

Mary Magdalene *Not* the Woman of John 8

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In Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne famously wore a large uppercase, scarlet-colored letter **A** on her gown, a punitive mark signifying her shameful status: **Adulteress**. Hester Prynne had a counterpart in the New Testament, equated in many a sermon we have heard with another scarlet woman assumed to be Mary Magdalene. But an important question begs to be asked: Is this identification Biblically valid?

Unlike Hawthorne's fictional account, the true story of the woman taken in the act of adultery is recorded in John 8:1–11. John certainly makes no mention of a scarlet letter **M** (Koine Greek Mu, for *moichalis*: adulteress), nor does he provide a name for the unfortunate woman. We owe it to ourselves to read the Gospel evangelist's account with care, for it contains several helpful clues that clear up the mystery of this woman's identity, though we may not know her name.

In the first two verses of chapter 8, we find Jesus leaving the Mount of Olives and teaching in the Temple at Jerusalem *early in the morning*. It strikes us as a bit odd that the woman taken in the very act of adultery should have been apprehended at this busy time of day. Be that as it may, a group of scribes and Pharisees soon interrupts the Teacher, dragging their wretched victim into His presence. We purposely say *victim*, for as Ellen G. White informs us, "These would-be guardians of justice had themselves led their victim into sin, that they might lay a snare for Jesus" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 461.1). Where, we are constrained to inquire, is the other party to this adulterous liaison? Just as importantly, where is the woman's wronged husband, whose duty would have been to prefer charges against his unfaithful wife (Numbers 5:11–31)? We are not told, but let us first discuss what we *do* know about Mary Magdalene in order to make sense of all this.

Mary Magdalene lived in Bethany with her siblings Lazarus and Martha. We know this because John ties the three of them together as living in the town of Bethany, which was about *two miles* (John 11:18 has 15 furlongs) *from Jerusalem* on the Jericho Road. It was at the house of Simon the Pharisee of Bethany that Mary anointed Jesus' feet (Matthew 26:6, 7; Mark 14:3; John 12:3). To confirm that this Mary was the same as Magdalene, we consult *The Desire of Ages*, page 568.1 and *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, page 129.2, where we learn that it was she out of whom Jesus had cast seven devils. Once again, Ellen White provides some extremely helpful biographical background: "Simon had led into sin the woman he now despised. She had been deeply wronged by him" (*Desire of Ages*, p. 566.5).

What makes Simon's sin even more heinous is that he was Mary's uncle and his crime that of incest (see Leviticus 18:14). We know Mary was Simon's niece because Ellen White identifies him as Lazarus's uncle in *Signs of the Times*, May 9, 1900, para. 15 (compare the related editorial endnote on page 76 of *Daughters of God*), so by extension, her uncle also.

It occurs to us that those who equate Mary Magdalene with the woman taken in adultery assume that she must also be the one out of whom Jesus cast seven devils. But lacking positive identification of the “sin specialties” of the demons inhabiting her, it does not necessarily follow logically that her possession involved, say, prostitution. Then again, even if we assume that this Mary was a prostitute, wouldn’t we expect her to be plying her trade under cover of darkness rather than in the early hours of the morning? Furthermore, it stretches our credulity that Mary Magdalene could be dragged two miles from her home in Bethany in order for Jesus’ enemies to deposit her at His feet in the Temple at Jerusalem.

A clinching argument against the adulteress of John 8 being Mary Magdalene is found in Ellen White’s inspirational biography of Jesus. “With all their professions of reverence for the law, these rabbis, in bringing the charge against the woman, were disregarding its provisions. It was the husband’s duty to take action against her, and the guilty parties were to be punished equally” (*Desire of Ages*, page 461.3, evidently citing both Leviticus chapter 20 and Numbers 5:11–31). The rabbis’ obvious reference here is to the legal provision in Leviticus, to which they appealed and which called for death by stoning, as they well knew. Yet these religious teachers conveniently omitted the fact that this very law also demanded the death of the paramour who lay with another man’s wife while she played the harlot, warning that “the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 20:10b; cf. Deuteronomy 22:22).

Summing up, those who tie Mary Magdalene in John 12 and the unnamed woman of John 8 into the same bundle really have no solid facts on which to make that case. Such an assumption is instead wholly invalid. A careful reading of this essay ought also to have elicited an unanswerable question: How could both the group of scribes and Pharisees as well as Uncle Lazarus have *led* the same woman into sin? One party only can do the leading; any other can only advance something already begun but logically cannot also be said to lead. The Spirit of Prophecy sources we have cited exclude this possibility. We therefore conclude that, based on all the *known* facts taken together, it is not only reasonable but clear that Mary and the nameless scarlet woman were *not* in fact one and the same person.