

THE CASE OF MARY MAGDALENE

by ALFRED MARSHALL

IN the Introduction to "The Man Born to be King", Miss Dorothy Sayers explains certain identifications which she made to secure the continuity of the plot-structure. "A few other 'identifications' supply the 'tie-rods' for individual plays and episodes, the most important being that of Mary Magdalen with Mary of Bethany and with the unnamed 'Woman who was a Sinner' of Luke vii. The identification is, of course, traditional, and is sanctioned by the authority of St. Augustine of Hippo and Pope Gregory the Great." Dramatic construction imposes its own laws, one of which is that unnecessary multiplication of characters should be avoided. But when we wish to discover what the actual facts of the matter were, neither dramatic propriety nor even ancient tradition can set aside the plain implications of the basic documents. In this short paper the Rev. Alfred Marshall, D.Litt., re-examines "the case of Mary Magdalene" and finds reason to reject the double identification.

THE writer has been struck by the extent to which, among evangelical preachers, the character and position of Mary Magdalene are misunderstood and misrepresented. Not very long ago in his hearing a minister (and a B.D.!), in dealing with the incident recorded in John 12: 1-8, not only confused this Mary (of Bethany) with her namesake, but went on to speak of the latter as a woman of evil life. More recently, a well-known Jewish missionary speaker applied to Mary Magdalene the words used by the Lord regarding the woman who was a sinner in Luke 7: 47.

This article, then, is a plea for accurate thinking in regard to her, based on the gospel records. In fact, there are three women to be distinguished.

(1) In Luke 7: 36-50 we have a story of an occurrence in the house of one Simon a Pharisee. This appears to have been in the city of Nain. After the healing of a centurion's servant in Capernaum (1-10), we are specifically informed that on the day after (v. 11) the Lord went to Nain. At the approach of the city He raised a widow's son to life. There is no suggestion of His having

gone elsewhere ; so that when in verse 37 we are told of "a woman in the city" it must be presumed that Nain is still the venue. Here then is the story of an unnamed woman, avowedly an openly sinful one, forgiven by Christ and showing her love for Him in the way described.

(2) Then in Luke 8: 2-3 we are introduced to a number of women of means who ministered to Christ of their substance. They had "been healed of evil spirits and infirmities", and from Mary Magdalene in particular had been expelled seven demons. The only other reference to this experience of hers is Mark 16: 9. It seems that on this fact rests the assumption that she too was a woman of evil life. But the assumption is a false one. Nowhere in the Gospels is demon-possession as such identified or associated with immorality. True, in the Gospels there are no good demons, as there were in pagan ways of thinking—they are all bad. But some were more wicked than others, and not all were "unclean spirits". Matt. 15: 21-28 ; 17: 14-18 ; 9: 32-33 ; 12: 22 are all cases of demon-possession, but in not one case does any question of immorality arise. We aver that Mary of Magdala had been mentally deranged and had been restored to sanity by Christ. Is it conceivable that Luke would have brought her thus on the gospel scene, with no suggestion of identifying her with the woman of the previous chapter, if indeed she could possibly be confused with her ?

(3) Passing on to Luke 10: 38-42, we find another woman brought before us. It may be strange that Luke should speak of "a certain village", as though he did not know its name. We know that it was Bethany. It is worth noting that Mary of Bethany is never mentioned save in association with her sister Martha, whereas Mary of Magdala never appears in association with Martha. So here again are clear grounds for distinction. It was, of course, this Mary who showed her devotion to Christ at the feast in the house of Simon the leper described in John 12: 1-8 (Matt. 26: 6-13; Mark 14: 3-9). But it is outrageous that she should be confused with the unnamed woman of Nain.

If the woman of Luke 7: 36-50 loved much because she had been forgiven much, may we not say that Mary of Magdala loved much because she had been greatly blessed in being given back her womanly self-respect so that she could take her place with others of her sex in ministering to Christ ? But what of Mary of

Bethany? Did she not love Jesus for what she saw Him to be in Himself—the Son of God, who loved her and in due course was to give Himself for her (Matt. 26: 12)?¹

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¹ Strangely enough, since the above was written the writer has found the following paragraph in the course of reading *Why did I Leave the Church of Rome?* by Father Luis Padrosa; it is on page 63 of the English translation by the Rev. E. Stuart Brown. It reads thus:—

“In another passage, St. Luke tells us how one of the Pharisees criticised Jesus because He received Mary Magdalene, and allowed her to anoint His feet. She was well known for her sin, he for his religion, but he was not justified before the Lord Jesus Christ, nor received salvation; while she, the sinner, heard these words from our Lord’s own lips: ‘Thy sins are forgiven’ (St. Luke 7: 48); and when the other guests at the table doubted, He made the ground of her justification clearer by adding, ‘Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace’ (St. Luke 7: 47-50).”

This is excellent evangelical teaching, but why speak of Mary Magdalene, who is not mentioned in the passage quoted? As we have shown, the woman of whom all this is said remains anonymous, and she was of Nain, not Magdala.

The misunderstanding may be charitably excused in an ex-Romanist who has not yet sufficiently extricated himself from the influence of his old communion; for, whether or no it is official Roman Catholic teaching to speak thus of Mary Magdalene, it seems to be the popular view. But it is inexcusable that Evangelical Protestants should so misread their Gospels.