

2024.7.22. The Feast of Mary Magdalene

The bestselling mystery thriller novel by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, was the first place that many of us ever came across several surprising ideas about Mary Magdalene, including that she was married to Jesus, and gave birth to his child, who became the founder of a bloodline which still survives. The book also suggests that the figure of the "beloved disciple" to Jesus's right in Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* is Mary Magdalene, not John, in part because Mary was venerated by the Dominican Order, for whom Leonardo painted the scene. The book created a huge controversy, and led to an extensive library of critical works by theologians and art historians dissecting its numerous historical and theological errors. None of that prevented it from selling 80 million copies worldwide, and exerting a strong influence on popular ideas about Mary Magdalene and her role in the history of Christian belief, even though most of them are untrue.

The problem is that there is no hint anywhere in the canonical gospels or later to imply such an idea, even though they mention all Jesus' other family members, including his mother Mary, his father Joseph, his four brothers, and at least two sisters. The few specific assertions made about Mary Magdalene in the Gospels state only that she was a leading figure among Jesus' followers, and one of his closest and widely respected companions, both before and after Calvary.

When the disciples abandoned him at his hour of mortal danger, Mary was one of the women who stayed with him, even to the Crucifixion, and later to the tomb. The implied criticism of the disciples is embarrassing but probably true, because the men in Jesus' company were more likely to have been arrested than the women.

Over the first to third centuries, the church developed an entirely different and elaborate portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute. That idea became the dominant image of her, and the theme of many melodramatic works of art. We should reject it, and remember instead her much more significant steely loyalty, and the special kind of courage it took to stand there helplessly watching the Messiah she loved and believed in die slowly in agony. Perhaps that is why she was the first person to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection; and the first to understand what had happened.

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