

Where Have All The Marys Gone?

J. Frank Henderson

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Outline

Introduction

Sources

Where has Mary Magdalene Gone?

Where has Mary of Bethany Gone?

Where have the Anointing Women Gone?

Where have the other Easter Marys Gone?

Where has Hard-Working Mary Gone?

Where has the Prophet Mary gone?

Introduction

A number of women named Mary are referred to in the bible, and during the middle ages many of them were commemorated and celebrated in liturgical calendars and martyrologies. Today, however, only two Marys remain in the liturgical calendar of the universal church: Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary of Magdala. Because the Blessed Virgin Mary has held her own in the liturgical calendar over the centuries, she will not be considered further.

Rather, with respect to the other biblical women named Mary and their place in liturgical calendars, we may think of the popular song, "Where have all the flowers gone . . . long time passing . . . long time ago?" Here we will ask, "Where have all the Marys gone?" In reflecting on the history of biblical Marys in this way we of course raise up the possibility of recovering some or all of these older liturgical commemorations for our own time.

Sources

In the middle ages the liturgical calendar was not standardized to the extent that it became after the Council of Trent and is today. A core calendar of saints is revealed in the *Roman*

Martyrology, whose 1946 English edition is not much different than medieval versions, at least so far as biblical saints is concerned. Other medieval traditions are identified in Sabine Baring-Gould's sixteen volume *Lives of the Saints* and the four volume *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. A fourth source used here is an expanded English version of the martyrology produced in 1526.

The Roman Martyrology, trans. Raphael Collins, intro by Joseph B Collins. Westminster MD: Newman Bookshop 1946

Sabine Baring-Gould, *Lives of the Saints*, 16 vol. London: John C. Nimmo; New York: Longmans Green 1897

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Where has Mary Magdalene gone?

In recent years Mary Magdalene may be thought of having experienced an identity crisis. For around 1500 years the Mary Magdalene known and venerated in the church was a composite figure constructed by merging Mary of Magdala (Luke 8:2; John 20:11-18), Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-44, John 12:2), and the one or more other women who anointed Jesus of whom we read in Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9 and Luke 7:36-50. Because the anointing woman of Luke 7 is described as "a sinner," the composite Mary Magdalene of tradition was taken to be sinner, and her sin was usually believed to be sexual in nature: she was often thought to have been a prostitute. This, at least, was the western tradition; the same amalgamation of personalities did not take place in the eastern Church.

It was this composite female figure, with her multiple identifies, that was known to the people of the middle ages and afterwards. It was this Mary Magdalene who was the object of popular devotion and liturgical commemoration during the medieval era, the post-tridentine centuries, and right up to the publication of the new liturgical books in the early 1970s.

Modern biblical scholarship, however, has shown us that this medieval view is not faithful to scripture. In our own day the "real" Mary of Magdala has been recognized and raised up; she was healed by Jesus (Luke 8:2), traveled with him during his ministry, stood by the cross (Luke

23:55; John 19:326), and was the first witness to the resurrection (John 20:11-18). This “new” Mary is the person celebrated in the liturgy today, and the recovery of this portrait – more faithful to scripture – is indeed a blessing. Her feast is celebrated on July 22, with John 20:1-2, 11-18 as the gospel of the day.

This reshaping of the liturgical feast of Mary of Magdala on July 22 has some negative aspects, however. One is that we have lost some remarkable and touching insights raised up in the medieval legends about the “old” Mary Magdalene. She was thought to have retired to a desert place to live a contemplative life. In due course other women and men were attracted to her company, and a kind of desert community drew up. One of the ways in which this community prayed was by dancing circle dances invented by Mary. She also composed the special music they required; she sang beautifully as her companions danced, and accompanied song and dance on the lute.

As “apostle to the apostles,” Mary evangelized parts of southern France; she, Martha and Lazarus had moved there after Jesus’ resurrection. She preached, converted, and established churches. Having a kind of apostolic authority, Mary ordained Lazarus to be bishop of Marseilles.

Where has Mary of Bethany gone?

Another problem that follows from the discovery of the “new” Mary of Magdala, is that we have lost sight of Mary of Bethany. Because July 22 used to be her feast too, that of Martha of Bethany – Mary’s sister – was put a week later, on July 29. Today we still commemorate Martha, but the Mary of July 22 is no longer her sister but another woman entirely.

Might we wish to choose a new day in the liturgical calendar to celebrate Mary of Bethany? Alternatively, July 29 might become the feast of Mary and Martha together. A third possibility would be to include Mary in the medieval feast of Lazarus and Martha (sometimes Lazarus only) that used to be celebrated on December 17. Finally, in some times and places there was a feast of Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, on January 19.

Where have the Anointing women gone?

Before Vatican Council II we proclaimed the story of the anointing of Jesus’ feet by Mary of Bethany on Monday of Holy Week. The anointing of Jesus’ head was told at the beginning of Matthew’s passion account, used in the liturgy of Palm Sunday. Mark’s account of the anointing of Jesus’ head was told in the Markan passion narrative, read on Tuesday of Holy Week. The anointing stories of Matthew and Mark were, in the context of Holy Week, very much subordinated to Jesus’ passion.

Today we use the same reading from John 12 for Monday of Holy Week. Mark’s anointing story is still part of the passion narrative proclaimed on Palm Sunday, year B, at least in

the long version. It is omitted from the short version of the reading, however. Matthew's version of the anointing of Jesus, however, has been eliminated completely from the liturgical readings for Palm Sunday, year A.

The anointing of Jesus' feet in Luke's gospel is not part of this evangelist's passion story, but is told as part of Jesus' public ministry (7:36-50). Before Vatican II, this story was used on three days of the liturgical calendar: Thursday of the fifth week of Lent, Ember Friday of September, and July 22, feast of Mary Magdalene; in earlier centuries it was sometimes also read on a weekday during the season after Epiphany. The use of this story on the Thursday before Holy Thursday made the story of the woman who anointed Jesus a kind of anticipation and parallel of the anointing of the apostles by Jesus.

Today, Luke's account of the anointing of Jesus is heard on the eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time, year C, and on the Thursday of the twenty-fourth week of Ordinary Time. (Because of the variable date of Easter, the eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time, year C, is sometimes omitted.)

Where have the other Easter Marys gone?

Both at Easter and on July 22 we may focus so much on Mary of Magdala that we are in danger of forgetting that she was not the only woman at the tomb. Matthew 28:1-10 speaks of Mary of Magdala and the other Mary; Mark 16:1-8 refers to Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome; and Luke 24:1-12 names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women. Medieval tradition tended to speak simply of the three Marys. (In John 20:1-18 there is only Mary of Magada.)

In medieval days, "Mary Cleopas" had her own feast day, April 9, while "Mary Salome" was commemorated on October 22. The feast of Mary the mother of James was celebrated on May 25. Might we wish to consider restoring these other Marys to liturgical memory?

(The mother of the evangelist Mark carried the name of Mary as well [Acts 12:12], and she had her own feast day, June 29. The house of Acts 12 was identified in the middle ages with the house where the Last Supper was held.)

Where has Hard-Working Mary gone?

Another Mary is named in Romans 16:6, which reads, "Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you." According to biblical scholars, the term "work" in this chapter denotes ministry in the church, though we do not know exactly what this consisted of; see verses 3, 6, 8, 12 (twice).

Chapter 16 of Paul's letter to the church in Rome names many remarkable and noteworthy persons, and provides wonderful insights into the early church and its ministry. Unfortunately it is

not included in either the Sunday or weekday lectionary.

Our medieval ancestors did celebrate some of the women of Paul's early churches. Thus Prisca (or Priscilla) with her husband Aquilla were commemorated on July 8; they are referred to in Acts 18, Romans 16:3, and 1 Corinthians 16. Syntyche had a feast on July 22 (see Philippians 4), Lydia on August 3 (see Acts 16), Phoebe the deacon on September 3 (see Romans 16:1), and some legendary female relations of Paul on October 11. Tecla (or Thecla) of Iconium was believed to be a co-worker of Paul, especially in ministry to women; her feast was September 23.

Junia the apostle (Romans 16:7), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Romans 16:12), as well as hard-working Mary (Romans 16:6) and Euodia (Philippians 4), Tabitha (or Dorcas; Acts 9), the four prophet daughters of Philip (Acts 21), and other notable women of the church were never commemorated liturgically, however – at least in the west. Might we wish to celebrate some of these biblical women in our own liturgical calendars?

Where has the prophet Mary gone?

The greatest Mary of the Jewish scriptures of course is the prophet (or prophetess) Miriam; Moses and Aaron were her brothers. Again, some of our medieval ancestors recognized her as a saint, and celebrated her feast on July 1.

Other female saints of the Jewish scriptures were also remembered in the course of the liturgical year; Eve on January 23; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah on February 5; the mother of the Maccabees (with her sons) on August 1; Suzanna on August 28; Rahab, Debbora and Ruth on September 1; and Judith, Ruth (again) and Esther on September 14.

This reflection raises a number of questions. Should we be commemorating some of these biblical Marys (and other biblical women) in the liturgical calendar today? Which ones? What criteria should be used? Who should decide? Should they be included in the calendar of the universal church, or in those of individual countries?

At another level we may ask what it means to include (or exclude) this or that biblical or postbiblical person from the liturgical calendar? How do we avoid filling the calendar with saints' days to the point of interfering with the temporal cycle? What impact do saints' days, which are mostly celebrated on weekdays, have on people today? Indeed, we may ask what meaning do saints have for people today?