

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*On
Mary's Authority
Before
Meeting Jesus*



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ON MARY'S AUTHORITY BEFORE MEETING JESUS

The reality of spirit in Mary's lifetime

In the first century world Mary Magdalene knew, the spiritual realms were real and alive to people in a way that is rare today. Followers of different religions and cults were aware that eternity did dwell in human souls. They understood spirit as a moral force, a mark of the age of the intellectual soul. But individuality as we know it was still to fully emerge and the central means of accessing the divine took place within religious communal enactments, and on an initiatory level in group rites that took the entranced neophyte beyond the physical body.

What all these avenues of worship had in common was the surety of a non-physical dimension to existence that impinged directly on everyday life and the hereafter. Rome, powerful and controlling, was the most worldly and earth focused culture, yet its rulers syphoned all the divinities they could into their architectural wonder of a temple, the Pantheon.

In multi-cultural Palestine

Women in the first century Greek, Roman and Jewish societies were second-class citizens. Yet they could rise above this. Mary Magdalene and other female followers of Jesus supported him with their own resources (Luke 8:3). This could be a husband's or inherited wealth or income they had earned. Women did run businesses in those days. Financial security suggests a certain independence. As well, Mary came with personal charisma.

Jesus was a powerful seer and he would immediately have recognized this, even if some male disciples couldn't. She became a leading disciple and gospel writers acknowledged this, despite her uncanny disappearance after the resurrection. So what kind of woman did have outer and inner authority? And who was the Magdalene *before* her encounter with Jesus Christ?

The land of Palestine (Canaan) where the events took place was a narrow land squashed between sea and desert. It lay on a significant trade route and was from ancient days subject to surrounding empires – Egyptian, Assyrian, neo-Babylonian, Persian and Greek. The religion that became Judaism had evolved from such a mixing of influences. In the first century, Palestine was part of the Roman empire although Jews remained as a

distinct religious group in their homeland and as the 'diaspora' across the empire.

Jewish leadership, all male, consisted of the seventy-one men of the Great Sanhedrin at Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin included the High Priest and chief priests who led the Temple rites and elders all drawn from other patrician families, mostly belonging to the Sadducee faction. Then there were the Pharisees, men of various social classes, but always scholars, who were rostered onto the Sanhedrin. This body acted as a court of law, both secular and religious. Above it was the king and above them all stood Rome.

In Mary's lifetime, strands of Judaism existed outside orthodoxy. There were esoteric groups such as Essenes and Nazarenes, and Samaritans who adhered to an alternate Torah. Outside the formal groups travelling 'holy men' attracted followers. Yet a characteristic of Jewish consciousness – a strong corporate identity cemented through worship of the ruling god Yahweh was common to all groups.

In the Exodus, the people who came from Egypt into Canaan described it as, 'a land flowing with milk and honey'. This is a pictorial reference to the harmonious interweaving, the flowing of spirit into the living world alive with the Wisdom of Nature. The goddess Wisdom, Hebrew *Hokhmah*, was very much evident in the holy book called the Torah. It is written of King Solomon:

He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; he spoke of the beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon. (1 Kings 4:33)

He was renowned for knowing nature's wisdom, and as patriarchal Judaism developed this wisdom remained an undercurrent of life from small farms to the Temple rites. Women especially kept this wisdom.

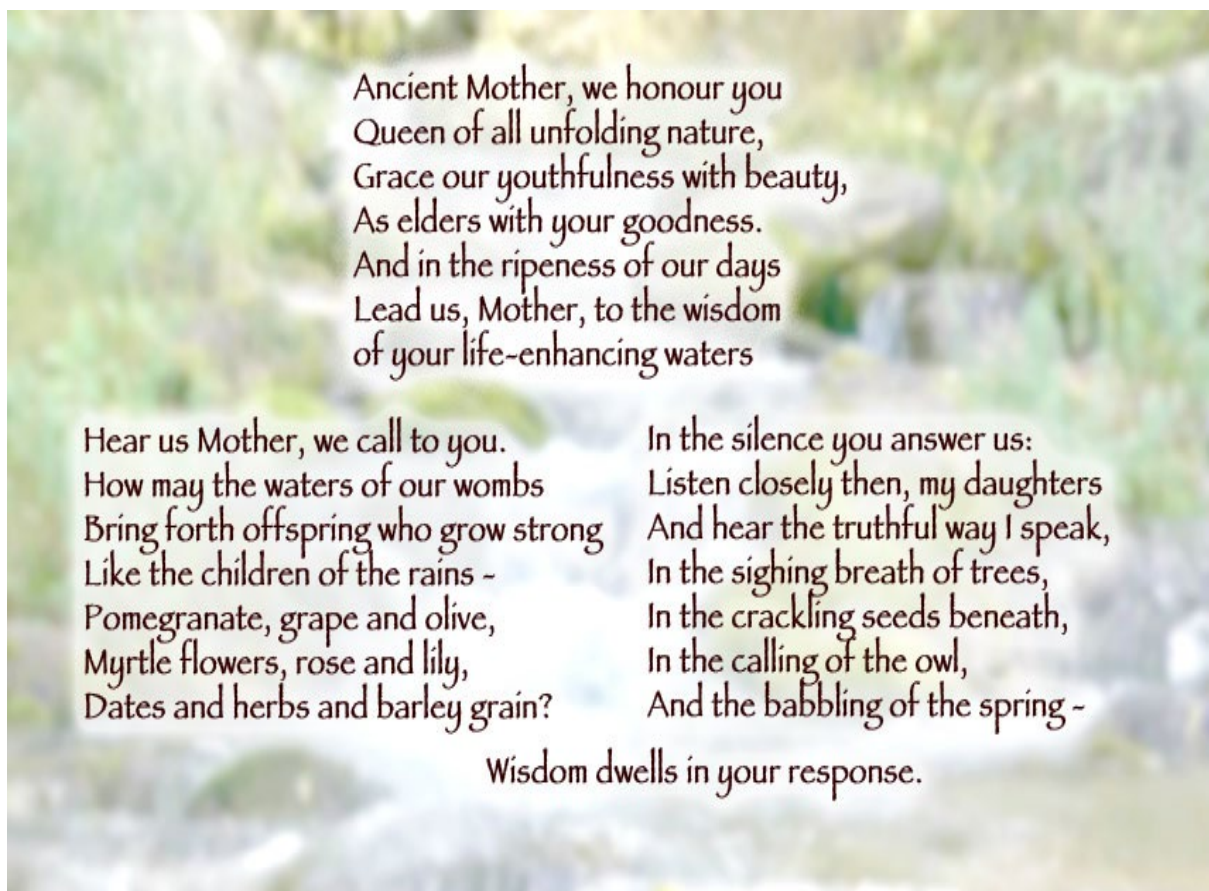
As well not everyone in this land followed the religion of Yahweh. In many towns you would find Greeks philosophising about the meaning of life, and only strict Jews avoided the lively ceremonies and processions celebrating various pagan gods and goddesses. In the countryside people continued to provide offerings at ancient shrines as well as attending the local synagogue. This diversity opens avenues for a wide exploration of Mary Magdalene's charisma.

There are clues, despite the limited contemporary writings about her, that Mary was in some way outside the group soul of Judaism. I believe a different consciousness is what enabled her to open freely to the reality of Jesus Christ. There'll be more to say on this.

A leader in the women's nature mysteries?

The common view is that Mary Magdalene was Jewish and lived in a Palestinian town or village. In such a culture closely intertwined with rural life, her reputation might have come through special skill in women's arts – perhaps with herbs and medicinal healing. She would know how to prepare laurel, olive leaves and the humble thorn for vitality, how to use storax to ease fevers, galbanum for wind, aloe to soothe cuts, mandrake to arouse the senses, and the creeper birthwort to bring on pregnancy. Add clairvoyant perception and we can envisage Mary harnessing her ability to 'read' people for healing of body and soul. She would have been valued for her wise counsel.

Women's mysteries could go deeper and tap into supposedly abandoned rites. Most likely Jewish women practised these in secret. Plant lore then would involve the preparation of libations for altars at semi-hidden ancient shrines where there would be joyful dancing. And I imagine Mary, initiated into the mysteries of the hidden goddess, leading the singing of an incantation to the Mother of the Springs and Waters:



This is the Mary I envisaged in my novel *Marriages of the Magdalene*. But let's look at other possibilities.

An educated woman?

Jewish women in first century Palestine sometimes had a rudimentary grasp of reading, enough to manage household affairs. But only boys received education from a rabbi, one of the ordained scholars.

Perhaps Mary Magdalene's status emerged not among village or country folk, but as a well-educated upper-class woman from a rich urban family. Girls from such families would be given some education on top of their important female skills. They may have been privileged with an education that extended beyond Judaism to, for instance, widely influential Greek philosophy.

Was Mary Magdalene part of this privileged tradition? There's respect for Mary by the author of the Gospel of John, who showed evidence of an extensive education. The treatment of her experiences and her prominent role in this gospel suggest a kindred mind – with both the author and Jesus their teacher.

What if Mary Magdalene didn't come from a Jewish family? Then other possibilities arise. Across the Mediterranean region we have the names of female philosophers, from the days of Pythagoras in the sixth century BCE right through to the fifth century CE. These women, from upper-class families, could also be poets and often seers. Thus, they avoided the secluded life of most women.



Female philosophers were invariably wives or daughters of male philosophers and no mention is made of Mary's husband or father, so this leads us in a different direction.

A priestess?

Among the Israelites in ancient days there were priestesses with the authority to lead rites of worship, practice divination and give oracles; Miryam sister of Moses for example. But King Saul is condemned in the Bible for going against his own laws and consulting the oracular 'Witch of Endor'. And in time Asherah the Queen of Heaven would be cast out of the Temple along with her priestesses.

By the first century, Judaism with its Temple in Jerusalem was one of the few religions that didn't allow priestesses (prophetesses couldn't so easily be banned). Elsewhere throughout the Near East oracular shrines and temples to different gods and goddesses were a common sight.



Greek priestess pouring libations on the altar

Originally, priestesses were set aside from childhood for duties within the sacred sanctuaries. They were oracles, musicians and healers and would have been viewed with some awe, although like medieval nuns they wore special clothes and lived apart. Priestesses spent their lives within temples and sanctuaries, performing their special oracular and ritual roles mostly removed from society.

Rome's vestal virgins were still strictly set aside until menopause on fear of death. Elsewhere under the very worldly influence of Rome, religion was changing. Priests and priestesses might participate in more than one temple cult and could even serve part-time or buy their way in, while benefitting from gifts by wealthy worshippers. Such practices would help to diminish the potency of the ancient religions and in time contribute to their demise.

When Mary Magdalene is spoken of as a priestess, she is often placed in the service of Egyptian Isis. The ubiquity of Isis cults across the Roman empire means it is possible.

A Prostitute?



Byam Shaw, *Jezebel* – a prototype for the church's Magdalene

Here we come to the Mary Magdalene of tradition – the redeemed whore. But she was not fully set into this role until the sixth century. Pope Gregory 1, 'the Great', had a lot to do with turning an independent loving, visionary woman into a licentious sexual sinner. He combined several women

appearing in the gospels to build a composite character. In 591 the pope declared in his homily number 33:

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices?

Those vices were known as the seven deadly sins – pride, greed, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth and lust. The Magdalene had them all. We are looking at a Roman Catholic establishment having real issues around sexuality and purity, especially regarding females. The male hierarchy saw keeping away from female temptation through celibacy as the answer. Mary's role as repentant harlot is mostly, but not completely, rejected today. We will come back to this whole theme, including the nature of her 'seven demons' healed through Jesus, which for centuries placed a heavy veil over the real Magdalene.

Rather than one of the women of the street or brothel, another sexual role suggests itself. Sacred sexual priestesses once served in temples of the love goddesses, Inanna, Ishtar, Astarte and in Mary's time Aphrodite. As her representatives they freely offered their bodies to worshippers who made sacrifices in her temples. Originally, these priestesses would have been honoured. In the patriarchal culture of Mary Magdalene's time there may have been temples remaining where holy sexual service took place, although evidence is scanty or confused by later moral values. Let's look at the possibility that Mary was dedicated to temple love before her encounter with Jesus. As such she would have brought the aura of a priestess with her.

To Jews and then to Christians worship of foreign gods was against divine Law, as was sex outside marriage. With a background in any other sexual role, disciples both male and female could have been challenged by Mary. None of the gospels moralise about her, however. Rather she has considerable status. Perhaps the first Christians did practise unconditional non-judgemental love as Jesus taught.

Contemporaries knew who she was

I can imagine Mary, trained and initiated in one of the old sacred pathways yet feeling that she was on the edge of something new, a shimmering portent of a deeper truth. And as she searched, she encountered Jesus and chose to follow him. Perhaps she did fall in love with him and discovered how profound love could be. So she experienced and contributed significantly to a spiritual revolution and would become a uniquely different priestess in the path that was first called 'the Way' and later Christianity.

Mary moved among the people in Palestine and they didn't need to be told who she was. She was present and known, the Magdalene, a prominent disciple of Jesus, and now ready to embrace the Christ Way with full understanding.

There is so much that can be revealed about her by uncovering the veils of time. Whoever she was, the kind of authority that lived in this woman in her full power can be reclaimed – an intelligence not limited to the linear, calculating, power-grabbing 'masculine' mindset but rather deep nature wisdom, the ability to connect soul to soul and with the knowledge of the heart so vital for the future of humankind and the whole earth.