

Chapter Seven



Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Marriage

One of the key historical figures in *The Da Vinci Code* is an early follower of Jesus, Mary Magdalene. As we learn in the course of the narrative, Mary was not simply one of Jesus' followers—she was his wife and lover, with whom he produced an offspring, a child who would begin a family line that continues down till today, protected by the members of a secret society, the Priory of Sion. I should point out that this understanding of Mary Magdalene and Jesus is not an original contribution of the fiction of Dan Brown. For much of his “information” Brown was dependent on an earlier best-seller of the 1980s, a book called *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which Brown explicitly mentions in his novel but which he does not acknowledge as the primary source for much of what he has to say about Mary Magdalene (and the Priory of Sion).¹ Nonetheless, anyone familiar with both books will see the high degree of dependence. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* was written not by scholars of antiquity or the Middle Ages, but by independent researchers Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, who came up with the sensationalist but historically discredited views about

Mary, Jesus, the Grail, and the Priory of Sion.² Since my primary concern is with *The Da Vinci Code* and the views it represents, I will not deal directly with *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, other than to say that Dan Brown has simply taken over many of its claims wholesale in his fictional account of the search for the Grail by Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu.

Many of these claims have to do with Mary Magdalene and “her marriage to Jesus Christ” (p. 244). As evidence of this marriage, the British aristocrat and Grail-seeker Leigh Teabing appeals to a Gospel that did not come to be included in the New Testament, the Nag Hammadi tractate known as the Gospel of Philip, in which it is said, “The companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene.” Teabing then declares, “As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word *companion* in those days, literally meant *spouse*” (p. 246).

Teabing goes on to quote another noncanonical Gnostic Gospel, the Gospel of Mary, where the apostles Peter and Levi have a dispute over whether Jesus would have revealed the truth to Mary. Teabing explains:

“At this point in the gospels, Jesus suspects He will soon be captured and crucified. So He gives Mary Magdalene instructions on how to carry on His church after He is gone. . . . According to these unaltered gospels, it was not *Peter* to whom Christ gave directions with which to establish the Christian Church. It was *Mary Magdalene*.” (pp. 247–48)

In order to stress the importance of Mary for the history of the Christian church, Teabing shows Sophie Neveu a genealogy of the Jewish “Tribe of Benjamin”; she notices that Mary Magdalene is in the genealogy, and expresses her surprise: “She was of the House of Benjamin?” “Indeed,” Teabing said. “Mary Magdalene was of royal descent” (p. 248). This would mean, he

points out, that any child born to Christ and Mary Magdalene would have a very pure bloodline of royalty. And that's why leaders of the church tried to cover over the relationship she had with Jesus:

“The threat Mary Magdalene posed to the men of the early church was potentially ruinous. Not only was she the woman to whom Jesus had assigned the task of founding the Church, but she also had physical proof that the Church's newly proclaimed *deity* had spawned a mortal bloodline. The Church, in order to defend itself against the Magdalene's power, perpetuated her image as a whore and buried evidence of Christ's marriage to her, thereby defusing any potential claims that Christ had a surviving bloodline and was a mortal prophet.” (p. 254)

But the cover-up was not completely successful, according to the traditions preserved through the centuries by the mysterious Priory of Sion:

“According to the Priory,” Teabing continued, “Mary Magdalene was pregnant at the time of the crucifixion. For the safety of Christ's unborn child, she had no choice but to flee the Holy Land. With the help of Jesus' trusted uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene secretly traveled to France, then known as Gaul. There she found safe refuge in the Jewish community. It was here in France that she gave birth to a daughter. Her name was Sarah.” (p. 255)

As with other statements made in *The Da Vinci Code*, there is more fictional license in these various claims than historical truth. Some of the statements are simply in error. To take just one obvious example: it is wrong to say that when the Gospel of Philip calls Mary Jesus' “companion” that the Aramaic word means “spouse.” For one thing, the word that is used is not Aramaic. The Gospel of Philip is in Coptic. And even though the

word used there for “companion” actually is a loan word from another language, the language, again, is not Aramaic but Greek. In other words, Aramaic has nothing to do with the saying. And to cap it all off, the Greek word that is used (*koinōnos*) in fact means not “spouse” (or “lover”) but “companion” (it is commonly used of friends and associates).

Other claims that Teabing makes are equally erroneous, or at least without any historical foundation. But this leads to a consideration of the broader issues that are raised. When looking at the historical record, what can we say about Jesus’ relationship with women? Was he married? Was his wife Mary Magdalene? If so, did he have a normal sexual relationship with her? Did they have a child together?

In order to answer these questions we have to shift from the realm of literary fiction to that of historical fact, and that means shifting from sensationalist claims to historical methodology. As we saw in the previous chapter, it is difficult to reconstruct what happened in Jesus’ life. Historians interested in doing so know that it is not a matter simply of quoting a verse here or there that randomly occurs in some Gospel or the other, and then taking that verse as historically accurate. Doing history is far more complicated than that. We have to take into account the nature of our sources and to apply rigorous criteria to them in order to separate the facts from the fictions. That is to say, even if our early sources *did* claim that Jesus and Mary were lovers and/or married, we would have to examine these sources to see whether the claims were true. But as it turns out, Teabing’s assertions notwithstanding, not a single one of our ancient sources indicates that Jesus was married, let alone married to Mary Magdalene. All such claims are part of modern fictional reconstructions

of Jesus' life, not rooted in the surviving accounts themselves. The historical approach to our sources may not be as exciting and sensationalist as fictional claims about Jesus (he kept a lover! he had sex! he made babies!), but there's something to be said for knowing what really happened in history, even if it is not as titillating as what happens in novels.

And so there are a range of questions that I'd like to ask about the historical Jesus, moving from the broader to the narrower: What was his relationship generally with women? What role did they play in his ministry? Did he have a close relationship with any of them? Was he possibly married? And what exactly was his relationship with Mary Magdalene? Are there any historical indications that they were married? That they had sexual relations?

Men in the Ministry of Jesus

The first thing to be said is that it appears that most of Jesus' followers, and certainly his closest followers, were men. The vast majority of the stories about Jesus—both those that can be established as historically authentic and those about which we might have some doubts—concern his interaction with men. This is not to be unexpected: women in the first century were typically under the authority of the men in their lives—their fathers and/or husbands—and would not have been allowed, for the most part, to be traipsing about the countryside after an itinerant teacher when there was so much work to be done in the home: preparing food, making and mending clothes, taking care of children.³ These were women's activities; men had more of a public profile outside the

home. For a woman to be active outside the home usually meant either that she was not under a man's authority (father or husband) because she was, say, an older single adult or that she was an upper-class woman of means who had others, such as slaves, to take care of her household duties. And even though a select few of Jesus' followers may well have been from the upper classes—and probably were, as we will see—the vast majority of them were peasants. And peasant women in areas such as rural Galilee would necessarily have spent most of their time at home working; there was not a lot of time (if any) for leisure activities such as going out midweek to hear a good sermon.

And so it is no surprise that most of Jesus' followers were men, who were more likely to be out and about rather than stuck at home. Moreover, it is a firmly rooted tradition in our historical record that the *closest* followers of Jesus were all men. These are the twelve disciples, whose gender is not open to serious dispute—twelve men drawn from the larger company, predominantly of men, around Jesus. This was not only the actual situation attending Jesus' public ministry but also the ideal situation that he himself appears to have envisaged. For, as we have seen, one of the firmly grounded traditions of Jesus' teaching is that he expected the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God in which God would rule his people through human mediators. And who would those human mediators be? Recall the saying of Jesus preserved for us from Q, a saying that passes our historical criteria for authenticity: "Truly I say to you, in the renewed world, when the Son of Man is sitting on the throne of his glory, you [disciples] also will be seated on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30). The future rulers of God's people would all be men.

Women in the Ministry of Jesus

This does not mean that women were absent from Jesus' ministry. Quite the contrary, even though women are not prominently featured in the stories of Jesus in comparison with men, they do appear there on a regular basis, far more than one might anticipate given the patriarchal society that restricted women's public activities in the first century. More than other teachers, including other Jewish teachers, Jesus appears to have been publicly involved with women in his ministry. This is born out by a careful examination of our surviving sources, utilizing the various historical criteria that I spelled out in the previous chapter.

To provide a brief synopsis of the material, I can summarize as follows.⁴ It is attested independently in two of our early sources, Mark and L (Luke's special source) that Jesus was accompanied by women in his travels (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3). This tradition is corroborated, independently again, by the Gospel of Thomas (e.g., Gosp. Thom. 114) and by other passages where Jesus interacts with women (e.g., Luke 10:38-42; Matt. 15:21-29). Mark and L also indicate that women provided Jesus with financial support during his ministry, evidently serving as his patrons (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3). That is to say, since Jesus during his ministry had no source of income, these women (one of them is named as Mary Magdalene) provided him with the funds that he and his disciples needed in order to live. These obviously would have been wealthier women who would not have been forced to remain at home to do the work necessary to keep a household together. It may be that some of these women, including Mary Magdalene, were single, but not all of them were. One of them is named as "Joanna, the wife of [King] Herod's steward Chuza" (Luke 8:2). Another is called Susanna, but, as

with Mary, we are not sure of her marital status. Luke tells us that there were “many others who provided for him [Jesus] out of their own resources.” The others named by Mark include one named Salome and another Mary, who is identified as “the mother of James the younger and of Joses.” It is possible that this is none other than the mother of Jesus, who is earlier said in Mark 6:3 to have two other sons named James and Joses. In any event, it is clear that Jesus was accompanied in his travels not only by the twelve men disciples but also by women, some of whom provided for him out of their means.

Not only was Jesus accompanied by women, he also was actively in contact with them during his public ministry. In both Mark and John, Jesus is said to have engaged in public dialogue and debate with women who were not among his immediate followers (John 4:1–42; Mark 7:24–30). Both Gospels also record, independently of one another, the tradition that Jesus had physical contact with a woman who anointed him with oil in public (Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8). In Mark’s account this is an unnamed woman in the house of a leper named Simon (this same account is found in a different form in Luke as well, who appears to have gotten it from Mark but changed it in some key ways; see Luke 7:36–50); in John’s account it is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, in her own home. And Jesus is said to have helped women in need on several occasions (e.g., Matt. 15:21–29).

In all four of the canonical Gospels, the women who accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem during the last week of his life are said to have been present at his crucifixion (Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:49; John 19:25). The earliest traditions in Mark suggest that they alone remained faithful to the end: all of his male disciples had fled. In addition, it is clear

from all four of the canonical Gospels, along with the noncanonical Gospel of Peter, that women followers were the first to believe that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb (Matt. 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 23:55–24:10; John 20:1–2; Gosp. Pet. 50–57). These accounts all differ in significant ways concerning how many women there were at the empty tomb: was it Mary Magdalene alone, as in John? Or Mary Magdalene and other women, as in the other Gospels? And if it was with other women, which other women? It depends on which account you read. In any event, it was these women who were the first to proclaim that Jesus had been raised from the dead. As some feminist historians have pointed out, it is hard to underestimate the importance of this tradition about the women at the tomb: without these women, there may well have been no proclamation of the resurrection—and thus no Christianity.

There are other interesting traditions about Jesus' contact with women that are found in only one or the other of our Gospels and so do not meet our criterion that multiply attested stories are more likely to be authentic. These would include the memorable moment found only in Luke's Gospel when Jesus encourages his friend Mary of Bethany in her decision to attend to his teaching rather than busy herself with "womanly" household duties (Luke 10:38–42).

What can we say about the contextual credibility of these traditions, in light of our criterion that any tradition about Jesus must plausibly be situated in a first-century Palestinian context to be accepted as historical? It is true that women were generally viewed as inferior to men in the ancient world. But there were exceptions: Greek philosophical schools such as the Epicureans and the Cynics, for example, advocated equality for women. Of course, there were not many Epicureans or Cynics

in Jesus' immediate environment of Palestine, and our limited sources may suggest that women, as a rule, were generally even more restricted in that rural part of the empire with respect to their abilities to engage in social activities outside the home and away from the authority of their fathers or husbands. Is it credible, then, that a Jewish teacher would have encouraged and promoted such activities?

We have no solid evidence to suggest that other Jewish teachers had women followers during Jesus' day. But we do know that the Pharisees were supported and protected by powerful women in the court of King Herod the Great. Unfortunately, the few sources that we have say little about women among the lower classes, who did not have the wealth or standing to make them independent of their fathers or husbands.

There is one other consideration, however, that makes it easy to believe that Jesus may have had women publicly following him during his ministry. This involves the particular character of his proclamation of the coming kingdom of God. If you'll recall, Jesus maintained that God was going to intervene in history and bring about a reversal of fortunes. The first would be last, and the last would be first. Those who were rich would be impoverished, and the poor would be rich. Those who were exalted now would be humbled, and the humble would be exalted. As a corollary of his message, Jesus associated with the outcasts and down-trodden of society, evidently as an enactment of his proclamation that the kingdom would belong to such as these. If women were generally looked down upon as inferior by the men who made the rules and ran the society, it does not seem at all implausible that Jesus would have associated freely with them and that they would have been particularly intrigued by his proclamation of the coming kingdom.

Some recent scholars have proposed that Jesus in fact did much more than this, that he preached a “radically egalitarian society”—that is, he set about to reform society by inventing a new set of rules to govern social relations, creating a community in which men and women were to be treated as absolute equals.⁵ This, however, may be taking the evidence too far and possibly in the wrong direction, for there is little to suggest that Jesus was concerned with pushing social reform in any fundamental way in this evil age. In his view, present-day society and all its conventions were soon to come to a screeching halt, when the Son of Man arrived from heaven in judgment on the earth. Far from transforming society from within, Jesus was preparing people for the destruction of society. Only when God’s kingdom arrived would an entirely new order appear, in which peace, equality, and justice would reign supreme. This kingdom, though, would not arrive through the implementation of new social reform programs. It would arrive with a cosmic judge, the Son of Man, who would overthrow the evil and oppressive forces of this world.

To this extent (and I would stress, *only* to this extent), even though Jesus did not urge a social revolution in his time, his message did have radically revolutionary implications. He may have urged his followers to implement these implications in the present (hence his association with women). And in any event, it should be clear that some persons would find his message more attractive than others—especially those who considered themselves downtrodden and oppressed in the present age, who would be rewarded in the age to come. If there were women who felt this way, given the patriarchal structures of their society, small wonder they would have been attracted to the apocalyptic message of Jesus and the hope it held out for life in the kingdom that was coming.



Painting of a Christian woman in prayer, from the Catacomb of Priscilla.

Was Jesus Married?

We can now turn to the thorny question of whether Jesus himself was married. In *The Da Vinci Code* there is no question about the matter, as both Robert Langdon and Leigh Teabing speak of Jesus' marital status.

As Teabing says at one point to Sophie Neveu:

“Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor.”

“Why?” Sophie asked.

“Because Jesus was a Jew,” Langdon said. . . . “According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned, and the obligation for a Jewish father was to find a suitable wife for his son. If Jesus were

not married, at least one of the Bible's gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood." (p. 245)

Once again, however, we appear to be in the realm of sensationalized fictional claims instead of the realm of historical reality. I will be dealing in a moment with the general question of whether Jewish men were always married and whether celibacy was "condemned." But first, what have historians said about Jesus' marital status?

It is true that there have occasionally been historical scholars (as opposed to novelists or "independent researchers") who have claimed that it is likely that Jesus was married.⁶ But the vast majority of scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity have reached just the opposite conclusion. This is for a variety of compelling reasons.

Most significant is a fact that cannot be overlooked or underestimated: in *none* of our early Christian sources is there any reference to Jesus' marriage or to his wife. This is true not only of the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John but of all our other Gospels and all of our other early Christian writings put together. There is no allusion to Jesus as married in the writings of Paul, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of the Nazarenes, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of the Ebionites—and on and on. List every ancient source we have for the historical Jesus, and in none of them is there mention of Jesus being married.

And just think of all the occasions each of the authors of these books would have had to mention Jesus' marriage or his wife, had he been married. Jesus' mother is mentioned in these books, as are his "father" (Joseph), brothers, and sisters. Why would his wife never be mentioned? His disciples are mentioned; his other

followers (including other women) are mentioned. Why would his wife never be? Moreover, the spouses of his followers are occasionally alluded to. And in one passage there is a reference to the wives of the apostles and to the wives of Jesus' earthly brothers (1 Cor. 9:5). Why not to the wife of Jesus? (That this is not just an argument from silence will become clear in a moment.)

More specifically with reference to Mary Magdalene, if Jesus were actually married to her, why would there be no reference to it? Why is she not singled out as special anywhere in the canonical Gospels? Why in fact, apart from Luke 8:1-3, where she is mentioned by name along with two other named women (Joanna and Susanna) and several others, is she not mentioned during his ministry at all, let alone as one who stood in a special relationship with Jesus? Why does she figure in none of the stories about Jesus in these Gospels? And even in Gospels where she is thought of as someone special, such as the Gospel of Mary, why is it as someone to whom Jesus delivered an important revelation, rather than as someone to whom he was married?

More telling still, why is she identified as she is, as Mary Magdalene? Scholars are widely agreed that she is called Magdalene to differentiate her from the other Marys named in the New Testament, including Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. *Magdalene* indicates her place of origin—the town of Magdala, a fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. If one wanted to differentiate this Mary from other Marys, why not indicate that this is the one to whom Jesus was married, rather than to say where she was from? Moreover, if they were married, how is it that Jesus is never portrayed as leaving his hometown until his public ministry, but this woman actually comes from a *different* town (Magdala, rather than Nazareth)?

These are imponderable difficulties for most scholars considering the question of whether Jesus was married, let alone married to Mary Magdalene. She simply doesn't figure prominently in any of our earliest traditions of Jesus, except at the very end, when she along with other women come to anoint his body for burial. And as I pointed out, not even the later Gospels, such as the Gospel of Philip, indicate that they were married (more on these Gospels in the next chapter).

But if in fact Jesus was not married, how can we explain that he was not? Is Robert Langdon right to say that Jewish men were *expected* to be married and that celibacy was "condemned"?

Unfortunately, this again is simply part of the narrative fiction of *The Da Vinci Code*; it has no basis in historical reality (or, perhaps, is based on a tendentious reading of much later Jewish sources). For we do know of Jewish men from the time and place of Jesus who were single, and it is quite clear that they were not "condemned" for it. And what is striking is that this tradition of remaining single and celibate can be found in precisely the same ideological circles as Jesus himself, among Jewish apocalypticists of the first century who expected that the world they lived in soon was to come to a crashing halt when God intervened in history in order to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in his good kingdom.

We know about one group of Jewish apocalypticists in particular from this time and place, as we have already seen. This is the group of Essenes who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. As it turns out, according to ancient records of these Essenes, they were predominantly single, celibate men. This is the testimony of Jewish sources from the time, such as the first-century philosopher Philo, who indicates that "no Essene takes a wife," and the historian Josephus, who indicates that the Essenes shunned

marriage; on the other hand, this view is affirmed even by non-Jewish sources, such as the writings of the Roman polymath Pliny the elder, who indicates that the Essenes renounced sex and lived “without any woman.”⁷

Scholars today do not think that Jesus himself was an Essene. But he did have a strikingly similar apocalyptic worldview. That he too would have been unmarried is therefore far from surprising. And in fact his own teachings provide us with grounds for thinking he was unmarried. At one point in our early Gospel accounts Jesus is confronted by a group of Jewish leaders called the Sadducees, who did not believe in an afterlife in the coming kingdom but maintained that death brought total annihilation. Jesus tries to convince them that they are wrong, that there will be an ongoing life for those who are now alive, and even for those who have already died, once the kingdom arrives. But, he insists, that life will differ in at least one significant respect from life in the present, for in the age to come people “neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25).

But what does this resurrection existence have to do with life in the present? Isn't this simply a description of how things *will* be in the future kingdom? What is worth emphasizing is that a good deal of Jesus' proclamation included his insistence that the ideals of the kingdom should begin to be implemented in the here and now. There will be no hatred then, so people should love one another now; there will be no suffering then, so people should work to alleviate suffering now; there will be no hunger then, so people should feed the hungry now; there will be no war then, so people should work for peace now; there will be no forces of evil then, so people should oppose evil (e.g., by casting out demons) now; there will be no illness then, so people should heal the sick now. That is why Jesus saw the kingdom of God as

a “mustard seed,” which is planted as a tiny seed now but is to become a huge plant once it grows to full potential (see Mark 4:30–32). The kingdom is like that because it has a small, inauspicious beginning now, as people begin to implement the standards of the kingdom in their lives, but once the Son of Man comes in judgment on the earth to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in God’s kingdom, then this small beginning will have a huge result, as the kingdom becomes manifest in power.

Jesus believed that the ideals of the kingdom should be realized in the present. And he believed that in the kingdom there would be no marriage and no sexual relations. This was evidently believed by the Essenes as well, his fellow apocalypticists. They implemented this vision by remaining celibate and unmarried. And it is entirely plausible—indeed likely—that Jesus did the same.

Further evidence comes in the writings of Jesus’ followers after his death. The earliest Christian author we have is the apostle Paul, who was not one of Jesus’ twelve disciples but was a leader of the movement founded in his name after his death. Like Jesus (and the Essenes before him), Paul too started out as a Jewish apocalypticist. And once he converted to faith in Christ, he did not renounce his apocalyptic worldview but transformed it in view of his belief that the end of the age had already begun with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul expected that he himself would be alive when Jesus came back from heaven in judgment on the earth to bring in God’s kingdom (see 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:50–57)—he was, in other words, a *Christian* apocalypticist.

And what was his view of marriage? Strikingly, it appears to have been comparable to the view of Jesus himself, that in light of the imminent end, one should devote oneself completely to the coming of the kingdom rather than become married and involved in sexual relationships. In giving advice about marriage

and sexual relations to his fellow Christians in the city of Corinth, Paul says: “To those of you who are unmarried, and the widows I say that it is a good thing for them to remain unmarried, just as I am” (1 Cor. 7:8). And why is that? For Paul it was “because of the impending crisis” (1 Cor. 7:26)—in other words, the imminent end of all things. And so those who were married were not to seek a divorce, and those who were unmarried were not to seek to become married (7:27). Instead all people were to commit themselves to converting others to faith in Jesus, to prepare them for the coming destruction of the present social order and the appearance of the kingdom of God, a kingdom in which, according to Jesus, “there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage.”

In view of Jesus’ apocalyptic message, then, it is not at all surprising that he remained unmarried and celibate. That was explicitly the stand taken by the apocalyptically minded Essenes in his own day, and by his apocalyptically minded follower Paul after his death. Given the fact there is no record at all of Jesus’ being married, let alone married to Mary Magdalene, it seems reasonably clear that Jesus the apocalypticist remained single.

Jesus and Mary Magdalene

In light of the circumstance that Jesus probably remained single and celibate, what can we say about his relationship with Mary Magdalene? A lot has been made of this relationship over the years, not simply in novels such as *The Da Vinci Code* and sensationalist works such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, but also in films such as Scorsese’s *Last Temptation of Christ* (itself based on the novel by Kazantzakis), where Jesus again is shown to marry Mary Magdalene, a prostitute, and to have had regular sexual rela-

tions with her. This view that Jesus had an especially close relationship with Mary has its ancient roots in some of our second- and third-century sources, such as the Gospels of Philip and Mary, which I have already mentioned and which I will discuss at greater length in the following chapter (though I should emphasize that even in these sources Jesus is never said to be married to Mary or to have had sex with her). But here I am interested in the *historical* situation, as this can be discerned not in these later legendary accounts but in our earliest surviving sources. What do we know of Mary Magdalene from them?

As I have indicated, Mary does not in fact appear very often in the Gospel traditions about Jesus: her name is given just thirteen times in the Gospels of the New Testament (as opposed, for example, to Peter's name, which occurs over ninety times), and often these are in parallel passages (e.g., where both Matthew and Mark say the same thing about her in a story that Matthew borrowed from Mark). If we are looking for stories found independently in more than one source, on the assumption that multiply attested traditions are more likely authentic, we can say the following things about Mary. The name Magdalene, as I pointed out, is used to differentiate her from other Marys, including Jesus' mother and his acquaintance Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha). She is said in two separate accounts to have accompanied Jesus on his travels in Galilee (Mark 15:41; Luke 8:1-3), and to have provided funds for his itinerant ministry out of her own pocket (along with other women, some of them left unnamed). All three of our earliest Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, indicate that she came (together with other women) with Jesus to Jerusalem in the last week of his life, and saw him crucified and buried (Matt. 27:56, 61; Mark 15:40, 47; Luke 23:55). And all four of our canonical Gospels, and the Gospel of

Peter, indicate that it was she who discovered Jesus' empty tomb and learned, either from a man who was there, an angel who was there, or two angels who were there—depending on which account you read—that he had been raised. In one of the accounts she alone learns this (Gospel of John), in the others it is in the company of other women, some of whom are sometimes named. She (and the others) then testified to the empty tomb and are, as such, the first witnesses to the resurrection. In some of the accounts Jesus actually appears to her before he appears to the disciples, after his resurrection.

And that, I'm afraid, is about all that we can find in multiply attested traditions about her. It is easy to wish that there were more information, and there is always the temptation to *invent* more when none is available (Jesus married her! Jesus had sex with her! Jesus had a child with her!). But historians can only go on the basis of the evidence there is, and they shouldn't make up historical evidence when none exists. There is no evidence to suggest that she was "from the Tribe of Benjamin" (as Leigh Teabing claims), and even if she were, this would not make her related to royalty (lots of people came from the tribe of Benjamin, including the apostle Paul; Phil. 3:5); there is nothing to suggest that Jesus entrusted the mission of his church to her (not even the Gospel of Mary indicates this), that he married her, that he had sex with her, or that she ever traveled to France.

There are other references to Mary Magdalene that occur in only one source. Luke, for example, is alone in saying that Jesus had cast "seven demons" out of her. Unfortunately, we don't know what the nature of her demonic possession was, assuming that Luke is right. The idea that these demons drove her to prostitution is a bit far-fetched; most demons in the Gospels prevent people from speaking, or make them ill, or try to harm them by

throwing them into fires or lakes. Moreover, there is nothing in any of these references—even the one in Luke—to indicate that Mary even was a prostitute. That idea came about 500 years after these sources were written, when Pope Gregory the Great delivered a sermon in which he indicated that Mary Magdalene was none other than the woman of ill repute mentioned in Luke 7:36–50. But scholars of the Gospels today do not find this identification credible. The story in Luke 7 is about Jesus being anointed by an unnamed woman and is a story that Luke has taken from Mark and jazzed up a bit for his audience. In Mark the woman is not identified as Mary Magdalene and is not, in fact, called there a woman of dubious reputation. In Luke as well the woman does not appear to be Mary Magdalene, since the latter is mentioned in the very next story and Luke *introduces* her there as if for the first time (Luke 8:2). Interestingly, the Gospel of John has a similar story of Jesus' anointing (although it takes place in Bethany of Judea rather than in Galilee, as in Luke); as I have pointed out, though, in John it is Mary of Bethany, not an unnamed woman (or Mary of Magdala) who does the anointing, and she does it in her own home, rather than (as in Luke) at the home of a man named Simon, the Pharisee. In any event, Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene come from different towns and are not to be identified as the same person.

Conclusion

In short, we do not learn much about Mary Magdalene in our earliest, most historically reliable sources. No wonder that the curiosity-driven Christians of the second and third centuries who

expanded, revised, altered, and sometimes made up traditions about Jesus applied their creative imaginations to this one named woman from Jesus' public ministry and started saying other, nonhistorical things about her. And no wonder these invented stories have resonated with modern readers, who have wanted to know more about Mary Magdalene than can be known. And no wonder, then, that modern legends have been invented about her, including the legend that she was actually married to Jesus, had a normal sexual relationship with him, and bore him a child, the legend found in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and taken over virtually unchanged in *The Da Vinci Code*.