



HER STORY WILL BE TOLD

# MARY MAGDALENE

A REFLECTIVE DISCUSSION GUIDE  
ON THE THEMES, CHARACTERS AND  
BIBLICAL REFERENCES FROM THE FILM

**MOVIES CHANGE PEOPLE  
PEOPLE CHANGE THE WORLD**



TRANSMISSION

# INTRODUCTION

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Not unlike Jesus, for over two thousand years the living and breathing woman behind the historical name 'Mary Magdalene' has been speculated upon, fictionalised, maligned and glorified.

To many, she is the seven-deviled devotee – often assumed a redeemed prostitute, despite absolutely no indication of this in history or scripture. The Da Vinci Code was not the first to suggest her relationship with Jesus was sexual, even marital, a conspiracy that continues. Pope Francis declared her 'an apostle of hope' and decreed that the celebration of her memory be on par with those of the male apostles listed in the gospels. Every Easter Sunday, she is remembered by Christians worldwide for her faithful return to his tomb, leading her to become the first person to see the resurrected Jesus.

In the film MARY MAGDALENE we see a unique representation of the enigmatic disciple. We meet Mary of Magdala (Rooney Mara) before her call, and find a restless woman, resistant to her family's hopes for arranged marriage, motherhood or feminine vocation. Interpreted as demonic possession by the Jewish men around her, her wrestle is somewhat unheard of for that time: she is a woman seeking solely after a relationship with God.

Upon meeting the person of Jesus, she is compelled to follow him. Mary leaves her family, home and reputation, to serve and learn from the softly spoken rabbi, as he walks the road to Jerusalem.

In this study, we want to encourage a deeper look at both Mary, and Jesus. As we examine their distinctive (and sometimes challenging) characterisations in the film MARY MAGDALENE, we are also able to examine our own assumptions, hopes, and conflicts, about the relationship between us, and God.





WHO WAS  
MARY OF MAGDALA?

# THE FRIEND



The acknowledgement of the feminine in partnership with the divine was controversial in Jesus' time, and continues to be today. Jesus' radical inclusion of women, as disciples, as ministers and as friends, pushed aside patriarchal restrictions on who was allowed to have a relationship with God, and what it should look like.

In the film, Jesus accepts Mary, baptises her, and commissions her – despite resistance from some male disciples. As the story continues, he leans upon her faithfulness and understanding. The connection between Mary and Jesus is intimate, shown by the filmmakers as a deep, spiritual friendship.

*From your previous cultural or biblical knowledge, what did you expect to see in a filmic interpretation of the character of Mary Magdalene?*

*How did the character differ from your expectations?*

*How did you personally respond to the scenes of Jesus and Mary alone together?*

*What other women do Jesus and Mary interact with?  
How do these women differ from Mary in their responses to Jesus?*

Bible References: Luke 8:1-3, Mark 15:40-41, Matthew 27:55-56



# THE BAPTIST

The film uses the symbol of water continuously, as representations of death and new life. The opening of the film shows Mary tumbling through the Sea of Galilee, and ends with bodies rising through the same water, toward blinding sunlight.

*We are faced with water's metaphor throughout the film – where else did you note its use?*

*How does Mary's developing interactions with water - from her exorcism to her baptism - reflect her spiritual journey over the course of the film?*

*How does she use water to serve Jesus?*

*Scripturally, the action of washing Jesus' feet is not attributed to Mary Magdalene, but to Mary of Bethany (Luke 7:36-50). In addition, it is Jesus that washes the disciples' feet at Passover (John 13).*

*How does the fictional modification of these details change the meaning of the 'washing of the feet'?*

Bible References: Luke 8:1-3, Colossians 2:12, Luke 7:36-50, John 13.



# THE MIDWIFE



Early in the film, Mary is seen coaching and consoling a young mother in the midst of a difficult birth. In the height of pain, she remains, and consoles, allowing for the birth of new life. She is noted, a scene later, as 'a natural'. Throughout the film, the symbolism is repeated, and she serves a similar purpose as one gifted in mercy - calming, comforting and imparting courage to those in painful transition. We see her gift again during the crucifixion of Jesus, when she offers her presence as support and encouragement.

*Where else did you see the metaphor of 'the midwife' placed throughout the film?*

*In Luke 10, Jesus sends out seventy-two of his disciples in pairs, to preach salvation, and heal the sick. In the film, Peter and Mary are paired together.*

*How do Mary and Peter contrast in their actions and attitudes, in attempting to fulfill their commission?*

*How do Marys' actions embody 'The Parable of the Good Samaritan' taught by Jesus later in the chapter (Luke 10:25-37)?*

*How did her gift of mercy serve the overall mission of Jesus in the film?*

Bible References: Romans 12:6-8, John 19:25, Mark 16:1, Luke 10:1-11, Luke 10:25-37.



# THE WITNESSES

Mary is represented as a disciple uniquely in tune with, and supportive of, Jesus' mission. Where others may misinterpret his intentions, she sees them clearly.

*Why do you think she is able to see the truth of his identity and journey in multiple instances in the film, when the other characters fail to?*

*Jesus calls Mary his 'witness'. What does this mean? How does she respond to what she has seen?*

*The testimony of a woman was not considered valid in Jewish culture at the time of the narrative. With this in mind, why would Jesus choose to first show his resurrected self to Mary - a woman - before any man?*

Bible References: Luke 10:23-24, John 19:25, John 20:11-18, Mark 16:9.

# who was JESUS OF NAZARETH & HIS DISCIPLES ?

In the film, we are presented with very different interpretations of who Jesus (played by Joaquin Phoenix) is, and what he has come to do. While some characters in the film completely reject his authority, dismissing him as a devil-led, heretical madman, Peter, Judas and Mary embody the contrasting hopes and expectations for the awaited 'Messiah' that existed even within his own followers.





# J E S U S : T H E S O N O F M A N



Through the eyes of Mary, we see a very human Jesus. This is the Jesus presented by the Gospel of Mark – ‘The Son of Man’ – a name Jesus gives to himself, to refer to his own mortality. He is a suffering servant, obediently taking the brutal road to the cross.

*There is a tangible tenderness to Mary’s Jesus in the film. He touches, and is touched. He is also vulnerable to the physicality of others – often having moments of being crushed by the crowds around him.*

*How does this physicality mirror his spiritual identity? How does his vulnerability in these situations foreshadow what is to come?*

*Mary is not afraid of Jesus’ intentions, but supports him. What does she see in his humanity on the road to death that might indicate his divinity?*

*When Jesus and Mary meet again outside his tomb, has he changed?*

*How does their resurrection meeting differ from the biblical account given in John 20:1-18?*

*Mary goes to tell others of what she has seen, but her truth is not received. What has he shown her, for her to believe that the kingdom has already come?*

Bible References: Mark 10:45, Mark 14:32-39, Matthew 16:21-28, John 20:1-18

# PETER : THE MILITARISTIC REVOLUTIONARY



The film depicts Peter (Chiwetel Ejiofor), as a defiant disciple of Jesus. Like many other Jews at the time, Peter expects the kingdom to come as military deliverance. Preparing himself to fight, he is hoping the great force of people believing and following Jesus will result in a revolution against Roman rule.

*For Peter, the kingdom or 'new world' is physical salvation from a very present oppression for his people. How does this affect his behaviour toward Jesus and the other disciples, including Mary?*

*Peter continually looks to Jesus' strength for assurance. However, Jesus' humanity is more prominent. How is Jesus' humanity represented in the film?*

*How does Peter respond to this side of him?*

*How did you feel about the humanity of Jesus portrayed in the film, and how does it compare with the Jesus you feel you know?*

*Peter does not believe Mary when she claims Jesus has returned, and with him brought the kingdom. Whys is her claim so difficult for him to hear?*

Bible References: Matthew 16:21-28, Luke 9:44-48, Mark 8:29-33, Luke 22:39-46

# JUDAS: THE KING OF DEATH



Judas (Tahar Rahim), offers one of the most compelling fictional interpretations of a biblical character in the film. His Judas is passionately devoted to Jesus, wide-eyed with wonder, and hopeful. Due to his interpretation of ancient scripture, he is convinced the 'kingdom' will come at Passover – specifically as supernatural victory by Jesus, and the immediate raising of the dead. His anticipation of this is due to his desire to be reunited with his wife and daughter, who both died of hunger at the hands of the Roman oppression.

*The Passover scene, at the temple, shows Judas' joyful anticipation, and impatience. When it does not play out as he expected, we see his deep disappointment.*

*Where have you experienced God not meeting your expectations in what you feel He has promised?*

*What reason does the film give for Judas 'betraying' Jesus and handing him to the authorities?*

*How does this differ from the original biblical narrative (see Matthew 26:14-16 and 27:1-10)?*

*In the film, Judas does not understand that Jesus must defeat death through submitting to it. How is his faith affected, when Jesus submits to death?*

*How does Jesus' death affect your own understanding of 'victory'?*

Bible References: Luke 22:1-6 & 47-48, Matthew 26:14-16, Matthew 26:36-40  
Matthew 27:1-10, John 12:2-6



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**MOVIES CHANGE PEOPLE** written by Anna McGahan

P.O Box 1520

Coolum Beach, Qld Australia 4573

[www.movieschangepeople.com](http://www.movieschangepeople.com)

[info@movieschangepeople.com](mailto:info@movieschangepeople.com)



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