

Mary Magdalene
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The character of Mary Magdalene has raised a lot of interest and curiosity in recent times. There are mainly two reasons: first, Dan Brown's new novel 'The Da Vinci Code' portrays Mary Magdalene as the wife of Jesus and the mother of their children; second, after Mother Mary, Mary Magdalene is the most popular character in the New Testament of The Bible.

Then, some years ago the novelist Nikos Kazantzakis published a novel entitled "The Last Temptations of Jesus Christ". In 1988 the Hollywood film producer Martin Scorsese made a film based on the novel. I saw the film in a theatre in Switzerland. In the film Jesus without dying on the cross comes down and starts a family with Mary Magdalene. Both Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene are historical characters. Similarly, Leonard da Vinci is also a genius painter, artist in history. In the film on Jesus and Mary Magdalene the producer has used the name of da Vinci. The novelist Dan Brown's success has been due to the fact that he built a magnificent story on the imagined life of historical persons.

Here, we shall try to portray the character of Mary Magdalene not based on imagination, but on reliable information given in the New Testament. All the four evangelists Mathew, Mark, Luke and John have spoken about Mary Magdalene in the Gospels. Mary Magdalene is the best known person among the women of the New Testament after Mother Mary.

Apart from Mother Mary the Gospels speak about three Marys: one, Mary Magdalene, two, Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and three, Mary the mother of James and Joseph. Apart from these three women with the name Mary, there has been many other women following Jesus. For instance, St. Luke says, "The twelve disciples went with Jesus, and so did some women who had been healed of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (who was called Magdalene), from whom seven demons had been driven out; Joanna, whose husband Chuza was an officer in Herod's court; and Susanna, and many other women who used their own resources to help Jesus and his disciples." (Luke 8, 2-3)

Before speaking about the women disciples St. Luke speaks about a sinful woman going to the house of Simon, a Pharisee, where Jesus was eating. She anointed Jesus' feet, and kissed them. Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." (Luke 7, 48) The author of "Impressions of Jesus", Denis Mac Bright believes that, that sinful woman is Mary Magdalene. But authors like Herbert Loekyer who has written "All the Women of the Bible" says, there are no conclusive proofs to believe that Mary Magdalene is the same as the sinful woman. Like some Bible scholars I too believe that it is an injustice to Mary Magdalene to consider her as the sinful woman. It is a defamation of Mary Magdalene.

We do not know about the parents, the family or the social life of Mary Magdalene. But Mary's name is listed first among those women who followed Jesus and provided him and his disciples from their own means. From this we may conclude that Mary Magdalene had received a family inheritance which she was free to use for the benefit of Jesus and his disciples. But without any specific family obligations, Mary Magdalene could follow Jesus together with other the women disciples of Jesus.

From Mark (16, 9) and Luke (8, 2) we know that Jesus has driven out seven devils from Mary Magdalene. In the time of Jesus the people believed that sicknesses like epilepsy and madness were the result of the possession of devils and evil spirits. Mary Magdalene must have suffered from such a sickness and Jesus must have healed her from that sickness and gifted her health. Mary Magdalene could have also suffered from some inherited sickness.

But the main thing is that Jesus saved her from sickness or possession which harassed her and gave her the gift of full health. Thus with a grateful heart Mary Magdalene must have offered her life for the service of Jesus and his disciples. With Mary Magdalene there were also other women who have been freed from their sickness or the possession. The Gospel of St. Luke clearly says that among those who followed Jesus there were some women who were been healed of evil spirits and sickness.

Among these women Mary Magdalene must have been very dedicated and may have displayed leadership qualities so that her name is mentioned first among all the women disciples of Jesus. Perhaps this major role of Mary Magdalene among Jesus' woman disciples may be the reason for novelists like Dan Brown to portray Mary Magdalene as the wife of Jesus. There is no historical or traditional proof to show Mary Magdalene as Jesus' wife. Dan Brown's novel, 'The Da Vinci Code' is nothing more than the fruitful imagination of the novelist.

Jesus was proclaiming God's Kingdom going from village to village and town to town. So people were needed to look after the needs of Jesus and his disciples like food and place for night-halting. The women disciples like Mary Magdalene did all that spending generously from their own wealth. Mary Magdalene may have played a leading role in it. But to conclude from it and to portray Mary Magdalene as the wife of Jesus, one forgets the great difference between the mentality of people today and at the time of Jesus.

I believe, like the relation of the twelve disciples with Jesus, Mary Magdalene too related to Jesus as master (Guru) and disciple. Mary Magdalene cultivated that relation with complete dedication and service. Jesus too appreciated Mary's complete trust and service. This becomes clear during the time of Jesus' Passion, his death on the Cross and above all during his resurrection.

During the last journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem as usual Mary Magdalene and the other women disciples accompanied Jesus and served him spending money from their own pockets. Besides, when the enemies of Jesus came to catch hold of him, the disciples fled from the scene, but Mary Magdalene and the other women disciples followed Jesus. Like Jesus they too became fearless in the face of death. So, the evangelists may have heard about the happenings and the events of the three last days of Jesus' life from these women and narrated them in their Gospels.

St. Luke writes that on the way of the Cross, "a large crowd of people followed him; among them were some women who were weeping and wailing for him." (Luke 23, 27) Luke has not mentioned the name of Mary Magdalene among the women following Jesus, but we would be surprised if Mary Magdalene is not there among the women. When the enemies of Jesus got hold

of him and took him before Pilot, Mother Mary and Mary Magdalene were certainly among the women following Jesus. The women closely followed the happenings and observed everything.

The director of the film 'The Passion of Jesus Christ', Mel Gibson has put an unforgettable scene in his film. At the order of Pilot Jesus is cruelly whipped in the palace courtyard. The blood from the whipping of Jesus makes the courtyard wet. In Gibson's film two women - obviously the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene - wipe the blood with their scarves.

On the way of the Cross, as Luke notes, the women were weeping and wailing for him. "Jesus turned to them and said, 'Women of Jerusalem! Don't cry for me, but for yourselves and your children.'" (Luke 23, 28) Mary Magdalene who followed Jesus all the time when he preached the Kingdom of God in all of Galilee and Judea certainly followed him on the way to the Cross. When Jesus was raised on the Cross these women were observing everything from afar. Mathew and Mark note almost in identical words that, "There were many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee and helped him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the wife of Zebedee". (Mathew 27, 55-56)

Luke has specially noted, "All those who knew Jesus personally, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance to watch." (Luke 23, 49) So, from this we can conclude that Mary Magdalene was there at Golgotha among the women and saw the scene of Jesus' crucifixion and heard the heart-rending words of Jesus from the Cross. One can imagine the scene of total helplessness of these women who were unable to help their beloved Jesus in his great suffering and death.

The Gospels speak about two unknown disciples: Joseph of Arimathea and a Pharisee Nicodemus. They brought down the body of Jesus from the Cross and wrapped it in a linen sheet. The Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and other devout women disciples might have helped the two to bury Jesus. Luke notes, "The women who had followed Jesus from Galilee went with Joseph and saw the tomb and how Jesus' body was placed in it. Then, they went back home and prepared the spices and perfumes for the body. On the Sabbath they rested, as the Law commanded." (Luke 23, 55-56)

The renowned artist Peter Paul Rubens has drawn a very famous picture entitled 'The Descent from the Cross!' In the picture two women are helping Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to take down the body of Jesus from the Cross. The two women are Mary Magdalene and Mary the wife of Cleopass. Rubens' portrait of Mary Magdalene gives credence to traditional belief that Mary Magdalene was at the foot of the Cross.

In the Gospels Mary Magdalene gets special place and respect because Mark has mentioned, "After Jesus rose from death early on Sunday, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had driven out seven demons." (Mark 16, 9) Jesus had broken many traditional beliefs of people during his life on earth. Against the customs of the Jewish rulers, Jesus took revolutionly steps like mingling and eating with outcasts, sinners and tax-collectors. In Jewish society a woman's place was not better than a servant or a slave. But in dealing with people Jesus gave women equal dignity and self respect like men.

As if these revolutionary steps were not enough, the resurrected Christ first appears to a woman, Mary Magdalene, and makes her the messenger of his resurrection!

St. John has described in a picturesque way the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection. "Mary stood crying outside the tomb. While she was still crying, she bent over and looked in the tomb and saw two angels there dressed in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. 'Women, why are you crying?' they asked her.

"She answered, 'They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!'

"Then she turned round and saw Jesus standing there; but she did not know that it was Jesus. 'Woman, why are you crying?' Jesus asked her. 'Who is it that you are looking for?'

"She thought he was the gardener, so she said to him, 'If you took him away, sir, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.'

"Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'

"She turned towards him and said in Hebrew, 'Rabboni!' (this means 'Teacher.')

" 'Do not hold on to me,' Jesus told her, 'because I have not yet gone back up to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to him who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God.'

"So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her." (John 20, 11-18)

After studying about the times of Jesus, we can say without doubt that in Jesus' time nobody could have even imagined the things Jesus did after his resurrection. Jesus makes a woman - Mary Magdalene - the messenger of his resurrection to his disciples! Following Jesus with other woman of Galilee Mary Magdalene has fully, absorbed the values, the ideals and the attitudes of Jesus. So, Mary Magdalene without any hesitation or doubt can courageously give the message of Jesus to his disciples.

In Jewish society the place of a woman was at the bottom. No one paid attention to her opinion. Women were confined to their houses. But Mary Magdalene knows well that Jesus has overcome these traditional beliefs and customs and that he has given to each man and woman without any distinction equality and dignity. So, Mary takes the message to the disciples, a thing they could never have imagined. Mary Magdalene experiences only enthusiasm and happiness in delivering the message.

Mary Magdalene has experienced a wonderful change in her life as a result of her meeting and long association with Jesus. The meeting and association with Jesus cannot fail to bring similar changes in one and all. St Paul is a typical example of this. In the letter to the Galatians, St. Paul

says, "I have been put to death with Christ on his Cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2, 20)

Mary Magdalene can also say like St. Paul "that it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me."

With her self-surrender and service Mary Magdalene has become another Christ. Mary Magdalene appears nowhere in the Bible after the story of her encounter with the risen Christ. All the same, we can believe that after the Ascension when the disciples and other followers of Christ were gathered in Jerusalem Mary Magdalene must have also been with them in the upper room where all were gathered in prayer. 'The Acts of the Apostles' says, "They gathered frequently to pray as a group, together with the women and with Mary the Mother of Jesus and with his brothers." (Acts 1, 14)

We can easily imagine that Mary Magdalene must have been there with the Mother of Jesus and the other women. Mary Magdalene's meeting and long association with Jesus transformed her from a weak woman to a strong one. Moreover she became the very first witness of Jesus' resurrection and also his first messenger of the resurrection. The encounter with Jesus and association with him transforms a person. Mary Magdalene is a great example of such transformation for good.