

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*The
Alabaster Jar
of
Aromatic
Oil*

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THE ALABASTER JAR OF AROMATIC OIL

The Myrrh Bearer

Mary Magdalene is often portrayed carrying an alabaster jar. In Eastern Orthodox church tradition she is known as the Myrrh-bearer.

The etymology of the word alabaster relates to the vessels of the Egyptian goddess Bast (or Bastet) – thus *a-labaste*. The city of Per-Bast in ancient Egypt was a centre Bast worship. She is a strong, protective cat goddess. Sometimes like Sekhmet she is represented as a lioness, for example on lids of vessels associated with her.



Bast the Egyptian cat goddess in the British Museum – two different ways of representing her

Alabaster is translucent allowing the light to enter it. In that sense for the Ancient Egyptians it was a ‘drawing stone’ of the sun. It was used for canopic jars because it had the capacity to draw the soul into the spiritual power of sunlight and to draw the sun to the departed soul. In the Book of the Dead, Bast is mentioned as destroying the bodies of the deceased with flame if they failed the weighing of the heart in the hall of Ma-at, goddess of order, balance and harmony.

Alabaster jars were called alabastron. Hundreds of these have been discovered by archaeologists. The mineral is a relatively soft stone compared say to marble and is easy to carve. In the ancient world it was widely used as a container for

perfumes and ointments, and for oils for anointing the dead and those set aside for sacred service.

She who anoints

The story in the gospels about a woman anointing Jesus with perfumed oil comes to us in different versions. In each the woman performs a daring and unconventional act of love. Luke makes this explicit; love is implied in John.

In Mathew 26:6 and Mark 14:3 this takes place in the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany. While Jesus is at supper an unnamed woman comes up and pours expensive perfumed oil on his head. The disciples complain: What a waste. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor. The way Jesus responds comes as a shock. ‘You always have the poor with you,’ he tells them, ‘But I will not be. She has done a beautiful thing by preparing me for burial.’ Nothing is written about how the disciples reacted, as Jesus goes on to say that wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, she will be remembered for this act.

In Luke 7:37 the anointing is performed by the woman of the city, a sinner who weeps copiously as she washes his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them and then anoints them with the expensive oil. Simon, who is a Pharisee, is indignant. Doesn’t Jesus know what sort of woman this is? The event is placed early in Jesus’s ministry and there’s no mention of his death. Jesus uses Simon’s repugnance to teach him with a parable about forgiveness – and then forgives the woman’s sins because she has loved much.

In John 12:1-8 Lazarus, the disciple Jesus ‘raised from the dead’ lives in the Bethany house. Here the woman doing the anointing is named – Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha. Rare in the gospels, it is stated that Jesus loves all three, which points to them as an inner circle of disciples. Mary returns that love when she anoints his feet with pure ‘nard’. It is Judas Iscariot who complains that it should be sold to the poor. Again, Jesus supports Mary’s action and says that she should keep what is left for his coming burial.

We know that witness statements do vary, and here we have head or feet being anointed, disapproval from different men and distinct teaching points. Yet these different versions most likely refer to one real event passed down among the early Christians.

Compared to the others, Luke’s version reads like a creative elaboration for teaching purposes. Yet it is popular in artworks for its high emotion, with the weeping woman almost collapsing onto Jesus’s feet. Often, he has his hand extended over her in a gesture of blessing which to me sentimentalises the scene (and it’s not in the story).

Luke’s is also the version taken up by the male dominated western church. Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century was surely of this mindset when he defined the woman as Mary Magdalene, a former prostitute who practised all the seven

deadly sins – pride, greed, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth and lust. Today the Catholic church has retreated, rightfully, from ‘Mary the former prostitute’.

I like this sixteenth century painting of the anointing by Antonio Campi for its representation of Mary. Here she is not the typical flamboyantly weeping repentant sinner, but rather a woman lovingly intent on her task.



Mary's gift of prescience

Although it isn't evident in a literal reading, I believe that the Mary named in John's gospel is the Magdalene. Symbolically alabaster is connected with the third eye and seership. I think it is a failure of imagination not to recognise that this woman with the alabaster jar is the visionary Mary Magdalene.

As Mary appears in the Gospel of John, she has been undergoing an initiation complementary to that of Lazarus and here, as a beloved one gifted with prescience, she is preparing Jesus for what is to take place.

Mary Magdalene carries a jar of spikenard, an amber coloured oil from a flowering plant found in the Himalayan mountains of Nepal. After being imported from so far away it would be vastly expensive. ‘Nard’ was usually mixed with other ingredients for religious and healing purposes, or as a perfume for the rich. Mary is carrying the pure oil. She removes the alabaster jar’s lid, and the perfume fills the room as she begins anointing Jesus’s feet, her hands moving in slow spirals like a ministering priestess. Whether she was a literal priestess or not, she is in this role.

What does it mean to be a priestess? Like ‘priest’ it is sometimes adopted as a sign of status, which implies ‘authority over’, albeit spiritual. That has always had unfortunate outcomes.

Does it mean to be on a spiritual path? The name is often applied like this today. Yes, but it is more than that. A priestess (or priest) offers self for the manifestation of the divine in souls and in the world.

Although in Mary’s time priestesses were no longer part of Jewish rites, elsewhere across the Near East many still lived and served in the sacred sanctuaries and temples devoted to a chosen goddess. They had status and some power. Even so, the mark of a true priestess was the willingness to do whatever was needed to aid pilgrims, without ego or expectations of reward.

With complete commitment Mary slips quietly into the room, without a word, without a thought for the disapproval her actions will arouse for her extravagant wastefulness, and for immodestly unbinding her hair in public (like a common prostitute). She focuses on what she must do. In her heart she knows that her teacher’s destiny is approaching, and her entire attention is on the act of preparation. Jesus doesn’t object, although many in the room look as if they can’t believe their eyes.

When she has completed the anointing, with her long hair she gently wipes the excess ointment off her teacher’s feet. She is all harmony, like flowing music, like the seven limpid colours in a rainbow. Here is a priestess with a difference whose offering is pure love.

The archetype of sacrifice

Anointing the head was usually part of the ancient ritual that establishes a king or a high priest. I am sure Mary Magdalene did *not* follow this rite. Jesus had already received anointing by the spirit at his baptism. The feet signify movement rather than receiving. They point to the road Jesus was to walk. Mary did anoint the feet of Jesus, an act that goes back much further – to human sacrifice.

In his monumental work *The Golden Bough* James Frazer explored the prehistoric roots in many Bronze Age cultures of the king as shepherd of the people, chosen servant rather than boss. And as the human embodiment of the dying and reviving vegetation god, such as Dumuzi, Dionysus and Attis, the king was offered back to the earth as a sacrifice after a fixed period of rulership. This work was taken up by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*. Human sacrifice did exist although there is mixed evidence concerning kings as literal sacrifices. Animal sacrifice of pure white doves or a lamb or perhaps a heifer to the divine ones was more common.

But we are looking at a powerful archetype. And archetypes are not fixed in time. As universal images in human consciousness they may look forward as much as backward. The archetype of the sacrificial king comes to fulfilment in Jesus the Anointed, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. As with any sacred story Mary's action has powerful resonance. She becomes the anointing priestess preparing the king or the Lamb of God for his coming sacrifice.

Archetypal and universal, yet this anointing was enacted between two living individuals on the physical plane in a house in historical time. It's an intense dramatic scene in a genuine biography. If we contemplate the reality of Mary's offering, its drama can penetrate our responsive feelings and the pictures will come to life in our imagination. Then we will know the reality of the love involved – *agape*, love on the highest level, of spirit.

**Cover picture - Mary Magdalene in the Musee de Cluny – National Museum of the Middle Ages, Paris*