

Healed

HOW MARY MAGDALENE
WAS MADE WELL

Kate Moorehead



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Making a Woman

I was the first woman to lead all three of the churches that I have served. I don't know if my leadership is supposed to look different than a man's. My husband used to pump me up when I first came to St. John's Cathedral. "Be the Dean!" he would say. I would try not to slouch. I would try to sound confident and tough. But really, I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing. I have been like a blind person groping my way towards some uniquely feminine form of leadership. To tell you the truth, I often didn't think much about it until I started doing retreats for women and they began asking me about what it was like to be a woman leader in the church.

I found myself searching the Bible for answers to their questions about what it meant to be a woman leader. Did women follow Jesus differently? How did they interact with Jesus? How did they worship him? Was there something that I was supposed to be doing?

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus were the most important women in Jesus's life. One is inaccurately known as a repentant prostitute, the other as a perpetual virgin.

These women are defined by whether or not they had sex. But who were they to Jesus? Did he define them by their sexual behavior too?

Mary Magdalene in particular grabbed my heart. Why had the church throughout the centuries painted her dressed in red, the color associated with seduction? Why was she seen as a sexual woman, voluptuous and tempting? In many Renaissance paintings, she looks like she is ready to lure someone to bed. Why was her sexuality so important? And why are fringe elements today trying to convince us that she really was Jesus's wife?¹

I wanted to get to know the truth about Mary Magdalene. But where to start? My search took me all the way back to the beginning, to the creation of the human race. The role and place of women in relationship to men has been complicated from the very beginning of scripture.

In the Beginning

In the Bible, the most important stories are told more than once. The story of Jesus is told in four gospels. The story of the Exodus is told many times in the Old Testament. And the story of the creation of the world is told twice. Scripture often repeats the most crucial stories as a way of honoring and exploring them, like when we hold up a diamond and examine its many sides. Each of these stories is told from a different angle, another perspective. Sometimes the details may even conflict.

1. The most popular book that describes Mary Magdalene and Jesus as having been married is Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*.

For some, the existence of multiple and sometimes divergent tellings of the same story is disturbing and means that none of it really happened. For me, it makes the words more real. After all, if a story is important to me, I tell it many times and so will anyone else who witnessed it. And their story will no doubt be told from a different perspective than mine. God inspired Holy Scripture to be written not as a textbook but as a living word told in many ways from many perspectives.

So there are two creation stories. All you have to do is open the Bible and read to see that this is true. In the first of the two creation stories (found in Genesis 1–2:3), God makes the world in seven days. On each day, God calls the created good. And on the sixth day, God makes humankind. Humans, both male and female, are created *in the image of God*. They are made in God's image together. And together, God declares that they are *very good*. In the first story, man and woman are created at the same time as equals and God says that they are very good.

In the second story (found in Genesis 2:4–5), God makes a garden first and puts Adam in that garden. For centuries the translators of the Bible have used the word *Adam* as the proper name for a man, and later in the book of Genesis, this word is used as if it were the name of the man. But the word in the Hebrew is derived from the word אָדָמָה (pronounced *adama*) which means “earth.” So a more accurate translation of the word *Adam* might be “earth-creature” or “one made from earth.” Adam is created when God takes the earth and forms it into a human shape. And God breathes into Adam the breath of life. God then sets about making some company for the earth-creature.

God creates animals, birds of the air, and fish of the sea, but still Adam is lonely. So God makes Adam go to sleep and separates Adam's *side* from the rest of his body. The result of this split is the creation of אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה (*esh* and *eesha*), male and female. These words, male and female, are different from the word Adam. So there is one earth-creature which is then split into two parts. And after the split, it seems that Adam and Eve existed in harmony and peace until the arrival of the snake.

We have only just opened the Bible and already the role and place of the woman is confusing. Was woman created alongside and equal to the man? Was she created after the splitting of an earth-creature? Who is she in relation to the man and what is her place in the created order?

These stories coexist to tell us a deep truth about who we are. The relationship between men and women is complicated and it has been from the very beginning.

Lilith and Eve

How can we understand these two different stories that sit side by side at the very beginning of the Bible? Babylonian Jewish scholars tried to make sense of the two creation stories by imagining that the woman in the first story was equal to the man and that he did not like her. They named her "the First Eve." Later, this first woman became linked with legends of a female *lilu* (demon), who stalked men in their sleep, causing nocturnal emissions. This demon also caused stillbirths and other pregnancy abnormalities. Jewish myths arose in which this first woman was called Lilith. In these myths, Lilith was banished by

Adam because she seemed too powerful, too much like him.² So Lilith roamed around in frustration, causing havoc in the night.

And so, the woman in the first creation story who was created right alongside and equal to the man became evil. She was banished for being proud and independent. She was blamed for unwanted sexual desire and abnormal pregnancies. Lilith was both sexual and demonic.

Meanwhile, the second story painted a very different picture of the first woman. Her name was Eve. She was subservient and submissive. In a strange twist of fate, it was Eve, the submissive woman, who became the one blamed for the fall of humanity. And it was her gender, associated with a certain kind of sexuality, which was later considered to be her method of persuasion.

Blamed for the Fall

Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. She ate first. She believed the lies of the snake. It was her fault that Adam fell from harmony with God. Was it because she was a woman that she made this fatal mistake? How did she convince Adam to eat? Was Adam unable to refuse because he found Eve's body so attractive? Is Eve to blame for the fall of humanity, for all of our suffering, for the fact that we have lost our place with God? *It is her fault. Isn't it?*

Did Eve use her body in convincing Adam to consume the fruit? How could she have done this if Adam himself had not yet fallen, did not realize he was naked, and felt no lust?

2. The only reference to "Lilith" in the Bible itself is found in Isaiah 34:14: "Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith shall repose, and find a place to rest."

First of all, let us go back and see exactly what the Bible says about how Eve convinced Adam to eat the fruit. Here are the simple verses from the book of Genesis.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

—GENESIS 3:1–6

From this passage, scholars over the centuries created a whole universe of possibilities. Notice that Eve and the snake have a conversation but Eve never converses with Adam. Did Eve convince Adam by seducing him? Did she use her femininity as her method of persuasion? Was it all her fault?

From these simple verses of scripture, the scholar Tertullian wrote this around the year 200 AD,

In pain shall you bring forth children, woman, and you shall turn to your husband and he shall rule over you. And do you

not know that you are Eve? God's sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil's gateway; you are she who first violated the forbidden tree and broke the law of God. It was you who coaxed your way around him whom the devil had not the force to attack. With what ease you shattered that image of God: Man! Because of the death you merited, even the Son of God had to die . . . Woman, you are the gate to hell.³

The Book of Genesis does not say that Eve convinced Adam at all. It simply says that he was with her. How have we come to believe that he needed convincing? The words of the scripture make it sound like Adam was just there when she ate the fruit so he took a bite. There is no reference to any kind of conversation at all.

Even if Eve did convince Adam, does that make Adam and all men not responsible for the fall? Is it really all Eve's fault, all the fault of the woman? Was Adam not conscious of his own actions? This theory makes Adam seem like some kind of helpless infant, as if he were incapable of refusing Eve. Ironically, this theory gives all the power to the woman.

Even as early as the second century, the fall of humanity became associated with women. Eve was considered the most at fault because she ate the fruit first. It was her disobedience which was the focus, the root cause of the fall from Eden.

3. Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, trans. S. Thelwall, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm>).

In the second century, Clement of Alexandria wrote,

Every woman should be filled with shame by the thought that she is a woman. . . . the consciousness of their own nature must evoke feelings of shame.

—*PAEDAGOGUS (THE INSTRUCTOR)*, BOOK 2, 33.2

Women were seen as lesser than men and this simple passage from Genesis about Eve was used to justify their reasoning. Martin Luther would later write,

For woman seems to be a creature somewhat different from man, in that she has dissimilar members, a varied form and a mind weaker than man. Although Eve was a most excellent and beautiful creature, like unto Adam in reference to the image of God, that is with respect to righteousness, wisdom and salvation, yet she was a woman. For as the sun is more glorious than the moon, though the moon is a most glorious body, so woman, though she was a most beautiful work of God, yet she did not equal the glory of the male creature.⁴

Even earlier, about 160 AD, Justin Martyr would paint Eve as the antithesis of Mary the mother of Jesus:

For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the

4. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John Nicolas Lenker (Gutenberg: Project Gutenberg E Books, 2015), chap. 2, pt. 5, 27b.

Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her.⁵

Again and again, the fall of humanity was blamed on Eve. It was the woman who was at fault. And the only way she could have convinced Adam to eat was by somehow using her body as a tool of seduction. Being a woman became a bad thing, for it was a woman who convinced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit.

Living in a Fallen World

I do believe that we live in a fallen world. Just turn on the news and watch. It is obvious. Life can seem cruel and random. When pain comes to us we feel that somehow we have been cheated. We ask God, “What have I done wrong?” Not only is pain itself difficult but it feels somehow unfair. When someone is diagnosed with an illness, they often ask, “Why is this happening to me?” They assume that they should be healthy and live always. When conflict, suffering, and even death arise, it just feels wrong. We were born assuming that life should be Eden. I believe this is evidence of the fact that we were initially created to live in Eden. We belong in Eden, in a place where there is no suffering and where we live in harmony with God. A child is born expecting and, in fact, deserving perfect care. And we parents, fallen creatures that we are, do our very best and still mess things up.

We love fairy tales for good reason. The good and the bad are so well differentiated. I love to take my boys to the movies

5. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 100, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1.

and watch the good guys beat up the bad guys. We all want to defeat evil and live happily-ever-after just like they do in the movies. It is immensely satisfying to watch because it feels right.

On some level, we still assume that life should be lived in a state of peace and joy. When I counsel young couples planning to be married, part of what I have to do is remind them that their lives will not be a happily-ever-after. No matter how good they are to each other, they will encounter pain and conflict. It is part of the fallen nature of our world. They will have to fight for their marriage. It will not be easy. And when things get difficult, it will no doubt surprise them. They will think that they have done something wrong, but really it is human nature to struggle. We just don't believe that things should be hard.

Our yearning for peace, our yearning for happiness—these are signs of the fact that we were created by God for Eden. We were designed to live in harmony with God. Eden is where we long to be; it is where things feel right. It is where we belong and we keep trying to get back there.

Humanity has fallen from paradise; there is no denying that fact. But the fall of humanity—is it the fault of the woman alone? Does she alone bear full responsibility? The man chose to eat as well, but because the woman ate first, she is considered the more fallen of the two, the great temptress.

Mary the Virgin and Mary Magdalene: The Two Extremes Continue

Echoes of Lilith and Eve were woven deeply into the Christian tradition. After Jesus's death and resurrection, when the writers

of the gospels began to tell the story, there arose two important women. One was Mary the mother of Jesus, the other was Mary Magdalene. In the gospels themselves, these women are portrayed with all the complexity and dimension of the men. Jesus's mother gets afraid and impatient with her son. She even tries to accuse Jesus of being possessed by a demon in order to bring him home. Mary Magdalene is a woman who has been healed by Jesus and becomes one of his most faithful followers. Jesus's relationships with both his mother and with Mary Magdalene seem to be relationships of mutual love and respect. It is Jesus's mother who urges him to perform his first miracle in the Gospel of John and it is Mary Magdalene who first sees the Risen Christ.

But as the centuries passed, these rich biblical characters began to be painted in black and white. Mary the mother of Jesus is described as a virgin in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. She was not yet married when she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not have an earthly father, and Joseph waited until Jesus was born to have marital relations with his wife. This is an important concept, for it validates the understanding that Jesus was born of God and of man. God was the father, humanity the mother. Over the centuries, the church began to believe that Jesus's mother Mary never had sex at all in her entire lifetime. Mary was considered a perpetual virgin.

The concept of Mary's perpetual virginity began in the second century with both Irenaeus and Origen. By the fourth century, it was well established as a teaching of the church. Mary was viewed as the second Eve, and her purity—her total lack of sexual activity during the course of her lifetime—made her

the antithesis of a temptress. John Chrysostom used the instruction of Jesus on the cross to his disciple—*behold your son, behold your mother*—as evidence of Mary’s perpetual virginity and the fact that Jesus was her only son. Augustine of Hippo argued for the perpetual virginity of Mary, and Thomas Aquinas argued that to doubt the perpetual virginity of Mary was to call into question the perfection of Christ and insult the dignity of the Mother of God.

In the year 553, Mary was declared a perpetual virgin by the Second Council of Constantinople. The Bible tells us that Joseph did not know his wife sexually “until she had borne a son” (Matthew 1:25). But this verse was overlooked. There are also passages that refer to Jesus’s brothers and sisters, but these were translated using a secondary translation, as cousins or friends. Even James, the brother of Jesus, was declared his cousin.⁶ It seemed essential for the church to believe that Mary the Mother of Jesus never had sex. This is still considered an essential doctrine in the Roman Catholic tradition today.

I have prayed to Mary myself. I find the concept of her perpetual virginity to be possible, even likely. Perhaps Mary, like Jesus, was so in love with God that she never had sex with her husband. In other words, perhaps the love of God replaced all carnal desire for both of them. I do not deny that this theory is entirely possible and would hold true with many of the saints of the church who simply refrained from sexual activity and were

6. Another theory has Joseph marry another woman. This woman, called Melcha, bears his other children and in this way, Jesus had brothers and sisters while his mother, Mary, remained a virgin all her life.

consumed with the love of God. However, if Mary were to have sex with Joseph after the birth of Jesus, as the synoptic gospels would suggest, this would not make her less of a pure woman in my mind. To mother more children would not demean her in any way for me personally.

Hebrews 13:4 declares that marriage is honorable, including the sexual component (“the bed”). The Apostle Paul instructed the early churches that husbands and wives should not deprive or defraud one another of the sexual component of marriage (1 Corinthians 7:1–5). So why has it been so important that Jesus’s mother remained a virgin for her entire life?

Would Mary, Jesus’s mother, have refused to bear any other children when this was considered the joy and purpose of a woman’s life? It is possible. Let me be clear that my purpose in writing these words is not to dishonor or denigrate Mary in any way. I believe that she is the greatest of the saints. If the thought of her having sex with Joseph after the birth of Jesus upsets you, please forgive me. But even if Mary did remain a virgin, why is this part of her character so much more important than all the other parts? Isn’t this private between Mary and Joseph? It seems that the issue of Mary’s subsequent sexual purity was of immense importance to leaders such as Pope Siricius I who wrote this in 392 AD:

You had good reason to be horrified at the thought that another birth might issue from the same virginal womb from which Christ was born according to the flesh. For the Lord Jesus would never have chosen to be born of a virgin if he had ever judged that she would be so incontinent as to

contaminate with the seed of human intercourse the birth-place of the Lord's body, that court of the eternal king.

—LETTER TO BISHOP ANYSIUS, 392 AD

Mary the Mother of Jesus became defined by her lack of sexual activity. It was her title. To this very day, she is called Mary the Virgin and not Mary the Obedient or Mary the Caretaker. We don't call Peter the One Who Had Sex or John the Virgin. I can understand why Mary's virginity was vitally important in the birth of Jesus, but why would it remain so for the rest of her lifetime? Why is it so important whether or not Jesus's mother ever had sex? I wonder why her sexual activity, or lack of, has to become such a central part of her identity. Is sex really that important? Would Mary the Mother of Jesus have been less pure if she had sexual relations with her husband after the birth of Jesus? Why do we let her sexual behavior define her whole life? Is sex really that important?

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Jesus's mother became known by another title. Rather than the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary is called *Theotokos* in the Eastern Church. The word means *God-bearer*, the one who carried God in her womb. This concept of God-bearer is much more active than the concept of perpetual virgin. Instead of focusing on what Mary does not do, this concept of God-bearer focuses on what Mary was able to accomplish by literally hosting God within her womb. It means that Mary must have been immensely strong, powerful, pure, and attractive all at the same time. A mother is the ultimate protector and benefactor of the child within her. There is no higher honor than to protect and provide for God Almighty. The power of this

theological concept can be immensely liberating for all women. This was our most powerful role in biblical times, the one thing that the men could never do. Women could bear and sustain life. And Mary bore God's life. She was strong enough to carry God within her.

In the beginning of the fifth century, John Cassian wrote,

You cannot then help admitting that the grace comes from God. It is God, then, who has given it. But it has been given by our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore the Lord Jesus Christ is God. But if he is God, as he certainly is, then she who bore God is the Mother of God.

—ON THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST AGAINST
NESTORIUS 2:2 (429 AD)

Mary was and is the Mother of God. Isn't that much more important than whether or not she had sex with her husband after Jesus was born? Should we not define Mary by what she accomplished rather than what she refrained to do? Should we not refer to her as mother, as God-bearer, rather than as perpetual virgin?

At the same time that Jesus's mother was being defined by her sexual activity, Mary Magdalene was also being reinvented. But Magdalene was cast as the opposite extreme. She was rapidly becoming known as a prostitute.