presumably involving an exorcism of some sort.³ It should be noted, though, that the author of the Gospel of Luke has a tendency to diminish Mary Magdalene’s role, in comparison with her treatment in the other three canonical Gospels. For example, Luke is alone among the canonical Gospels in claiming that the risen Lord appeared exclusively to [Peter](#) (Luke 24:34; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:5).

No appearance to Mary is recorded in Luke.⁴ Accordingly, his reference to seven demons may be tendentious.⁵

So how did Mary become a repentant whore in Christian legend?

Critical scholarship has provided the answer to this question: It happened as a conscious attempt on the part of later interpreters of the Gospels to diminish her.^a They did this by identifying her with other women mentioned in the Gospels, most notably the unnamed sinful woman who anoints Jesus' feet with ointment and whose sins he forgives (Luke 7:36–50) and the unnamed woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11).⁶ This conflation of texts was given sanction in the sixth century by Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) in a famous homily in which he holds Mary up as a model of penitence. Pope Gregory positively identified the unnamed anointer and adulteress as Mary, and suggested that the ointment used on Jesus' feet was once used to scent Mary's body. The seven demons Jesus cast out of Mary were, according to Gregory, the seven cardinal sins, which include lust. But, wrote Gregory, when Mary threw herself at Jesus' feet, "she turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance."⁷

Thus was invented the original hooker with a heart of gold.

Interestingly, the legend of Mary the penitent whore is found only in the Western church; in [the Eastern church](#) she is honored for what she was, a witness to the resurrection. Another Gregory, Gregory of Antioch (also sixth century), in one of his homilies, has Jesus say to the women at the tomb: "Proclaim to my disciples the mysteries which you have seen. Become the first teacher of the teachers. Peter, who has denied me, must learn that I can also choose women as apostles."⁸

Mary's historical role as an apostle is clearly tied to her experience of an appearance of the risen Christ. As noted above, in the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene goes alone to the tomb, where she is the first to see the risen Jesus. He tells her to tell his "brethren" that he is ascending to God the Father. She then goes to the disciples and tells them what she has seen and heard (John 20:1, 11–19).⁹ Later that same day Jesus appears to the disciples gathered behind closed doors. He thus confirms in person the message Mary had given them. In contrast to Luke's picture of Mary, in John she emerges as an "apostle to the apostles."¹⁰

The positive role played by Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of John was considerably enhanced in Christian circles that honored her memory. The Gospel of Mary, quoted in the accompanying article, is the product of one such early Christian community. In her recent book *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, Jane Schaberg presents the following nine-point "profile" of Mary: (1) Mary is prominent among the followers of Jesus; (2) she exists as a character, as a memory, in a textual world of androcentric language and

patriarchal ideology; (3) she speaks boldly; (4) she plays a leadership role vis-à-vis the male disciples; (5) she is a visionary; (6) she is praised for her superior understanding; (7) she is identified as the intimate companion of Jesus; (8) she is opposed by or in open conflict with one or more of the male disciples; (9) she is defended by Jesus.¹¹

All nine characteristics are prominent in the Gospel of Mary, although many of these nine points are found in other noncanonical texts.

But does this portrait of Mary Magdalene as an early Church leader reflect historical reality? Perhaps. One scholar has suggested that Mary may even be mentioned along with a few other female leaders whom Paul sends greetings to in Romans 16:6, where he writes: “Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you.”¹² But this must remain speculative. It is true that we have no reason to suspect Mary was a prostitute or lover or wife of Jesus. But it is also true that if she was an apostle to the apostles, the evidence for her role has successfully been suppressed—at least until now. As a result of the recent work of a number of scholars, Mary Magdalene’s apostolic role in early Christianity is getting a new hearing.

That, in my view, is more important than viewing her as Jesus’ wife.

Notes

a. See Jane Schaberg, “[How Mary Magdalene Became a Whore](#),” *Bible Review*, October 1992.

1. Luke 23:55 refers to “the women who had come with him from Galilee” without naming any of them.

2. On that town, see esp. Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 47–64.

3. Reference to seven demons may mean that she was totally possessed. On the seven demons see Esther de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 48–55.

4. See esp. Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 19–40.

5. In a secondary ending to the Gospel of Mark, it is said that Jesus “appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons” (Mark 16:9). The secondary ending is probably dependent upon the Gospel of Luke. As the best manuscripts attest, the earliest versions of Mark end at 16:8.

6. Mel Gibson makes that identification in his movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. On the tendentious conflation of traditions, see esp. Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, pp. 65–77, 82.

7. Quoted in Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 82.

8. Quoted in de Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 12.

9. Vv. 2–10 are probably a later interpolation into a more original account and interrupt the flow of the narrative.

10. On this term see Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle*, p. 1. Brock's book is a valuable discussion of the apostolate in early Christianity and Mary's role in it.

11. Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 129.

12. de Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 59–60.

Retrieved March 28, 2026 from [Was Mary Magdalene Wife of Jesus? Was Mary Magdalene a Prostitute? - Biblical Archaeology Society](#)