
MARY MAGDALENE: A SINNER AND A SAINT?

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The mystery surrounding Mary Magdalene is one that has persisted for centuries; ever since her earliest appearance in the Gospels, she has remained a driving force in Christianity, filling various roles as a saint, a disciple, and essentially, a legend. Though much of what is known about her is pieced together from different stories and accounts, Pope Gregory I provided an image of Mary Magdalene that has grown and expanded to become the standard. Through his various works, Mary Magdalene underwent a transformation, becoming a prostitute, then a repentant sinner, and finally, the quintessential Christian. Mary Magdalene was the prime example of repentance and love, and her new image became the ideal for everyone who wanted to find God, and ultimately, Christianity.

Gregory's homilies expand upon certain passages of Scripture dealing with Mary Magdalene and elaborate upon their meaning to preach the ways of the Lord to a Christian audience. Two of his most renowned homilies, homily 25 and homily 33, transform Mary Magdalene from simply a character within the Gospels (though an essential one at Jesus' resurrection), into one of the leading ladies of Christianity. By breaking down the Scripture and explaining it on the literal and moral levels, Gregory was able to reshape and mold Mary Magdalene into an example of how Christian women and sinners should live. Gregory used this new composite Mary Magdalene to garner a broader audience of Christians and turned her into one of history's greatest success stories.

Homily 25 explores the Gospel of John; specifically, Gregory elucidates John 20:11-18. Though Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John comprise the four canonical Gospels, it is interesting that Gregory chose a passage from John (the only non-synoptic Gospel) to discuss Mary Magdalene's appearance at the scene of Jesus' resurrection, since this is the one that varies greatly from the other three. In Matthew, Mary Magdalene appears at the tomb of Jesus only to be greeted by an angel who tells her (and the other women) to reveal to the disciples that Jesus has risen (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Matt. 28.1-10). It is not certain if Mary Magdalene and the other women actually make it to the disciples to reveal the news. The women meet a similar fate in Mark, in which "a young man, dressed in a white robe" (Mark 16.5), presumably an angel, appears to the women and also tells them to spread the word of Jesus' ascension into Heaven; the women, however, are scared and run away without telling anyone (Mark 16.7-8). In the extended version of the Gospel, which acts as an epilogue, Mary Magdalene *still* does not fare very well, since she tells the disciples

that Jesus has risen and they do not believe her (Mark 16.9). Finally, in Luke, the last of the synoptic Gospels, a group of unnamed women appear at the tomb to witness Joseph bury the body. They return the next day to see two angels who again deliver the same message as revealed in the other two Gospels (Luke 24.5-9), and yet again the apostles do not believe them. While Mary Magdalene is consistently present in the stories, and while the stories are, for the most part, all very similar, the women seem to get nowhere; this is probably why Gregory chose the resurrection passage from John. By using this passage, Gregory had the most to work with and was able to use the Scripture to further mold Mary Magdalene into Jesus' preferred disciple.

In John, Mary Magdalene persistently searches for Jesus and is unable to find him. She weeps until someone appears and asks her why she is crying; she thinks this person is the gardener until he calls her by name, and it is then she realizes it is Jesus, her "Rabboni" (John 20.16). He then calls upon her to tell his disciples, which she does, and they presumably believe her. Gregory begins his homily by stating, "Mary Magdalene, *who had been a sinner in the city*, loved the Truth, and so washed away with her tears the stains of wickedness" (187). He immediately presents her as a sinner, most likely the same sinner that appears in the Pharisee's home and anoints Jesus with oil and cleanses his feet with her hair and tears (Luke 7.36-39). Whether or not these two women are actually the same person, he ties them together to make his first point: Mary Magdalene *was* a sinner. Relating this back to the passage from John, Gregory goes to great lengths to point out that though she was a sinner, she is still the chosen one of Jesus, the one to reveal He has risen. The language that follows within the homily is filled with such intensity that it seems as if it can only be related to sexual desires. While Gregory does this to play on the audience's attention and emotions, it also establishes the precedent that Mary Magdalene was not only a sinner, but a prostitute. Gregory says:

We must consider in this the woman's state of mind, that a great force of love inflamed her. When even the disciples departed from the sepulchre, she did not depart. She sought for him whom she had not found, weeping as she searched; being inflamed with the fire of her love, she burned with desire for him who she believed had been taken away. (188)

Gregory uses descriptions like these not only to represent the degree of intensity of Mary's love for Jesus, but it also serves to stress the point that Mary Magdalene was also familiar in using this same intensity in terms of her body. As if this were not clear enough, he specifically claims at the end of his homily that she was indeed a prostitute: "Perhaps another yet, being enkindled with the fire of lust, has lost the purity of his body: let him look on Mary, who purged away the love of her body by the fire of divine love" (Gregory 198).

Though the majority of women during Gregory's time (c.600) were *not* prostitutes, claiming that Mary Magdalene was established a new image of repentance – even the worst of sinners could turn their lives around. This homily, though maybe not written intentionally for women, reaches out towards them, since women were inherently sinners due to Eve's original sin. Peter Brown, in *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, refers to Paul's teachings regarding the "flesh" to early Christians. Brown asserts that "the 'flesh' suffused the body with disturbing associations: somehow, as 'flesh,' the body's weaknesses and temptations echoed a state of helplessness, even of rebellion against God, that was larger than the body itself" (48). As a result of this flesh, people were naturally prone to sin, especially to sexual sin. Women were viewed as the less rational sex, and more likely to fall victim to sin of the flesh, or desire (which again relates back to Eve and her desire to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge in Genesis 3.6-7). Gregory draws a comparison between Mary Magdalene and Eve within the homily as if to prove that though Mary Magdalene was a woman and a sinner, she was also Eve's counterpart. He maintains that "the sin of the human race was removed where it began. In paradise a woman was the cause of death for a man; coming from the sepulchre a woman proclaimed life to men. Mary related the words of the one who restored her to life; Eve had related the words of the serpent who brought death" (195). Though Mary Magdalene was burdened once with this flesh, she repented and loved enough to receive Jesus' grace and become the one who was to spread the Word of his resurrection. Since the Gospel of John was the only one of the four to drive this point home, it made the most sense for Gregory to use it.

Homily 33 also explores Mary as the repentant sinner and further establishes Mary's love for Jesus. Luke 7.36-50 tells of the story of the sinner who enters the Pharisee's home as he is feasting with Jesus. The sinner washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. She then anoints Jesus with oil as the Pharisee asks Jesus if he realizes this woman is a sinner. Jesus then explains that since she has loved more and repented more (than the Pharisee or any other person in the house) that her sins are absolved and that she shall go in peace because her faith has saved her. Gregory yet again in this homily makes assumptions that the various Marys mentioned in Luke and John and throughout other biblical stories (besides the Virgin Mary) was essentially Mary Magdalene. Though there is no guarantee the sinner in the Pharisee's home was in fact Mary Magdalene, if the Gospels are read together and Gregory wanted to make a point of Mary's repentance, what better way to do so than to claim that the sinner's identity is one and the same as the woman who Jesus appeared to during the resurrection? To make this point, Gregory stated:

She had used her hair to beautify her face; now she used it to wipe away her tears. She had spoken proudly with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet she fixed it to the footsteps of her Redeemer. She found as many things to sacrifice as she had had ways of offering pleasure. She converted the number of her faults into the number of virtues, so that she could serve God as completely in repentance as she had rejected him in sin. (270)

Throughout the homily, Mary Magdalene's repentance is emphasized; by doing this, Gregory indicates that it is not enough to be half-heartedly sorry or repentant as the Pharisee is; His composite Mary Magdalene accounted for all the good deeds of the Gentiles and in turn, of the faithfulness of the Christians (Gregory 274). Just as Jesus did with Mary Magdalene, Gregory wants his audience to realize that "He is seeking those reconsidering in the right way, whom he lost when they were considering wrongly" (Gregory 278).

Gregory turned Mary Magdalene into a prostitute to use her as a metaphor for a sinner who inherently turns her life around; furthermore, he made her the ultimate example of how much everyone should love Christ. Gregory preached that, as with Mary, Christians can sin but if they truly repent, they too can be saved. In doing so, Gregory was able to reach a broader audience (i.e. women and sinners) and showed that even Mary Magdalene, a saint, was once a sinner of the flesh. Through various accounts and assumptions, Gregory created a composite Mary Magdalene who became one of history's greatest success stories, and one of Christianity's leading ladies.

References

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