

The Harlot Kōan

David O'Neal

Hers is perhaps the ugliest image in Orthodox iconography. Just about all the other saints, even the serious ascetics, get to shine with ageless, transcendent beauty. But not her. She's always presented to us as a gaunt, withered old woman, naked but for a borrowed cloak, her skin leatherized from years of exposure to the elements, and with a bad hairdo. Her expression is often almost pathetic. It's difficult to imagine her as sexually alluring in her youth, even though that's how the story goes, and her story is familiar to the many Eastern Orthodox Christians who encounter it annually on the fifth Sunday of Great Lent. Her life is read aloud with the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete at that Wednesday's matins. It can be an emotional experience to be confronted with the image of her radical repentance. It can also be an occasion for modern people like me to come up against elements of her tale that raise more questions than they answer.

The Life of Our Holy Mother Mary of Egypt is attributed to St. Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem from 634–638. His text is said to be based on an oral tradition that had circulated among the monks of Palestine for a century prior to that, having originated with the monk St. Zosimas—the only person ever to meet Mary after her departure for the desert. According to the

Life, Mary was a woman of sixth-century Alexandria who became emancipated from her parents as a teenager and lived independently, supporting herself by begging and spinning flax in order to make herself available for what she considered her true vocation: having sex with any and all men who were interested. And many were interested indeed, according to her account. This happy harlothood went on for seventeen years before the change of life occurred that she recounted so movingly to Zosimas: One day, seeing some pilgrims boarding a ship bound for Jerusalem for the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Mary decided it'd be fun to go along, and she offered the crew use of her body for ticket price. Though she makes what reads to me like a humorous effort to speak demurely of what transpired on the boat, she doesn't conceal the fact that she was responsible for turning the voyage into quite an orgy.

On arriving in Jerusalem, she followed the pilgrim throng toward the church where the celebration was taking place but found herself somehow unable to enter. When this confounding exclusion was revealed to her to be the result of her dissolute life, she was overcome with repentance. She cried out to the Virgin Mary for help and her prayer was answered. She entered the church, venerated the cross,



St. Zosimas and St. Mary of Egypt. Icon by Mirra Meylakh.

and then departed for the desert beyond the Jordan River, where she spent the rest of her life wandering in solitude.

It was after more than four decades of this ascetical journey that she had her surprise encounter with Zosimas, who was spending Lent in the desert according to the custom of the monks in his coenobium. She told him her story—basically what I’ve summarized above, but in greater detail. He agreed to bring her holy communion the next year at the same time and place, which he did, keeping her existence a secret for the time being.

Another year later, he returned again to find her lifeless body. She had passed away immediately after re-

ceiving communion, but not before having written a message in the sand for him, in which she revealed her previously undisclosed name. A lion appeared, to help Zosimas dig Mary’s grave. The burial is said to have taken place in 522.

The story gained a lot of traction in the early church and went on to become one of the great classics of Christian hagiography. It is often regarded as a true image of repentance, and rightly so. Hearing it works like medicine for the disease of self-pity, and for our tendency to compartmentalize the process of repentance in our lives or to put it off for a more convenient time. Every year she knocks us down, and when we get back up, we’re headed in a better direction. My

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gratitude for her story is immense. But it also makes a lot of alarms go off for me. I know I'm not the only one scratching my head with puzzlement even as tears arise.

The first of the alarms has to do simply with the sexist attitude the story exemplifies: the unquestioned idea that forty-plus years in the desert is appropriate penance for a profligate woman, versus what would likely have been required for a comparably promiscuous male (who'd probably have to fast for a few weeks before being ordained a bishop). It's reasonable to assume that Mary's story, after a century of retelling by male monastics, would have been colored by attitudes common toward women then and later: that they were naturally morally and intellectually inferior to men (as the fathers are said to have taught) and prone to outrageous promiscuity if given the chance. Mary may have represented a kind of nightmare come true to innocent monks: proof that an independent woman loses all moral control when left to her own devices.

Then there's the idea of a woman living an independent life in the ancient world, which is unlikely enough as to be preposterous. It strains credulity to think that Mary could have lived on her own, supporting herself, in sixth-century Egypt—let alone to think that she'd be able to find opportunities in her spare time for the prodigious amount of casual sex she claimed to have enjoyed. And she's careful to emphasize to Zosimas that she was *not* a prostitute. She did it all for fun. It's very difficult to imagine this. I think we can be reasonably sure that 99.9 percent of women in the history of the world up until fairly re-

cently who had sex with many partners did so out of economic necessity. It's nearly impossible to imagine a woman of Mary's time and place living the life she describes, even if she wanted to. But for the sake of argument, let's concede the possibility that she could have been a precursor of the late-twentieth-century-style sexually liberated woman. Even then, it remains difficult for me to imagine anyone actually enjoying sex with so many people over a period of seventeen years, as she claims to have. People who do that nowadays, when casual sex is more readily available and less stigmatized, end up burning out, usually either getting religion or seeking help for the addiction when it turns into compulsion or when age begins to limit their prospects. And Mary must have been thirtyish at the time of her wonderful awakening—middle-aged for that time and place. Add to all this the fact that the sexually transmitted diseases that have always been around were, until recently, usually a death sentence, and credulity is even further strained. Mary's story of her pre-repentant life is dubious in the extreme.

So, is the *Life of Mary of Egypt* simply pious fiction with a heavy dose of misogyny thrown in? It does nothing to the truth of the story to regard it that way. But even so, I find myself clinging to the idea that there's a real person behind Mary. Maybe it's only wishful thinking on my part, based on the story's effectiveness in annually cleaning the dross from my heart. But maybe not. There was certainly precedent for her desert-dwelling in that pious age, even if the naked wandering she took up was on the extreme fringe of that lifestyle. But there are also subtle elements of Mary's story

that ring deeply true to me beyond its sentimentality and hard-to-swallow aspects. Chief among these is her description of the pivotal moment when repentance overwhelmed her—the moment she understood why she was unable to enter the church. In the translation I have, she says: “The word of salvation gently touched the eyes of my heart and revealed to me that it was my unclean life which barred the entrance to me.”

“Gently,” it says. This *gently* rings true to me across the centuries. There wasn’t an angel with a fiery sword; the heavens didn’t open. I don’t think it’s even clear that what prevented her from entering the church was anything other than the press of the crowd. The point was she woke up. And whether what kept her from the church was some mysterious force or just a rowdy mob makes no difference. In the face of her awakening, either would have been just as miraculous, and just as ordinary. And though Mary was sincerely regretful of her behavior, I suspect she didn’t spend her years in the desert beating herself up. There’s a way of wallowing in repentance that’s really just the flip side of wallowing in sin. If that kind of self-abnegation is what her flight to the desert was about—an appeasement of a God she’d offended—I really don’t think she’d have been able to endure all those years.

It seems to me rather that the God who’s beyond offense—who’s beyond the word God, and who can’t be said properly to “exist,” who a few hundred years previously had been revealed through Christ to be profoundly intimate with all things—was revealed to Mary. In the revelation of that paradoxical intimacy, when ev-

erything looks utterly different yet completely the same, the misguidedness of her previous direction became apparent. When this happens, there can be no question about it; there’s no need to justify it, prove it, or make it match what anyone else might say about it. No religious authority is needed to articulate or enforce it.

The radical reorientation of one’s being that takes place seems quite natural. This change of mind and heart can be called repentance. It includes regret for whatever past deeds set one in a direction other than God and fellow being, but the pathological aspect of regret is overwhelmed by gratitude for being able to see what went wrong. It’s akin to joy. Or maybe this repentance is the same thing as joy. Dramatic displays or supernatural phenomena don’t belong to this radical change of heart, as they’re inadequate in the face of the miracle of it. When Mary describes her experience with the word *gently*, it feels to me as though something of a real woman’s experience has been transmitted to me across a millennium and a half.

This waking up is a paradigm shift worthy of a radical response. Mary’s flight to the desert is a sign of just how different the new life looks in relation to the old. But I wonder if, given her situation, the flight was also simply a practical move. There may realistically have been no place for the new Mary in the world. I wonder if someone with her reputation would have been unwelcome in communal monastic life. That’s been the case for “fallen women” at various points in history. If she couldn’t be a nun, what else could she do? Go back to Alexandria and continue to spin and beg while she preached to her old Johns?

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Not a viable option. The life of a respectable Christian matron would not likely have been possible for Mary either. As an independent woman of ruined reputation, she may well have had no options. In the face of this, is it possible that life in the desert was not a heroic act, but simply the one that made sense? It was a horribly difficult life—I get the feeling she downplays the horror of it, in the same way she downplays the orgy on the boat—but probably not a lot more difficult than sex work would have been.

It's the Mother of God, who seems to have taken Mary under her wing like a daughter, who sends her into the desert. She tells Mary: "If you cross the Jordan you will find glorious rest." Not, "If you cross the Jordan you'll have plenty of time to agonize over your sins, which are so much worse than anyone else's," but, "You will find glorious rest." There's a feel of truth about those words as well. I somehow don't imagine the Virgin Mary's promise went unfulfilled.

There's a temptation to see in Mary an extreme version of ourselves: to take her function to be that of revealing our sinfulness by showing us our own blown way out of proportion, so that it becomes like a spotlight on us. I believe that's a temptation to be avoided along with the sentimentality that's also sometimes confused with repentance. There's no difference between Mary and any of us who wake up to our wrong direction. There's no meaningful difference between the sins of a prostitute and those of a respected Alexandrian wife in that regard, despite appearances. The idea that there's a significant difference between any of us when it comes to degree of misdirection is laughable in

the face of repentance when it arises. One who by grace has had her direction realigned understands this, and smiles. The details aren't as significant as the joy of seeing it.

But back to the implausibility of Mary's story. If there is a real woman behind it, and if it's not just been revised by misogynists, is it possible that Mary was simply making things up about her pre-desert life? I quite boldly like to imagine that she was. I like to think that Mary misrepresented herself to Zosimas in order to keep herself from being cast as victim, as that would have missed the point. I don't mean that she wasn't a victim—in fact, I'm convinced that she was as much a victim as most of the sex workers throughout history have been. But I take her to be attempting to deflect Zosimas' (and our) attention toward what was important.

She was a victim, but awakening happens in the midst of victimhood, and victimhood doesn't prevent it. Awakening happens in the midst of a world of delusion, and the delusion doesn't go away. Included in that delusion is every sort of oppression and injustice, which, horrible as they are, can't triumph over the awakening. There's a temptation to think that the business of salvation is the eradication of delusion and of the injustice and suffering that arise from it. It's not.

Christ appeared in the middle of an oppressive political situation and did nothing to solve it—though everyone was expecting him to. His salvation was about something entirely other than an independent state of Israel. St. Paul, in the midst of all his self-sacrificial bearing of witness, did nothing to address the system of enslavement

of some human beings by others that was part of the social system in his time. He even seems to condone it. As does St. Peter. And Mary lived in a time when the systematic oppression of women was so completely embedded in the culture that no one was even aware that there was a problem or the possibility of something better. Mary herself, who suffered greatly from it, probably didn't consider that an alternative was possible. But as it turned out, as it always seems to turn out, no oppressive system can do anything to inhibit the truth of the encounter with Christ. Nothing inhibited Mary's perception of it. Nothing diminished for her the joy of being set in the right direction.

Here I need to declare in no uncertain terms that I believe injustice and oppression should be resisted and fought against at every moment of our lives. The Bible is full of (mostly ignored) references to that idea, but no "proof text" is needed other than our own dawning awareness of the suffering of the person standing right before us. I believe the awakening of repentance in our hearts in fact makes the struggle for justice more rather than less important—but it also puts the struggle in perspective. The delusion from which oppression arises doesn't ever go away, even though it waxes and wanes. Awakening has never waited for oppression to be

solved. Mary woke up in the midst of a world mostly deluded, and the delusion didn't go away. It's never any different for anyone.

She alluded to the unsurprising fact that her life alone in the desert was difficult. But I have to wonder if it would have been just as hard for her back in the world as a rootless and relation-less former whore. One thing I feel certain of, though, is that she transcended hardship through her repentance. She found the glorious rest she was promised in the midst of the hardship, and the hardship did nothing to impede it.

I believe our hymnography gets her wrong. She doesn't teach us to "disregard the flesh for it passes away," as the troparion says. To transcend something is not to leave it behind. Transcendence includes what's transcended, sharpening our understanding of it. My guess is she understood and appreciated "the flesh" better post-repentance than she ever did when she was trading in it.

And I also feel that our iconographic tradition gets her wrong by focusing on her literal reality rather than on the greater reality that iconography should be about. She should shine with radiant beauty and quiet joy. She's been misunderstood. But that's OK. She's used to it. ✽

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