

20 - THE WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED JESUS Luke 8:1-3

Jesus chose some unusual traveling companions for those times. Twelve men were not unusual, but several women "who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities?" That would be astonishing as they moved from town to town through Galilee. Imagine how tongues would wag about that!

Who were they? Mary, from Magdala, a town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee noted for its fishing industry. Legend and later Christian art cast her as a woman of some wealth, beautiful, even voluptuous and indulgent, who made her resources available to Jesus.

The Gospels tell us that she had suffered from what we would call a mental illness, which the scriptures describe as demon possession. In his imaginative study of Mary, Bruce Chilton suggested that Jesus himself gave her the nickname *Magdalene* to distinguish her from other Marys. A very progressive scholar, Chilton also regarded her one of the founders of Christianity, arguing that she was the source for many of the traditions behind the Gospels' exorcism stories. (*Mary Magdalene: A Biography*. Doubleday, 2005).

Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, was another significant person in her own right who followed Jesus because he had healed her. Her husband's position gave her both wealth and influence. She would have been of help in protecting Jesus and his small group of followers from politically

motivated officials and even Herod Antipas himself.

We know nothing at all about Susanna, the third woman named as a member of the group. Luke simply included her as another of those whom Jesus had "cured of evil spirits and infirmities." She appeared nowhere else in the biblical record or later church tradition.

After naming Susanna, Luke adds "and many others, who provided for them out of their resources." This is the source of the traditions and many fabulous legends that grew up in later years about the wealth of both Mary and Joanna. Luke's added note show that he was aware of these traditions.

In the crucifixion narrative, Luke implies that Susanna was present there too. (23:49, 55) Again in Luke 24:10, she and Mary along with "Mary the mother of James and other women" were at the empty tomb. So these women were no mere visitors or curious onlookers. To have been named as corroborating witnesses to the resurrection, indicated that they were not only among the leaders of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem, but played a significant part in its founding.

What happened to this leadership role played by women in the next few centuries of the church's history is tragic. Blame lay on the way the 2nd century and later church reacted to the egregious claims by some of the heretical groups that developed, notably some of the Gnostics. Chief among their faults was the indulgent sexuality of which women were accused. Customs and attitudes of the times were responsible, not Jesus' own policy.