

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*Mary  
Magdalene*

*~Back  
to the  
Beginning*

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## **MARY MAGDALENE – BACK TO THE BEGINNING**

### **Unthinking patriarchy being pushed away**

There is a shift taking place in human society, one that is redressing the imbalance between males and females. The impetus is like a tide ebbing and flowing, yet with a bigger inexorable forward momentum. The movement is most evident in western democracies although it is found across the world, including where dangerous struggle is involved. The socio-political movement called Feminism emerged from struggle. And it continues.

Males who hold to old values and behaviours are on notice. Meanwhile such a radical change to the status of women has engendered plenty of resistance. Yet the rebalancing is taking place and will take place. It must, because human consciousness is evolving and with this will arise awareness of the need to eliminate domination by one gender – or indeed a race, social group or religion – for humanity’s inner wellbeing.

In institutionalised religions – Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian – women have long been expected to play subservient roles because of the importance given to male practices in society. The church lodged in a male-dominated comfort zone long ago, when the free-making Christos impulse that spread rapidly among men and women was pigeonholed into an organized institution with a patriarchal mindset. This has long been a bone of contention for feminists, including those who are Christians.

From the twentieth century theologians and scholars researching biblical times have worked to penetrate every word of the Bible, other early texts, and centuries of commentary to break through dense layers of presumption. Women, and men, in the church are seeking to bring a more balanced view of early Christian teachings. And despite the old guard’s resistance, more than a thousand years of unthinking patriarchy is being pushed away. Mary Magdalene as a leader among women in the gospels is a major focus. The Magdalene certainly needs rehabilitation.

A central aim of this whole website is to unfold the profound meaning of Jesus the Christ through what we can discover about Mary, because in so many ways she lives on in hearts and souls of genuine truth seekers as an extraordinary pathfinder.

### **The teacher and healer**

Often in my meditations I turn imaginatively to the inauspicious beginnings of Christianity in first century Palestine – the small territory west of the

Jordan River surviving with some discontent under the strong and cruel hand of imperial Rome.

I picture the wide Galilean lake, the wooded hills, cramped little villages tucked above valley folds, wildflowers, dusky olive groves, vineyards, walled gardens of figs and carob, and sheep grazing on dry moorlands. There are market towns and ports where indigenous folk mingle with Greeks, Syrians and Romans. And there is noisy, crowded multicultural, multi-racial Jerusalem with its grand Jewish Temple gleaming like a snowy peak on the rock plateau of Mount Moriah, where scholars ceaselessly argue the point among its courts and columned porticos.



*Reconstruction of Herod's Second Temple in Jerusalem*

Jesus, a Jew, walked this land as an unorthodox healer and teacher. In ancient days healing wasn't divided into physical and spiritual. The aim was always to heal holistically. Jesus was a gifted healer even before his baptism in the Jordan River at the age of thirty, the spirit-filled event that brought the greater destiny into play.

Followers were drawn to him as he went from place to place working among the people. Jesus did not turn anyone away. A large part of his difference from the Jewish norm, and his notoriety, was his willingness to embrace all people, rich, poor, clean, unclean, scholar, peasant or non-believing foreigner – and women, who were classed as chattels. Men scowled when Jesus spoke alone with women who were not part of his family. He was not focused on worldly attitudes but rather the human soul and spirit. Women responded and were to be found among his disciples – Mary Magdalene and other women named Mary (it was a very common

name) and Joanna, wife of one of the king's officials, Suzanna, Salome and Martha.

Jesus upset Jerusalem's religious authorities in the Temple whose job it was to ensure everyone kept to the dictates of the Law. He was executed on the orders of the procurator Pontius Pilate for his nuisance potential and supposed anti-Rome activities. Crucifixion was common enough, and the death of Jesus passed almost unnoticed in an insignificant client state of the vast empire.

The disciples of Jesus, however, would awaken to the awesome spiritual power at work behind those external events. They joyfully spread word of the resurrection, and subsequent appearances by the risen Christ. They became the first messengers, the apostles. Mary Magdalene was such a messenger.

### **The first people of 'The Way'**

Jesus did not start a religion. What became a religion developed slowly. For around two centuries there was no church with dedicated buildings. The word 'church' comes from the Greek *ecclesia*, which referred to a calling together of people. Those people who met with one another in private homes did feel they were 'called', by the Christ spirit.

In the young movement there was great diversity with communities listening to events recounted by different witnesses and followers of those witnesses. The image-filled stories were passed on orally before they began to be written down. We can assume some of the witnesses were women as listeners began to record the knowledge given first-hand from those who had known Jesus.

The people who wrote about what took place wanted to truthfully portray the chosen saviour. They also wanted to write about the close disciples who, often despite themselves, were thrust into a life they could never have imagined. There were many, men and women, although 'the twelve' were marked as special. This number was set in place because twelve matched an ideal archetypal number signifying sublime order in space, time and spirit. People knew twelve in the heavenly zodiac, in the tribes of Israel, the sons of Jacob, the stones from the Jordan Joshua set up at Gilgal and other biblical twelves.

The writings became the gospels. Our word 'gospel' comes from Middle English 'God Spell'. In the original Greek it is *evangelion*, 'good news', from which comes evangelist, those who spread the good tidings. Only writings by men have come down to us, perhaps because only they were literate, or any writing by women was abandoned. Certainly, there is no personal record by Mary Magdalene.

## **The new Mystery**

The word mystery comes from Greek *musterion* - 'secret/hidden thing'. And in a spiritually focused ancient world, the Mysteries offered paths of initiation, leading serious seekers into deeper layers of experience and meaning beneath the myths and legends, with the secrets only disclosed to the initiated.

Likewise, the gospels of the New Testament and the letters of the great evangelizer Paul speak of hidden teachings behind the literal sense. The keys to decode this sense would be given after a time of preparation because the inner levels required deep understanding. That is, the movement that was first known as 'the Way' was also a mystery.

But the Christ impulse was different because it was framed by an outer story of real events in time and space about Jesus the healer and teacher who had no regard for rules and societal divisions that restricted human freedom. To welcome people into the new Christ mystery, stories centered around the deeds of Jesus, and his inclusive message of love and compassion. In that fashion the first steps on the Way were shaped into an accessible form understandable to recent converts.

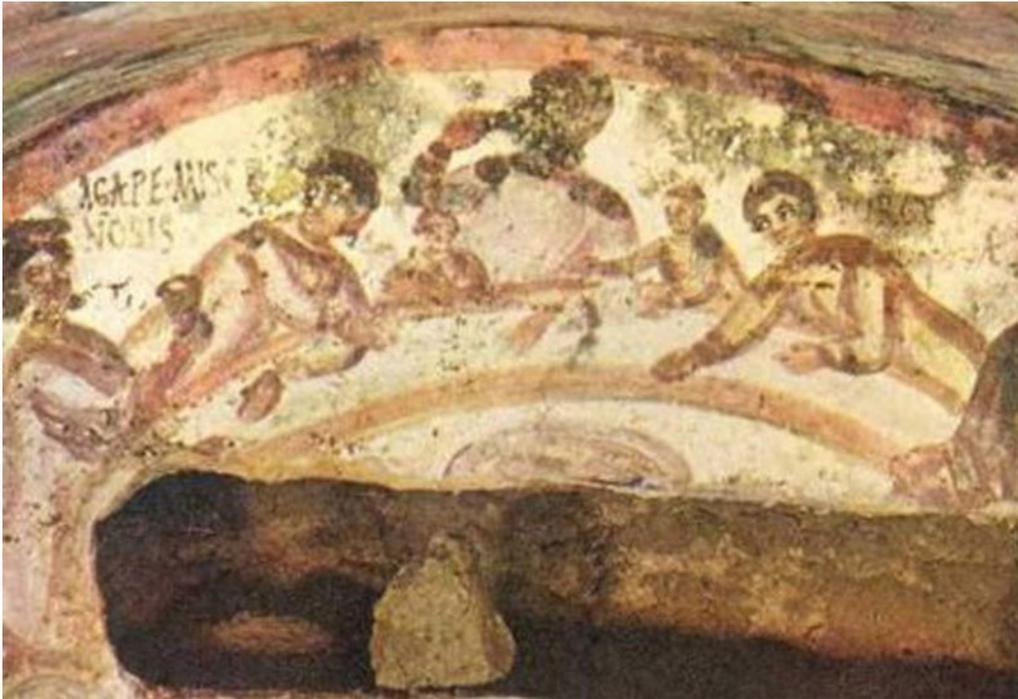
Jesus's teaching was not new, although it was imbued with enormous power and love because of the workings of the divine worlds in his life and death, and in human souls. The meaning of the incarnation of the high being known as *Christos*, 'saviour' would be revealed when the convert had 'eyes to see and ears to hear' the reality of this mystery.

This is described in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13). The writings of those first people of the Christ Way were and are initiatory documents that still require meditative in-depth exploration and the freedom of mind to gain gnosis of what lives within the outer shell.

We will be exploring the reality of the Christ through Mary Magdalene's story which will reveal especially the feminine aspect of this spiritual power and the I AM in us.

### **See how they love one another!**

Christians were a minority, albeit a committed one, in a world dominated by adherence to time-honoured, regional and syncretised gods and goddesses. Romans thought their compassion for the less fortunate strange, even ridiculous. 'See how they love one another!' is a dumbfounded statement attributed to a Roman observer.



*An image in the catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome – here the word agape (spiritual love) indicates Christians celebrating their ‘love meal’.*

Refusing to sacrifice to the official Roman deities meant they were lumped in with Jews and at times hunted down and executed. The most infamous ruler, Nero (54-68 CE) made them scapegoats to divert the population from his misdeeds, including the burning of Rome’s unwieldy tenements. Intermittent persecutions of Christians took place up until the fourth century. Many who spoke out and died for the faith became saints of the church.

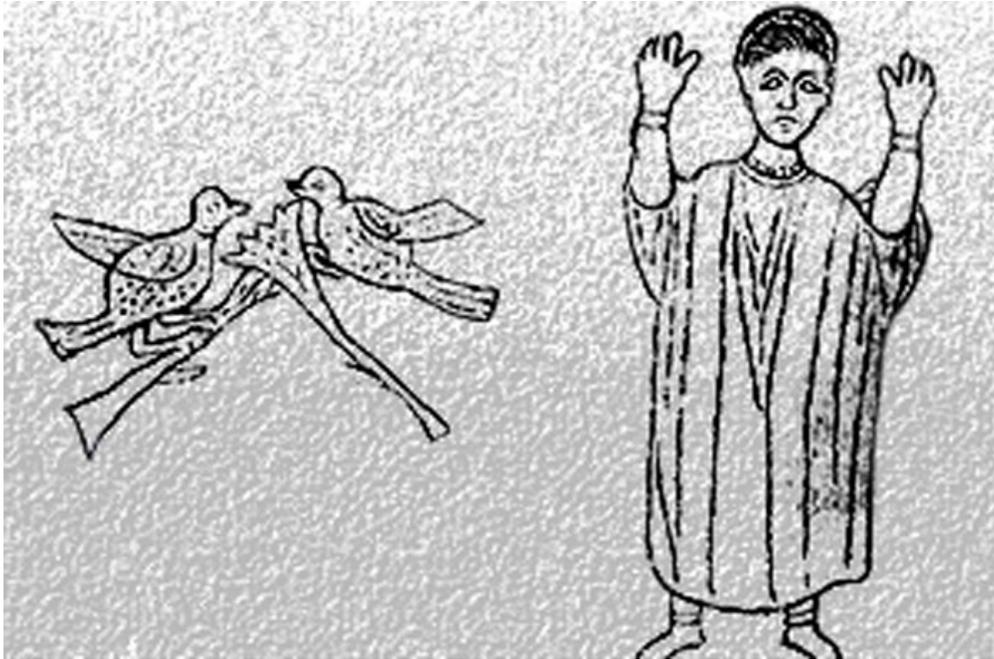
### **A place for women leaders**

In those earliest Christ focused gatherings, as the higher truth took hold, we see a radical, inclusive path where women stepped into roles previously set aside for men. ‘In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,’ Paul wrote, and he personally addressed women in his letters as teachers, organizers, leaders and apostles.

This was at odds with the norm of the dominant religions with men as leaders, women as followers, and the authority of women in Christianity was not to last.

Still, we see evidence of female leadership on the walls of the underground burial places called catacombs. In Rome early Christians often met there for safety and covered the walls in images.

The image below is from a first century wall drawing of a woman preaching or leading the eucharist. Her open raised arms are a liturgical gesture still in use today by the priest or pastor, sometimes with the words 'Christ is in you'.



### **The beginnings of form**

As small Christian communities multiplied, so began the desire for uniformity among the *ecclesia* gathering in homes. In the New Testament's *Acts of the Apostles* we have a record of some early attempts in the community in Jerusalem led by Peter and James the brother of Jesus. James is recorded in Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*) as being stoned to death around 62 CE. *Acts* depicts Peter going back and forth on missionary journeys. A tradition grew that he died in Rome.

After rebellion arose in Palestine, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE and its people murdered, enslaved or exiled. The Christians there either fled or were slaughtered along with the rest of the population. The same fate happened to other rebellious cities in the land. When the Jewish Bar Kochba revolt of 132-136 was put down, the whole land was fully taken over by Rome and was renamed as the Roman province of Syria Palaestina.

By this time Christianity had already spread across the Greco-Roman world. Gospels proliferated and the teaching diversified. Most of these gospels have been lost. A number have been rediscovered over the centuries, often as mere fragments. Some are wildly fanciful; others elaborate on threads about Jesus's childhood and family. At a time when

philosophy mattered, there were different philosophical approaches. We still have excerpts from some lost writings, quoted in other works opposed to the views expressed. Nevertheless, all this helps biblical scholars to piece together the great variety in early Christianity.

Although early Christianity was decidedly pluralistic, theologians such as Tertullian of Carthage and Irenaeus Bishop of Lyon, were working to develop a cohesive Christian doctrine and weed out dissenting views, among them the teachings of Marcion, Valentinus and the Gnostics.

### **Who were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?**

By the mid-second century Irenaeus and others were claiming four among the many gospels as fully authentic and inspired. The authors were named as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. To understand the reasons behind the choice we need to look at spiritual experience in those first Christian centuries. The hidden heavenly script was more readily accessible than it is today with our pervasive materialistic thinking. Those early church sages knew their biblical texts and could attune to the vision of the prophet Ezekiel that unveiled the divine beings of the heavenly realms, called the Merkabah by Jewish mystics. Its four living creatures marked the four fixed signs of the zodiac that are also found in the sphinx – the man, the lion and the bull, often with wings, and the eagle. The sages also had esoteric knowledge including knowledge of the four aspects of the human being. They chose the four gospels accordingly.

Matthew relates to the physical. The gospel is rich with physical detail beginning with the ancestry of Jesus. Jesus teaches a morality pointing to how we should live in this world. He is depicted as the promised messiah ('Anointed'), although the one whose purpose comes from the spiritual realms. Matthew was given the symbol of the winged man, the angelic potential of humanity.

Mark is the gospel of the etheric, dynamic, like a fire, events happening 'immediately'. There is no genealogy; Jesus Christ comes into the world as a potent life force represented by the lion's sun-like mane. Mark's symbol of the lion depicts Christ as the incarnating Sun Being, a majestic heavenly king come to offer transformation.

Luke creates through inspired pictures that emerge from the astral which is why Luke's stories engage our higher feelings. The angels and shepherds and baby Jesus in this gospel would lead to more than a thousand years of nativity re-enactments. The bull was a sacrificial beast for the Jews and other ancient mysteries such as Mithraism. It represents the priestly Christ and the divine one who offered up self as a sacrifice.

Clement of Alexandria called John's gospel 'the spiritual gospel' for its lofty vision of the Christ as the cosmic I AM. It speaks of the mighty spirit called Logos or Word 'becoming flesh', that is incarnating. It also has a focus on initiatory themes of the spiritualised 'I' in human beings. The far-sighted eagle in flight is its powerful symbol.

Three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke tell similar stories and are known as the synoptics (looked at together). John tells a different history. In contrast to the other gospels a point is made that the author, known as the beloved disciple, personally witnessed the events.

Recent archaeological excavation in Jerusalem backs up the author's descriptions of the first century city. English Anglican theologian Richard Bauckham follows the evidence in his scholarly work *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006; rev. 2017). Through his spiritual insight, founder of Anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner affirms the truth of the author as eyewitness.

By the fourth century these four gospels had entered the official canon or 'rule'.

### **The challenge of letting go male dominance**

In the synoptics you can pick up a theme of cultural ambivalence about the witness of mere women and their place in the gospel stories. 'The women' are often bunched together. Their resurrection experiences are even fobbed off as the sort of visions women are prone to. It's possible that despite all that happened, it was a challenge for those male writers to let go of societal norms. But the women could not be left out when they were deeply involved and travelled with Jesus and funded his ministry.

In John's gospel women are often the focus and it shows Jesus in serious and exceptional interactions with women. We see an eyewitness author who values the place of the feminine in the Christ mystery. While Mary Magdalene appears as a leading woman in the synoptics, John gives her prominence and fleshes out our knowledge about her and is an important source for understanding Magdalene Christianity.

When Mary and the beloved disciple are paired, they represent the ideal male and female Christed initiates, so there will be more to unfold about this profound gospel in the search for the Magdalene.

For nearly two millennia an idea of one smoothly unfolding church was promoted. The dedicated research of scholars into Christianity's early centuries has informed us that it never grew as one holy religion. It was made up of humans who quarrel and love, who aspire and repress. And it originally included the neglected female half of humanity.

Although the work of feminist scholars (which includes men) has helped to bring about the instigation of female pastors, priests and even a few bishops, the charisma of Mary Magdalene reaches beyond forms and walls, beyond women or men to human hearts and souls. So let's continue her story.

Further reading:

Andrew Welburn, *The Beginnings of Christianity* – esoteric exploration of Christianity as it emerged within its historical setting

Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* – overview of two millennia of attitudes to Mary Magdalene