Woman with the Alabaster Jar

Mary Magdalene: Her Role as an Anointer
A Prayer and a Blessing

Almighty Lord, who is a strong tower to all who put their trust in You, to whom all things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, bow and obey: Be now and evermore our defense, and make us to know and feel that the only Name under heaven given for health and salvation is the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.  (revised from the blessing on page 456 BCP)
Every Gospel contains a story of Jesus being anointed by a woman. None of them say it was Mary Magdalene.

- Two state that the woman anointed his head
  - Mark 14:3-9
  - Matthew 26:6-13
- Two state that it was his feet that were anointed
  - Luke 7:36-50
  - John 12:1-8

The most obvious conclusion is that there were at least two times Jesus was anointed, and that they were understood by the writers as being for different purposes. Later Biblical scholars noted some similarities that created questions.
Before we go further, let’s establish a timeline:

• Mark and Matthew place the anointing story in Bethany, after Jesus has entered Jerusalem, disrupted the Temple trade and done some teaching.
  • It immediately precedes their description of Judas going to the priests, and the Last Supper narrative.

• Luke places the story early in Jesus’ ministry and around Capernaum where he was healing and teaching. He had just healed the Centurion’s slave and answered questions from John’s followers. It has nothing to do with the last days of Jesus.

• John’s gospel places the anointing back in Bethany, but it comes before Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and the Supper with the disciples.
Here are the two stories of anointing his head:

**Mark 14:3-9**
While he was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar, and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there that said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way, for this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Leave her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you will always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

**Matthew 26:6-13**
Now when Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, “Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.” But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”
Notice any similarities?

- Jesus in Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper
- A woman with an alabaster jar of costly ointment
- Poured on his head
- Anger that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor
- Jesus’ response that she is to be left alone and that the poor are always here but he will not be
- She has anointed my body for burial
- This story will be told and she will be remembered

These two are clearly from the same source, or Matthew knew Mark’s account
Here are the two foot anointing stories:

**Luke 7:36-47a** One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “speak.” . . . Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house and you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven, hence she has shown great love.

**John 12:1-8** Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus feet and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”
Here is where we begin to get confusion.

- Luke’s gospel, written later than Mark and Matthew, moves its only anointing story to early in Jesus’ ministry — not just before his Passion narrative.
- The account happens in Capernaum — not Bethany
- The dinner is at a Pharisee’s home — but Luke does give his name as Simon
- He states clearly that it was an Alabaster Jar of costly ointment
- The purpose and the outcome of the anointing is very different

Either Luke is describing a different incident of anointing, or he has deliberately changed the context and meaning.

Interestingly, it is two lines later (after this story) that Luke describes the people with Jesus and includes Mary Magdalene in the entourage. Most commentators conclude that this is the way Luke references the “sinner” (harmartolos — one who “misses the mark according to the Pharisaic rules”).
Let me be clear. Almost every commentator states that “the woman with the alabaster jar” of costly ointment in Luke’s story is Mary Magdalene.

• and note that the same line is used in both Mark and Matthew

But the confusion deepens: Look at John’s story, written much later than any of the others.

John places the anointing back in Bethany at the end of Jesus’ ministry and before his death

• Apparently at a different house – Lazarus, Martha and Mary
• He retains the costly ointment, but has the woman anoint Jesus’ feet (just as in Luke)
• The woman’s name is given as Mary (apparently Martha and Lazarus’ sister)
• The outrage is the same as that given by those in Mark and Matthew but this time stated only by Judas
• The rebuke by Jesus is nearly the same – the anointing was preparation for his burial.

John clearly knows both traditions and mixes them for his own purposes in presenting his understanding of the life, death and meaning of Jesus.
To what end for John?

- The mention of Bethany and Lazarus immediately puts the whole story in the context of death and resurrection (or at least rising from the dead).
- The costly ointment filling the house with fragrance is a reference to the line, “He stinketh,” and pushes forward to the opening of Jesus’ tomb where it is in a garden and there is no sense of desiccation and decay.
- The garden imagery will also remind us of the original Biblical Garden.
- Anointing of his feet removes dust (a symbol of death and chaos) and becomes a “type” of the action Jesus will soon use of washing the feet of his disciples.
- Naming Judas is the first clue of what Judas is to become – not a faithful and reverential follower, but betrayer.
- The whole context of the scene – dinner together, foot washing, Judas – points to the Last Supper.
- The mention of wiping with her hair shows deep emotional care and intimacy – the same care shown by Mary Magdalene at the cross and tomb.
John seems to take the two stories and make them one, pointing us directly toward the actions of Jesus, the dinner with his disciples, his betrayal, arrest and crucifixion, and the tomb and resurrection. It is all prefigured at this point.

Two things:

1. By mixing the two traditions, John opens the possibility that the Mary in Bethany can be - Mary Magdalene (the “sinner” from the Lukan tradition)

2. This is strengthened by pointing the story directly at the actions of what we know as Holy Week, and there is only one Mary who is stated as going through the whole ordeal of death and resurrection with him - Mary Magdalene.

My belief is that the intention of John, and in fact, all of the anointing stories, is that it and they are about Mary Magdalene.
But the most difficult question is, “What do the stories of the anointing mean?”

• Mary (Magdalene) is the only disciple to take seriously, and do something about it, Jesus’ announcement that he is going to Jerusalem to die.
  • She may not know what kind of death, but she takes seriously that his actions and teaching were not welcome by the Temple priests and the Pharisees.
  • She anoints his head to show that his “source” is The Source of All, and she anoints his feet to help him trod the path of death cleanly and with purpose, as both anointings show her deep care and respect.
  • Anointing with oil is one of the prominent symbols of the presence of God as Holy Spirit in Scripture
• There are many other images given of the Holy Spirit in scripture (wind, fire, dove, cloud), but pouring oil is one given particular importance.
  • Anointing of people: prophets, priests, kings, the messiah
  • Anointing of objects: altars, pillars, weapons, the sacred objects in the Temple
  • Anointing for hospitality: to show respect to your guest
• But in all cases it is a sign that the Spirit of God has come

• The Holy Spirit is sometimes equated in Scripture with the feminine aspect of God as Wisdom as is found in Proverbs, and the Shekinah (Glory of God) that guides the Sabbath.
• Paul’s letter to the Romans reminds us that the Holy Spirit is not just a creative power, or the ability to speak truth to power (prophetic ability), but a helper in weakness. When we no longer have the strength or words, the Spirit intercedes.

Mary’s anointing is a sign that the Spirit of God, the Wisdom of God, is to be with Jesus in the upcoming events. She (the Spirit/Wisdom of God) is the manifestation of help in his weakness and when he has no more words, and of the creative, transformational power to bring new life.
The actions of Mary bring up some interesting questions:

1. What meaning do these actions have for us as we enter into Lent?
   - To honor God in Christ and our neighbors even in our weakest moments by anointing with what is most valuable—our empathy, compassion, justice, mercy (you fill it in)
   - To remember that the presence of the Holy Spirit is meant to be a healing balm in weakness, for ourselves and our world, within God.

2. Why is it, that this moment of a disciple honoring Jesus' prediction of death, has not gained a stronger liturgical presence in the life of the Church?
   - Why do we not close the season of Lent with an action mirroring the action of Ash Wednesday, only using oil, or an evening service where we remember this action of love by a disciple that calls us to remember and honor Jesus deeply in our hearts as we go into Holy Week?
What other Lenten thoughts come to you from what we have talked about today?
Next:

Mary stands watch at the crucifixion of Jesus