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MARY MAGDALENE'S MODERN MAKEOVER

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Revisionist portraits of Jesus promulgated today by sources ranging from the Jesus Seminar to the New Age movement are receiving great attention; meanwhile, another, lesser figure who is associated with Jesus has been undergoing a significant, but quieter, makeover. Mary Magdalene has become the subject of a spate of recent books and products, some of which portray her in terms that evangelical, Catholic, and other Christians have deemed questionable or even offensive.

The most recent and popular revisioning of Mary Magdalene has emerged from the best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*, which paints a portrait of Mary as the wife of Jesus and as the true spiritual head of a church that had been corrupted by male apostles. The author, Dan Brown, had adopted a history of Mary from earlier treatments, such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Henry Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, as one who escaped to France to produce a royal bloodline with Jesus. These and other new visions of Mary variously combine the text of the New Testament, apocryphal works, medieval legends, and modern understandings to create a revamped Mary Magdalene that has informed popular culture and tantalized public perceptions.

Small-Town Beginnings. The portrait of Mary Magdalene that emerges from the handful of verses about her in the Bible indicates that she was a woman of some importance. She is identified as a supporter of Jesus' ministry (Luke 8:1–2), which could indicate that she was a person of means. Luke records that seven demons were cast out of her (Luke 8:3), which may well have been the event that led her to support Jesus' ministry. Other texts affirm that she was one of several women who attended Jesus' death and burial. Most significantly, she is reported to be the first recipient of a personal visit by the resurrected Christ (John 20:11–18), a significant honor. The word *Magdalene* is not a surname, but an indication that Mary resided in the fishing village of Migdal (which would later be called Magdala) on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee.

Magdalene Media Blitz. Riding on the success of *The Da Vinci Code*, several books and products concerned with Mary Magdalene either have newly appeared or seen a revitalization of sales. These include fictional works such as *Unveiling Mary Magdalene* by Liz Curtis Higgs and *Mary, Called Magdalene* by Margaret George; commentaries on apocryphal texts associated with Mary Magdalene such as *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* by Jean-Yves Leloup and *The Gospels of Mary* by Marvin Meyer; speculative biographies ranging from Margaret Starbird's esoteric *Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile* to Bruce Chilton's more mainstream *Mary Magdalene: A Biography*; and, offering the truest signal that Mary Magdalene has "arrived" in popular culture, a *Complete Idiot's Guide to Mary Magdalene* and a *Gospel of Mary Magdalene 2006 Calendar*. Older books used by Dan Brown as sources for *The Da Vinci Code*, such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, have received renewed attention, while newer books offering the same general thesis placing Mary Magdalene in France, such as Laurence Gardner's *The Magdalene Legacy*, have also ridden on the crest.

A Manufactured Reputation. The current interest in Mary Magdalene reflects nothing new, but is a revitalization of a fascination that first appeared in the second century AD. Philip Jenkins, Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and author of the book *Hidden Gospels*, reminds us of ancient documents such as *The Gospel of Mary* and *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, which were authored by groups regarded as heretical by the mainstream church, and which cast Mary in a superior role, often having a special and perhaps even sexual relationship with Jesus. Jenkins notes that

the worldview of the authors of these documents (whom scholars loosely refer to as “Gnostics,” from the Greek word *gnosis*, or knowledge, after their belief that salvation required special “knowledge”), “demanded that spiritual beings exist in male and female pairs,” and so Jesus Himself required some sort of equitable female counterpart. Mary Magdalene became a natural choice for this equation because she was the first person to see the risen Jesus.

Modern interpreters of Mary Magdalene, ironically, make significant but often selective use of these ancient texts. Paul Maier, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, observes that “Dan Brown will use whatever apocryphal writings are helpful to him, but he overlooks the most famous Gnostic gospel of all: The Gospel of Thomas,” which concludes with a saying that is antithetical to Brown’s view of Mary Magdalene. When Peter asks Jesus to force Mary to leave, “for females don’t deserve life,” Jesus does not rebuke Peter, but rather says, “I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.”

Darrell Bock, Research Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, and author of *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* and the forthcoming *Jesus in Context*, notes that the Jesus of the Gnostic texts is often portrayed as “so divine he can’t be human,” which is in contrast to the Jesus of *The Da Vinci Code*, who is seen as a mere man who was elevated to divinity.

Richard Bauckham, professor of New Testament at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and author of *Gospel Women: Studies of Named Women in the Gospels*, similarly says that “at the fairly popular level, references to the Gnostic Gospels are given without any serious account of what Gnostic Christianity was like.” Bauckham points out that these references tend to ignore the views of Gnostics that are elitist and “generally anti-material—i.e., they regard the body as an evil, processes like sex and childbirth as undesirable.” In contrast, *The Da Vinci Code* implies that the original form of Christianity involved semi-public sexual rituals and was highly egalitarian. Bauckham thus emphasizes the irony: “The idea that Jesus and Mary had a sexual relationship and produced children would have horrified orthodox Christians, but it would have horrified Gnostics even more!”

The next “cultural makeover” of Mary Magdalene occurred when she was (most scholars believe, erroneously) identified with the unnamed “sinful woman” of Luke 7:37–50, and also with Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Pope Gregory the Great (c. AD 540–604) analogically connected Mary’s seven demons with the seven deadly sins, and used Mary as an ideal type of the repentant sinner. Ironically, many modern interpreters of Mary Magdalene view this as a symptom of a desire to suppress and discredit her as the representative of authentic Christianity, when in fact, say Carl Olson and Sandra Miesel, authors of *The Da Vinci Hoax*, Gregory’s intent was to uphold her as “an exemplar of repentance, humility, and devotion.”

Closer to the modern era, interest in Mary Magdalene, and alternate views of her role, emerged well before *The Da Vinci Code*, for example, in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which appeared in 1982. Christians may recall a more controversial (and graphic) variation of the relationship between Jesus and Mary as presented in the book (1960) and film (1988) *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Suggestions that Jesus and Mary were a married couple can also be discovered as a secondary belief (not a formal doctrine) of the Mormon church. “Marriage, procreation, and polygamy were very important elements in a Mormon’s salvation during the early years of Mormonism. For this reason we should not be surprised to learn that LDS leaders portrayed Jesus as a married man,” says Bill McKeever, director of Mormonism Research Ministry. “Some Mormons may find the Jesus/Mary Magdalene connection made by early [Mormon] leaders uncomfortable; however, the fact that none of them were reprimanded shows that it must have been an acceptable teaching.” McKeever cites early Mormon apostle Orson Hyde, who inferred that Jesus was married not only to Mary Magdalene, but also to Lazarus’s sisters Mary and Martha. *Time* magazine writer David van Biema, in an August 11, 2003, article “Mary Magdalene: Saint or Sinner?” attributes to early Mormon leader Brigham Young a belief that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were marriage partners. Today, popular Mormon apologists such as Michael Griffith entertain the idea that Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ wife, and appeal, even as *The Da Vinci Code* does, to ancient Gnostic texts as support.

The Perfect Heroine. Why the renewed interest in Mary Magdalene? Liz Curtis Higgs, author of *Unveiling Mary Magdalene*, suggested in an interview with the JOURNAL that the trigger was a combination of factors, particularly the appearance of the “voluptuous, sensual Mary Magdalene” singing to Jesus, “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” in the 1973 film version of *Jesus Christ: Superstar*. Higgs also credits revival of interest to the “goddess movement” (a woman-based form of spirituality that views Christianity as patriarchal and destructive, and portrays itself as regenerative), as well as a more general interest in women of the Bible by Christians. Higgs, who has collected more than 100 books on Mary Magdalene, regards her as “the finest role model in the Bible,” but also “the most misunderstood” woman in the New Testament. She noted that many of the books (such as Margaret Starbird’s) “jump to conclusions” based on silences in the biblical text and inferences that the authors draw from Mary’s special prominence among women in the Gospels.

Scholars observing the current Mary Magdalene phenomenon have suggested that its roots lie in ideological concerns and a desire to refabricate Christian faith to make it more suitable to modern preferences. In *Hidden Gospels*, Jenkins refers to “a tendency by feminist scholars to inflate claims about the value of lost gospels and scriptures as evidence for the early church” and affirms the “ideological character” of these modern efforts. In his article “A Quite Contrary Mary,” journalist of religion Kenneth Woodward writes, “In the case of Mary Magdalene, the news is not what is being said about her, but the new context in which she is being placed—and who is doing the placing and why.” Feminist scholars, Woodward says, suppose that “the early movement led by Jesus was egalitarian and gender-inclusive” but that later male-dominated parties in the church (led first by Peter) covered up Mary’s role in this movement. This is the same theme that governs the plot of *The Da Vinci Code*.

In somewhat different terms, Bauckham believes that the renewed interest in the women of the Bible and the early church has been, in general, “healthy and productive.” “We have learned a lot more about women in early Christianity, and most would agree that they played more prominent roles than usually had been thought,” Bauckham told the JOURNAL. He cautions, however, that “this trend can be taken in speculative and extreme directions” that hypothesize deliberate suppression of evidence, which then allows entry for the idea that documents like *The Gospel of Mary* may be “more authentic” than the canonical ones. Maier, likewise, asserts that although for “too long, the church has underused the great talents of women,” and that therefore there is “some justification” for the current interest, many efforts such as Brown’s “overdo it heroically and are false historically.”

On the popular level, Bauckham believes that, combined with the allure of conspiracy theories, the interest in Mary has been kindled by “a desire to discover that Jesus had a sexual relationship, because to so many contemporary people this seems essential to being human.” Bock attributes the renewed interest in Mary Magdalene to a combination of “the concern to discover the role of women in the church” (and particularly, to seek documents that present “a prominent role for a woman close to Jesus”) and a desire to “challenge the uniqueness of Jesus as presented in orthodox Christianity.”

The vision of Mary Magdalene has traversed from one of mystical elitism (as held by ancient Gnostics) to one of social egalitarianism (as held by modern feminist scholars and popular works). What other visions may emerge in the future is open to speculation, but it is certain that with the upcoming release of *The Da Vinci Code* film, a spotlight will continue to shine on this most prominent of “Gospel women.”

— James Patrick Holding