

**MARY
MAGDALENE
NEVER
WORE
BLUE
EYE SHADOW**

AMANDA HOPE HALEY



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Mary Magdalene Never Wore Blue Eye Shadow

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INTRODUCTION

So why didn't the other disciples respect Mary Magdalene's authority in this text?" asked the teaching fellow in my Apocryphal Jesus class. We were analyzing the Gospel of Mary, a second-century writing that exalts Mary Magdalene as Jesus' beloved apostle and is not part of the Bible for several reasons—most obviously that more of the manuscript is damaged than is legible.

There were about ten students there, and we were all seated around a big table in a windowless room. It was a graduate course at the Divinity School, but undergraduate students were allowed to take it. Across from me sat DeWitt, a Harvard senior who (as I remember him) always wore a popped-collar pink polo and a smirk.

I volunteered the first answer: "Maybe it's because she was a prostitute?"

DeWitt could not control his laughter. "Mary Magdalene was *not* a prostitute. How did you make it to grad school without knowing that?"

The TF tried to smooth things over by calmly explaining to me that the Bible does not claim Mary was a prostitute. That was a traditional, not scriptural, belief that had been introduced by Pope Gregory I in the sixth century.¹ In my defense, it was 2003 and *The*

DaVinci Code was not yet the worldwide phenomenon that has since made this fact common knowledge.

I don't remember too much more about the not-in-the-Bible-for-good-reasons texts we studied that semester. But as tends to happen in life, that embarrassing mistake taught me a more important lesson: we must examine Scripture itself so we know the differences between what God said in the Bible and what people say about the Bible.

When I told my mother what had happened, she was livid. She recalled that when she had dressed up as Mary Magdalene for a children's Easter play at her church, her mother had smothered her face in makeup because—as everyone knew—Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. (And apparently first-century prostitutes wore a lot of blue eye shadow.) I was at least the third generation of my family who wholeheartedly believed the Bible said something that it does not.

So how did I make it to grad school without knowing that? I grew up in the Bible Belt and attended church Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday nights—as did my mother and her mother before her. We “knew” the Bible as well as anyone else in our churches; we also knew our churches' teachings and traditions. But we didn't know how to differentiate between them. The traditions had been taught to us as if they were the inspired Word of God.

I can't imagine there's some Sunday school teachers' convention where everyone is trained in how to use felt boards, serve animal crackers, and indoctrinate children. No, when laypeople and sometimes even the ordained mistakenly teach Christian traditions or denominational beliefs as if they are scriptural truths, they do so because they believe what they are saying. This is why James says, “teachers will be held to a higher standard” (James 3:1, *THE VOICE*): teachers must know how to study the Bible for what God says and not just recite to students what they have been taught.

Traditions get elevated to doctrines—and eventually honored as equal to Scripture—when people fill in details they think the Bible has left out. In the case of Mary Magdalene, Pope Gregory was trying to give a name to the woman who washed Jesus’ feet in Luke 7:36-50. He chose Mary Magdalene simply because hers is the next woman’s name in the text (Luke 8:2). Because Pope Gregory was the authority for the Catholic Church at the time, no one questioned his teaching. When the people heard that Mary Magdalene was the adulteress of Luke 7, they took the rumor and ran with it. And as all rumors do, it grew until Mary became the archetypal blue-eye-shadow-wearing prostitute I saw on Sunday school felt boards. Academic and armchair scholars alike may debate whether or not Gregory’s intentions were insidious and misogynistic, but the fact is he filled something in where he thought God had left something out. This was false teaching.

But it wasn’t all Gregory’s fault. For fourteen hundred years, a chunk of Christianity—myself included—didn’t bother to fact-check him or any of our other teachers. When Grandma, Mama, and I read Luke 7, we imagined Mary Magdalene as the woman washing Jesus’ feet simply because we’d always been told she was there. We trusted our teachers more than we scrutinized Scripture, and we unwittingly enabled others to do the same. We three knew what we believed but not why we believed it. We’d learned Bible stories instead of study methods.

We need to stop treating the Bible as a big collection of fairy tales or a sixty-six-chapter rule book and start studying it as the culturally, literarily, theologically, and historically unique Scripture that it is. This is a challenge that often requires us to reconsider our own long-held traditional beliefs. Reading the Bible in its original context instead of from our own contexts may teach us that what we thought was truth is legend. Admitting we are wrong

or ignorant is humbling, but it is the necessary beginning of a dynamic faith that is sensitive to God's Word and properly reflects Him to the world.

When Christians cling to traditional beliefs more strongly than to scriptural facts, we confuse the gospel for ourselves and others. What should be a glorious message of grace and love that draws people to Jesus is too often perceived as a rigorous list of dos and don'ts that brands Christians as hypocritical and hateful. The Bible needs to speak on its own, free from the doctrines and traditions we have created around it, to show humanity who God is and how He has worked.

When we are growing in our understandings of and relationships with God, we can recognize false teachings such as Pope Gregory's fill-in-the-blank theology and the noncanonical Gospel of Mary. While it is true that the manuscript is badly deteriorated and incomplete, the document's physical condition is not the primary reason it is not part of the Bible. It contradicts canonized Scripture, claiming that Jesus reserved special teaching for Mary's ears only, and that He loved Mary (not John) the most of His disciples.² Both Gregory's denigration of Mary Magdalene and the noncanonical gospel's exaltation of her obscure the disciple's true character as revealed by God in Scripture. *The DaVinci Code* does the same. All three prove why it's better to get biblical history from the Bible itself rather than from tradition or, worse, from popular fiction.

Studying Scripture begins with knowing what the Bible is and what it isn't, what it says and what it doesn't say. This book aims to give you that foundation and encourages you to seek God in His own words rather than accept a version of Him that has been altered by tradition. Why? Because God has revealed Himself in Scripture, not in creeds or hymns or books like this one, no matter how righteous they may be.

Chapter 1

GOD'S LIBRARY IN ONE BOOK

Every year just before Easter, my hometown's churches volunteer for a twenty-four-hour, four-day-long Bible Reading Marathon. They've done this for as long as I can remember, and for the same number of years, the church I grew up in has seemingly been assigned a graveyard shift and the "worst" books for such an event: 1 and 2 Chronicles. Just imagine standing outside at 3:00 in the morning reading aloud, "Now Benjamin begot Bela his first-born, Ashbel the second, Aharah the third, Nohah the fourth, and Rapha the fifth. The sons of Bela were Addar, Gera, Abihud, Abishua, Naaman, Ahoah, Gera, Shephuphan, and Hiram" (1 Chronicles 8:1-5), and so on for the fifteen to thirty minutes you are at the podium. It does, indeed, feel like a marathon.

Passages such as that give the Chronicles their reputations as the most boring books of the Bible. The long genealogies, tongue-twisting names, and hypnotic repetition are occasionally broken up by narrative stories, but even those read as sanitized copies of Samuel and Kings. Chronicles seems to offer nothing to the casual Bible

reader, so why on earth is it in there? For that matter, how did any of the books make it into the Bible?

From Many Scrolls to One Book

Thanks to my father, I've learned a lot about books. Not in the reading-is-my-hobby kind of way (although that's true too), but in a books-are-business way. Before he retired, Daddy worked for a book distributor. He spent his days figuring out how to get books from the company's warehouses and print-on-demand facilities to bookstores and households as efficiently as possible. What mattered to his job was not the intellectual material he was moving all over the world, but the physical material. Over the last two decades, no one has had a better view of how technology has changed one of the oldest industries in the world.

We take for granted the accessibility of books. Today, thanks to on-demand publishing, it is possible to print a hardbound Bible on the same machine that just spit out a copy of *War and Peace*. Neither production would take more than a minute, and the resulting books would look similar: hard cover, thick spine, paper pages, and black ink. And with the growing popularity of free shipping deals offered by various retailers, you no longer have to go to a brick-and-mortar store to get one of those hot-off-the-press books. Daddy could have had it on your doorstep in two days or less.

The density and uniformity of almost any book feels powerful in a reader's hand. We assume the pages between the cloth-covered cardboard contain words that have been written, translated, edited, and designed to perfection just for our pleasure or edification. For no book is this truer than the Bible, but what we can hold in one hand today is a poor reflection of the ancient library it actually represents.

Materials

Writing a book takes effort. It begins with an idea and then requires the author to sit down for hundreds of hours to record those thoughts. As a so-called Xennial who was taught to write research papers using index cards and note cards but now bangs her ideas directly into a virtual Word document, I know that writing is easier and far less time-consuming than it was just twenty years ago. I no longer have to write everything in longhand on a legal pad, edit on paper, and then type out a perfected copy on a word processor. I don't need Wite-Out for corrections, and I don't waste money on paper and ink supplies.

Go back not twenty but two or three thousand years from those typewriter days, and the effort required to write a "book" began with making—not buying—materials. The men (yes, *men*—we'll get to that) who took the time to record the words of Scripture sacrificed not only their time but sometimes their animals. Although pieces of Scripture can be found all over the Near East painted onto buildings and pottery, pressed into clay and wax, and even engraved on metal and wood, the more-or-less complete copies of books of the Bible primarily survive on parchment and papyrus.

WHAT HAPPENED TO BC AND AD?

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The first thing a biblical archaeology student learns on her first day of a theology class is dating. Three things to keep in mind:

1. There was no Year 0, so each millennium (and century and decade) begins on a 1. That means we should have been partying "like it was 1999" on December 31, 2000, because the twenty-first century didn't actually start until January 1, 2001.

2. The years prior to nonexistent Year 0 count backward. Even theologians need to understand the mathematics they struggled to learn in high school.
3. The designations BC (“before Christ”) and AD (*anno Domini*, “in the year of our Lord”) have been replaced by BCE (“before the common era”) and CE (“common era”) in scholarship. When I first learned about this change, I thought the world was trying to get rid of Christ. While there might be some truth to that statement, I agree on the whole that the new date designations are better for everyone. The most obvious reason is that most archaeologists in Israel are Jewish, so BC doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to them. But the more important reason is that Jesus probably wasn’t born AD 1; 4 BC (or maybe even a bit earlier) is a better fit for His birthday considering historic, literary, and archaeological facts. It is less confusing if Jesus was born “before the common era” than “before Christ”; that second designation would instigate all sorts of theological conundrums!¹

Ostraca

An issue for many biblical scholars is the lateness of the first complete version of the Hebrew Bible (Protestants’ Old Testament). It was preserved in two distinct versions: a Hebrew version (as one would expect) called the Masoretic Text and a Greek translation called the Septuagint. The first complete Hebrew Bible is called the Leningrad Codex; it was made in 1008 CE. The first complete Greek Bible (both Old and New Testaments) is called the Codex Sinaiticus; it was made around 350 CE.

This is not to say that the Hebrew Bible was simply dreamt up

thousands of years after some of its events. Fragments of Scripture are literally all over the ancient Near East—often in ancient trash heaps—dating as early as the tenth century BCE.² These fragments are called *ostrakon* or *ostraca* (plural); they are often broken pieces of pottery with ink lettering. Scribes would apparently write on whatever material was available, no matter how cumbersome.

Arguably the oldest record of biblical Scripture was found on a broken piece of pottery in 2008 during an excavation of the biblical city called Sha'arayim or Shaaraim (mentioned in Joshua 15:36; 1 Samuel 17:52; and 1 Chronicles 4:31). This was a border city between Philistia and Judah during the reign of David in the eleventh century BCE. The pottery's text roughly coincides with 1 Samuel 8, where the last judge of Israel, Samuel, describes what will happen to the people when the nation becomes a monarchy.

Around the year 1000 BCE, when that piece of pottery was inscribed with Samuel's warning against the Israelite tribes requesting a unifying king, the words were not yet Scripture. They were news. Or maybe a journal. Someone wrote down Samuel's words because he wanted to remember and thought others should be able to read what he had heard come from the prophet's mouth. Of course, those words never traveled outside of the city from which they were written, indicating the one major problem with writing on broken pottery (or stone or wood or clay): it isn't very portable. The ancient world needed to develop writing mediums that could travel and could hold more than a few dozen words.

Parchment

The first thing that comes to mind when I hear the word *parchment* is a diploma. Today diplomas are printed on parchment paper, as are other important documents such as marriage licenses, land deeds, commendations, and even resumes. Parchment paper is

usually heavy, tan, and textured, imitating its leather forerunner. But have you ever heard someone call a diploma a *sheepskin*? Have you ever wondered why the traditional image of a diploma is a ribbon-tied scroll although none of us store them that way today? All diplomas were inked onto leather sheepskin—not paper—up until the 1950s.³

The leather-making process hasn't changed much in the last five thousand years. Animal skins were cleaned of dirt, blood, hair, fat, and flesh and then cured in water-based solutions containing salt or even urine. The skins were then rinsed before they were soaked in another solution containing plant extracts. The wet, tanned leather was then stretched to dry.⁴ The whole process took months.

Any leather, no matter how thick or what color, could be inked by scribes and rolled into scrolls. Entire libraries of leather scrolls, most famously the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran, exist today thanks to the durability of leather.

Parchment is essentially an extremely thin, tanned leather. Whereas standard leather could be heavy and was readily available to all, parchment was lightweight and costly. Beginning in the fourth century CE, it became the ideal medium for Scripture recording because it could be carried easily from one community to another and could withstand being rolled and unrolled—no ribbon necessary—almost countless times as it was copied and read.

Papyrus

Even before their first dynasty was founded in 3100 BCE, the Egyptians were making papyrus sheets. It had advantages over the leather scrolls—most obviously its light weight—but it was delicate, perishable, and expensive. It was also produced exclusively by the state. No one was allowed to collect reeds for their own use;

everything belonged to the pharaoh, and he dictated who made how much papyrus and for what purposes.

Tall papyrus reeds naturally filled the Nile River's delta marshlands. Workers would harvest the plant first from those wild deposits and later from cultivated fields. The damp stalks would be sliced into pieces so the pith could be removed from the center and pounded flat. Two pieces would then be pounded together, with one pith running horizontally and the other vertically, until they merged into one inseparable and quite strong sheet of papyrus. Sheets could then be placed alongside others and pounded together into sheets of any length. Once dried in the sun, the sheets could be rolled up with the vertical pith to the outside and the horizontal pith on the inside.⁵

The Egyptians used papyrus primarily for their court and religious documents; it was not an ancient schoolboy's notebook paper. They widely exported it during the Greek and Roman Empires, but it was not used in the ancient Near East until the first century BCE. This is fortunate, as papyrus rarely survived outside of Egypt's uniquely ideal climate of dry-but-salty air and consistently warm temperatures. Egypt has just enough humidity and salinity to keep the scrolls supple but not so much that the papyrus would mold. Had more Israelite and Jewish scribes used papyrus instead of parchment, we would have even fewer artifacts to learn from today.

Technique

Ancient scribes never could have imagined the print-on-demand machines publishers enjoy today. For them, the great technological wonder was ink. By mixing charcoal and oil or red ocher and gum, scribes could record any letter instantly—when compared to the old chisel-and-stone method—and in color!

For hundreds of years, scholars have debated when exactly the first Scriptures were recorded. Considering all discovered media—from walls and pottery to jewelry and scrolls—the (arguably) oldest biblical text archaeologists have found is inscribed on a tiny silver scroll that someone would have worn on a necklace around 700 BCE.⁶ It is roughly the text of Numbers 6:24-26:

The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face to shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace.

Have you ever been to a fair and watched someone writing on grains of rice and selling pendants in which to wear them? The microscopic words supposedly bring luck to the wearer. Consider this modern curiosity (itself with ancient Eastern roots) an equivalent to the ancient and highly symbolic silver scroll amulet. In a largely illiterate ancient society, someone took the time to write a scriptural blessing on a costly piece of silver that (he assumed) would never again be read once finished. Written words were meaningful—maybe even magical.

Until scribes began diligently recording the Hebrew Scriptures onto parchment scrolls for use in the temple and later in synagogues and churches around the world, God's words were known through long-told stories and memorized prayers passed down within families from generation to generation. Why did it take so long for Scripture to proliferate? Because texts required skill, time, and money to create. And someone who could contribute all three was more likely to be employed by the state than religion.

Consider the scribes mentioned in the Hebrew Bible: each one serves in a king's administration, be it Israel's or a foreign power's.

David's and Solomon's often nameless scribes pop up all over Samuel and Kings. Ezra, who famously rebuilds Jerusalem after the exile, did so at the command of the Persian king Artaxerxes, whom he served as the court's Jewish attaché. Even Baruch, who served as the prophet Jeremiah's personal scribe, came from a noble family of royal scribes.⁷ Quite obviously, it was political service that "paid," and not religious service.

The royal exclusivity of the written word diminished during the Hellenistic period (332 BCE–70 CE), after Alexander the Great had conquered the ancient Near East. As his Greek traditions were imposed across the soon-to-be Roman Empire, nationalism arose among the Jews and the dissemination of Scripture became important to retaining their culture as Greek values began transforming Jerusalem physically and socially. Scribes began copying scrolls in earnest for the temple's use. The young men who had learned how to write the Hebrew alphabet began copying the as-yet uncanonized biblical books letter by letter. If one of them made a mistake—no matter how close he was to completing the scroll—it would be buried and never read.

Around the same time, the codex—folded pages nested within other folded pages and stitched together, not unlike this book you are holding—supplanted the scroll as Most Likely to Be Portable in the literary world. The story goes that Ptolemy V of Egypt, in a desperate attempt to keep his library at Alexandria the fount of knowledge in the ancient world, banned the export of papyrus. This was what motivated Eumenes II of Pergamum to invent *parchment*. Ptolemy's plan backfired as the durability, flexibility, longevity, and reusability of parchment flooded the new "book" market. Codices were often smaller and lighter than their scroll counterparts. Their pages could be inked on both sides, and readers could more quickly flip to the sections they wanted to read. The publishing world never looked back!