

Biblical Folks and Leadership

Mary Magdalene

We must first pay attention to the fact that Mary Magdalene was a woman. The fact that she was female puts her story in an entirely different context than if she were a man. Women in Jesus' world had few rights and were not considered to have much value other than that of being child-bearers. With this in mind let's look at Mary Magdalene and examine her traits as a leader.

We are introduced to Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:1-3. These verses tell us that she had been healed by Jesus from demon possession. These verses also give us a look at the leadership qualities of Mary.

First, Mary is traveling with Jesus. This would be highly irregular at this time. Women were not allowed to receive teaching from rabbis. Not only was Mary receiving teaching, she was traveling along with Jesus and his disciples. This shows two important qualities.

- Mary is breaking with the norm of her culture. She is not settling for the role society expects her to play.
- Mary is brave. Traveling during this time and region was not safe. There were robbers along the roads and few safe places to spend the night. She was taking a huge risk in following this man who healed her of her afflictions.

Second, Mary is supporting Jesus' ministry by providing for the company through her "considerable means". Mary had money. She was an unmarried female with money. This would have been quite irregular. Although the verses do not tell us how Mary obtained her wealth, the fact that she was able to maintain and manage it in her context, gives an indication that she was quite organized and strong willed to be able to provide for herself in a culture where she had few rights and little inherent value.

Finally, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection give us insight into the leadership qualities of Mary Magdalene. She is present at the crucifixion. This was an extremely volatile and violent day. The fact that she shows up again displays her courage as well as her dedication. We see Mary's faithfulness in her showing up at the tomb to prepare Jesus' body also (John 20:1-18). She wanted to perform this final duty for her Savior. When she sees the empty tomb, she takes yet another risk in immediately reporting the incident to the disciples. None of the disciples understood what the empty tomb really meant, and easily could have written Mary off as crazy. Instead though, the disciples took her word as reliable, evidenced by the fact that they ran to the tomb to see for themselves. This response of the male disciples speaks volumes to her leadership. Women were not even allowed to testify in court during this time because they were seen as too unreliable. Yet, at her word, the disciples literally raced each other to the tomb.

- 1) Which of the traits displayed by Mary do you feel are most important to leadership?
- 2) How might the story of Jesus resurrection be different if Mary were not such a strong leader?
- 3) How is it different today for women in leadership compared to Mary's context? What things aren't so different?

For further conversation:

4) In *Mark's* version (16:1-8) of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene and the other women are so afraid of what the angel told them, that they tell no one. In *Matthew's* version (28:1-10), the women are told by an angel that Jesus is risen and, out of excitement, they run to tell the disciples. On their way to telling the disciples, Jesus meets them on the road. *Luke* 24:1-12 tells a version of the empty tomb in which the male disciples do not believe the women. In fact, they think the women are talking "nonsense". Peter, however, is the one male disciple who runs to the tomb in Luke's account, to see for himself.

What does the response from Mary Magdalene and the other women in Mark say about Mary's leadership? Is not telling anyone out of fear an act of leadership? Why or why not? How does Jesus' response to the women at the tomb in the various accounts give a different vision of women in leadership (appears to them before the men, showing acceptance of them and trust in their leadership and management abilities)

What are some possible reasons the resurrection stories differ from each other? Do the four versions change your view of Mary Magdalene's leadership abilities?

NICODEMUS

Nicodemus emerges three times in the scriptures of John. Through these brief accounts, we see Nicodemus' inherent leadership qualities and how his faith and leadership interconnect to shape his actions.

John 3:1-21 (especially 1-10) Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He is also a member of the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin. He is well-educated, respected. Nicodemus approaches Jesus at a political time when most Pharisees are feeling threatened by Jesus. Nicodemus, however, is not threatened by Jesus; he is curious. He has seen something remarkable in Jesus and wants to learn more. Nicodemus goes to Jesus at night, though. This night journey is probably to keep him from being found with Jesus. After all, it would be scandalous to the other Pharisees and cause quite an uproar for Nicodemus, a learned teacher, to be seen in the presence of Jesus.

Nicodemus is a learner. He is seen as one of the wisest men in his community. His wisdom is visible in that he listens as Jesus responds to Nicodemus' question with a challenge. Nicodemus comes to listen to Jesus. He wants to learn more.

Nicodemus is a risk-taker. Sure, he comes at night, but he *does* come. When the rest of the Pharisees seem to want to kill Jesus, Nicodemus wants to be in dialogue with Him.

Move ahead to John 7: The temple guards are returning from an encounter with Jesus. They were sent by the Pharisees to arrest Jesus, but in listening to him, they were moved by his words, nervous that the crowd would turn on them, or could not charge him with breaking any specific law. When they returned without Jesus, the Pharisees were angry. (7:32, 45-46)

47-49 “You mean he has deceived you also?” the Pharisees retorted. Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law – there is a curse on them.”

50-51 Nicodemus, the man who had come to Jesus earlier and was both a ruler and a Pharisee, spoke up. "Does our Law decide about a man's guilt without first listening to him and finding out what he is doing?"

52-53 But they cut him off. "Are you also campaigning for the Galilean? Examine the evidence. See if any prophet ever comes from Galilee."

In this incident, Nicodemus stands up for Jesus. The Pharisees have already tried and convicted Jesus in their minds, all except Nicodemus. Standing up for Jesus in this way could easily raise suspicion among the Pharisees. They are really out to get Jesus at this point. Nicodemus cannot remain silent however, and speaks out in defense of this teacher he may believe in.

JOHN 19:38-42 The next time we see Nicodemus is at the crucifixion. Nicodemus accompanied Joseph of Arimathea in order to prepare Jesus' body for burial. This was an outward and obvious sign of Nicodemus' belief in Jesus. If any doubt was still in Nicodemus in John 7, it has vanished now. He is an unashamed believer in Jesus as the Christ. After all, he was carrying 75 pounds of anointing spices and gels, not exactly undercover work! Also, he goes with Joseph of Arimathea to publicly ask for Jesus' body. Nicodemus takes an incredible stand. He is throwing away his life of traditional religious power to proclaim Jesus as Savior.

- 1) What do you think happened to Nicodemus after this?
- 2) What about Nicodemus as a leader do you admire most?
- 3) When in your life have you had to make an important stand that you knew would have consequences for you?
- 4) Nicodemus grew from a man who was curious about Jesus to a man who gave up everything to proclaim his belief in him. How did changes in Nicodemus' faith change his way of being a leader?
- 5) What risks do you take to proclaim and follow Jesus? What risks would be/are most difficult for you to take?

MOSES

Moses plays a huge role in the Biblical story. He is a complex character whose life is written about extensively. But now we will try to sum his leadership and management qualities in about a page and a half.

There is no doubt God intends for Moses to be a leader. In fact, the leader of God's chosen people. Moses is clearly a leader because God anointed him to leadership.

In Exodus 3:10 God says, "So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

When God makes this proclamation, Moses immediately opens his rolodex of excuses as to why he could not fulfill this mission. God tries to convince Moses he is capable, but Moses' sense of insecurity and self-doubt do not allow him to accept the mission to which God is calling him. God is angered over Moses' lack of faith in himself and in God's ability to work through him. God agrees to allow Aaron to be Moses' mouthpiece. But God insists that it be Moses' words that Aaron speaks.

Exodus 4:16 He will speak to the people for you. He'll act as your mouth, but you'll decide what comes out of it. (The Message translation).

This encounter with God shows Moses' many weaknesses. He has some sort of speech impediment. He lacks self-confidence. And, perhaps most importantly, Moses lacks faith in God's ability. Moses really is not off to a good start!

Depending on which Biblical scholar you believe, the number of people in the Exodus traveling party varies from 7,000 to 6 million. Either way it would take quite strong leadership to bring even 7,000, even 700, even 70 people together for a common goal. Moses, with God's help, convinces these people to leave all they know and most of what they have, and head out with him into the desert to some place he calls The Promised Land. They all pack up and go with him.

Can you imagine the management skills it would take to provide food, shelter, and water for thousands of people moving through the desert? Moses must have been very efficient in organizing and distributing resources. He must have developed and maintained some quality system of communication. Certainly every day provided a new challenge that no doubt tested Moses' competence as a manager and his ability as a leader.

Moses brings God's laws and rules for the people to follow. Moses displays amazing leadership in getting people to buy in and follow these -- especially in continually having to bring people back to the laws when they stray. Moses' greatest challenge perhaps comes when the people he is leading begin to grumble and complain. They begin to say they would rather return to bondage than continue following him through the desert. On top of this, his own sister and most trusted confidant, speaks out negatively about Moses to the people, inciting them all the more to rebel against his leadership. Moses must have felt betrayed, hurt, and burned out.

Read this excerpt from Numbers to get a glimpse of Moses when he nears the end of his rope and his resolve has all but run out.

Numbers 11:10-17: Bear their burdens and hurts.

¹⁰ Moses heard the people of every family wailing, each at the entrance to his tent. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. ¹¹ He asked the LORD, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?" ¹² Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? ¹³ Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴ I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin."

¹⁶ The LORD said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. ¹⁷ I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.

God promises again to provide, just as he has done time and time again. And Moses continues to move forward.

Moses displayed good leadership characteristics and some incredible management skills. However, Moses' lack of faith in himself and God caused him to fall short. Moses never saw the Promised Land.

- 1) How did Moses' lack of faith play into the attitudes and behaviors of his followers?
- 2) Do you ever feel like Moses in his conversation with God in Numbers 11? When you get to a place like this, what are some healthy things you can do for yourself and your ministry?
- 3) Discuss the importance of skills and faith in leadership and their relationship with each other.