

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*The Tower
of
Far-Seeing*

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THE TOWER OF FAR-SEEING

It's an honorific, a title!

Mary Magdalene has been swept up in the momentum as a kind of popular icon of 'the return of the goddess'. Yet the powerful symbols of the divine feminine can be more than image or idea. In the Christianity of Mary Magdalene, they would be revealed through an embodied spirituality, in her real-life drama of transformation and initiation. That's the significance of the living woman.

What a powerful woman she must have been! But was she from Magdala?

In the gospels of the canon, written in Greek, a language of scholarship and trade across the Roman empire, Mary is not referred to as Mary 'of' a town, or of anywhere. She is *Maria hé Magdalené* – Mary *the* Magdalene, or at times simply Mary Magdalene. Luke 8:2 clearly states that she is 'Mary, called Magdalene.' Her name functions in a similar way to Simon the Rock (*Cephas/Petros*) and Jesus the Nazarene (*Nazarenos, Nazoraïos*), which is not the same as a village called Nazareth.

First-century Palestine was multilingual. As well as Greek being widespread, Aramaic was the common language, and Jews understood Hebrew the language of the Torah (the Hebrew Bible). The word *migdal* in Hebrew and *magdal* in Aramaic mean 'tower' which in turn come from the verb *gadel* meaning to grow strong or great.

This is the source of the Greek 'Magdalené'. Mary has a title. She is Mary the Tower.

A superficial explanation is that she was unusually tall and that this was simply a nickname. Only someone with scant respect for her would come up with that. Mary was one of those wealthy enough to support Jesus financially. We don't know whether she inherited wealth or earned it in trade – not unheard for women of in those days. But 'tower' doesn't fit as a description there either.

In those days there was a limited repertoire of names to choose from so often people were given distinguishing nicknames or titles. That is, men were. Being so named is unusual for a woman.

With women it was about belonging and relationship. If a woman was married, she was generally known as 'the wife of' whoever the man was; she belonged to her husband legally. In the gospels for example there are

Mary the wife of Clopas and Joanna the wife of Chusa. Mary Magdalene is not named as the wife of anyone. Mothers are also named for their sons, and widows are 'the widow of' something, often a place. Neither of these are applied to Mary either. This suggests that she was not or had never been married, or as an unusual woman was important enough to have her own personal title – Mary the Tower.

A closer look at the Magdala tradition

There is no real evidence for a town of that name in the first century when Jesus travelled through Galilee. Magdala is not mentioned in the gospels. (Even one mention in some translations of Matthew 15:39 has been corrected to 'the region of Magadan').

When we look at other contemporary sources, such as the writings of the historian Josephus, the town that would later be associated with the church's Magdala was known then as Taricheae, a Greek name. Josephus records that Taricheae was a centre of the rebellion against Rome (66-73 CE) and was destroyed by the Roman army c. 69.

The Jewish Talmud, compiled in the late second century well after the Roman invasion notes a town called in Aramaic, Magdal Nunayya. It may have been Taricheae rebuilt and renamed. The names Nunayya and Taricheae are both connected with fish processing, although archaeology raises questions about whether the location fits.

The gospels were copied and recopied, and in the early fourth century we find the first Latin translations. It is possible that along the way Mary the Magdalene became Mary of Magdala.

It's recorded that Christian pilgrims in the sixth to ninth centuries visited Mary Magdalene's supposed house and a church dedicated to her in a Magdala on the western shores of the Sea of Galilee. Then records disappear until the nineteenth century when Christian travellers from the west discovered a very small Muslim village called al-Majdal in the area, a convenient site for 'Magdala' supposed home of the Magdalene.

The strong protective tower

Margaret Starbird and others have connected the Magdalene's title with a prophecy by Micah, a prophet of Judah between 737 to 696 BCE (Micah 4:8-11).

The prophecy begins:

And you, O tower of the flock,
Hill of the daughter of Zion,
To you shall it come, the former dominion shall come,
the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.

‘Tower of the flock’ in Hebrew is *migdal-eder*, which most likely refers to a tower on a vantage point near Bethlehem from which shepherds watched over their flocks.



‘Migdal Eder’ ruins – nineteenth century photo

Micah continues with the ‘daughter’ writhing like a woman in travail, yet she will be redeemed from the hands of her enemies – those who do not know the thoughts of the Lord or of his plan.

In symbolic language Micah spoke about the fall and exile of the people of Judah, and the eventual restoration of Zion (Jerusalem). The prophecy has also been linked to the coming of the Jewish Messiah and to the birth of Jesus.

‘Tower of the Flock’ could be the source of the title given to Mary, perhaps by Jesus her teacher. To me it adds to the picture of who she was – and is. The Micah prophecy speaks strongly of what took place for Mary Magdalene – the mistreatment in her life and her afterlife. Yet a tower is strong enough to withstand onslaught and shelter those in danger. Mary’s title speaks powerfully of her ability to stand firm in the face of opposition, her authority as a shelter, nurturer and mediator for souls in distress, during her life and beyond. It is a role that would be recognised by the church as these prayers show.

... your love for the Lord held you by his tomb.
Pray for those who are in dark places –
who feel without hope
and for whom life feels burdensome.

Guide us all through your story
to the hope of resurrection.

—from a Novena, a cycle of nine prayers to Saint Mary Magdalene

Therefore, since you are now with the chosen because you are beloved and are beloved because you are chosen of God, I, in my misery, pray to you, in bliss; in my darkness, I ask for light; in my sins, redemption; impure, I ask for purity.

—from a Prayer to the Magdalene by St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Towards the tower of light

From a tower you can see far and spiritual far-seeing was a quality that led to Mary Magdalene's significant experiences being described in the gospels, most thoroughly in John's Gospel. This gospel tracks the path of the author's initiation into the Christ mystery. To make clear this is a path for all, the identity of the author is disguised by taking on a mask like an actor in ancient Greek drama.

This powerful art form first emerged from the mysteries in Greece. Our word drama comes from the Greek *dran*, to act, make akin to, and this is what took place in the mysteries, especially the mysteries of Dionysus the god of disruption, transformation and renewal – and of wine, because it takes you out of the everyday self. Sacred myths were re-enacted before candidates for initiation in the deepest secrecy. At the central moment in these awesome rituals, worshippers became like the gods as the divine entered them.

Drama as we know it emerged after certain of the rites became public. The aim of drama was still catharsis, from *kathartikos*, cleanse or purify. Performers were masked to emphasize that it was relevant to all. Powerful outer events were portrayed to enable you to be released from your personal 'underworld' through bringing what had been hidden into consciousness. The intent was that you became ready to be purified and transformed within the healing temples always associated with theatres.



The god Dionysius – from a Greek vase painting

Early in John's gospel Jesus transforms water into wine, a very Dionysian act. And this gospel is such a drama because through dramatic events or 'signs' it reveals the process that readies one for initiation into the Christ mystery of the human spirit. Like Greek drama, the protagonist is 'masked' while the inner reality, the mystery, is no longer hidden but available for 'those who have eyes to see and ears to hear'. The personal emerges into the light and meets universal truth, which is the essence of drama.

Mary Magdalene is the important female character in this gospel and a counterpart to the disciple and author behind the mask, Lazarus-John. Mary's initiatory journey is also portrayed. She is named at key points although at times her identity too is disguised. Her signs will be significant in Portal 7: The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene. For a start, who and what Mary is becoming is revealed behind one mask, that worn by 'the woman of Samaria'.

In a land of high towers

Appearing only in John's gospel there is a significant discussion between a woman in Samaria and Jesus (John 4:16-26). This is exceptional, firstly because Jews and Samaritans had no discourse with one another, and secondly because men were not expected to speak in public with women other than members of their own family. But here he is having a long discussion with this woman beside a public well about comparative

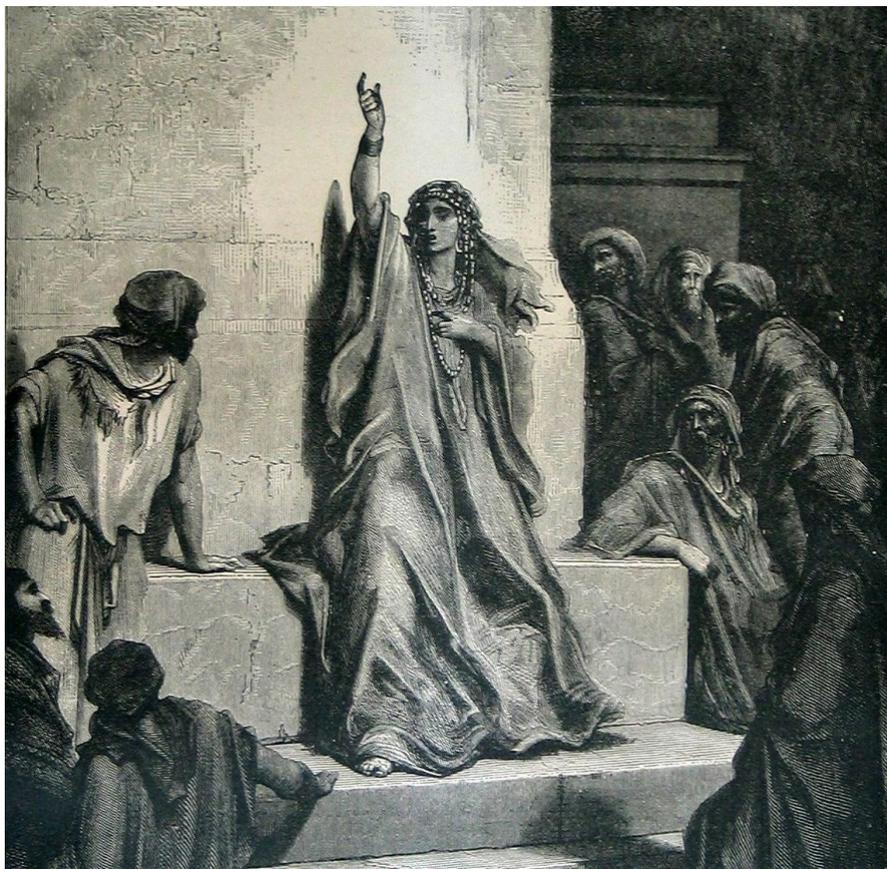
understanding of the Messiah and telling her about the 'living water' of eternal life he offers. As well, he looks at her with spiritual insight and perceives the needs of her soul.

I return to this significant interchange in *The Seven Demons and the Well*. But for now, we can take note of the importance of Samaria as the setting. This central region of Palestine in the heart of old Canaan was a land of many towers built over the ages as high-reaching watchtowers to protect this vulnerable region.

High towers symbolise visionary sight and spiritual perception. And in Samaria we have Mary the Tower as she begins to emerge. In response to what Jesus tells her, the amazed woman recognises him as a special prophet and spreads the news.

And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me all that I ever did'.
(4:39)

Prophecy speaks to the past, present and future as one whole. A prophet or prophetess has the gift of interpreting the divine will. In that sense it is more than prediction and fortune telling.



Deborah by Gustav Dore; judge and prophetess

Prophetesses were valued in the ancient world, including in the Religions of the Book. The Jewish Talmud recognises seven Hebrew prophetesses: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Hulda, Abigail and Esther. By the first century many Jews believed the age of prophecy was over. Yet prophets still formed part of the web of society.

In Luke's gospel we meet the aged prophetess Anna who lived in the Temple precincts. When eight-day-old Jesus was brought there to be circumcised, as was the custom, she declared to everyone that he was the redeemer they waited for.

Mary the Prophetess

The first Christians recognised prophecy as a spiritual gift and women were among the gifted. They felt called by the words of the Hebrew prophet Joel that, '...your sons and your daughters shall prophesy' (Joel 2:28). The evangelist Philip had four unmarried daughters, all prophetesses, so it seems this ability was not uncommon.

Mary Magdalene will become the paramount disciple as seer and visionary, the first to acknowledge Jesus's destiny, when in another semi-disguise as Mary of Bethany she anoints the feet of Jesus, with the profound intuition that this is a preparation for his death. And under her own title she is the first to perceive the risen Christ.

Today her vision, strength and surety can still inspire us. The 2018 movie *Mary Magdalene* redresses the long-held prejudice that the women around Jesus were mere hangers on. The Magdalene played by Rooney Mara comes centre stage as the one who perceives and knows Jesus the Christ. Rooney's quietly compelling portrayal draws on an alternative Mary who has been waiting in the background since the Gnostic gospels were suppressed, yet who is emerging now as part of the twenty-first century zeitgeist. 'I will not be silenced,' Mary says to Peter, who is intent on dismissing her from the company of the disciples. And it is so.