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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/1062067>

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Mary of Magdala: The Evolution of an Image

by

Rachel Owen

Under the Direction of Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr.

ABSTRACT

In this study, Mary of Magdala will be presented as a cumulative character consisting of multiple layers rather than as a concrete historical figure, for this allows one to see the opaque connections between her divergent textual and traditional (medieval) images. The “historical” Mary does, however, find a place here--she is presented only as a persistent early Christian belief in the veracity of her figure, and as the foundation for both the textual and traditional Mary.

In light of this, the textual, the “historical,” and the medieval will be examined as these comprise the materials out of which Mary’s cumulative layers were made--the understanding of one aids in the understanding of another. Ultimately, this study will examine the many layers of Mary’s character in hopes that the contradictions existing between the “historical,” the textual, and the traditional will diminish, thus giving equal consideration to all.

INDEX WORDS: Mary of Magdala, Canonical texts, Gnostic texts, Medieval saint, Apostles, Saint Mary Magdalene, Early Christianity

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RACHEL OWEN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

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2007

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May 2007

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Introduction

Mary of Magdala. It is a name that invokes a variety of conflicting images. Some see her as the reticent woman who performs a brief but pivotal role in the Canonical gospels. Others see her as the outspoken and spiritually mature woman who plays the lead in several Gnostic texts. Still others see her as the embellished figure of the penitent whore inherited from the devout medieval mind. Increasingly, many see her as a troubling *mélange* of both the textual and the medieval images. On one side of the issue stands the confusedly dual figure of the textual Mary, an uneasy union of the canonical and the Gnostic. On the other side stands a Mary often maligned, the embellished whore casting a seductive silhouette across Christianity's past. My task is not to reconstruct a purely historical Mary against which to compare her textual and traditional images, for such a task is highly problematic, if not impossible. Nor do I hope to tear down the Mary who arose out of the medieval religious landscape, or to prove her image historically inaccurate and false. The process of this image's manufacture is widely known in the academic community. Rather, I hope to show that the traditional Mary, though largely invented, warrants the same consideration as her allegedly more respectable literary counterpart, an enigmatic figure who will also be examined in order to provide an accurate portrayal of both the textual and the traditional personae of Mary of Magdala, ultimately showing that hers is a figure made up of cumulative, and often inseparable, layers.

In this study, both Mary's textual and traditional images will be explored in order to show that neither can be neatly separated from the other, and that both are built upon the same foundation. Looking at both text and tradition, the textual Mary will be teased out of the texts that preserve her so that she can take her place beside the medieval Mary, the penitent whore, the image which persists as normative for most Christians even today. Because of the contradictions between Mary's textual and traditional images, an examination of a "historical" Mary will also be provided in order to demonstrate first, that the complex and ever-cumulative character of the Magdalene is added onto what was believed to have been a highly significant figure, and second, that the seemingly incompatible images of her character are not wholly distinct manifestations, but rather that they constitute the many layers of a cumulative whole, layers added over time to a figure of indeterminate historical significance in the early Christian community. By peeling back the layers of Mary's ever-developing character, the lines that separate one image of Mary from another will blur, and the contradictions existing between the textual and the traditional will diminish, thus giving equal significance and consideration to both Mary's textual and traditional layers, for both are built upon the same early Christian belief in her significance.

Another reason for examining the "historical" Mary is that through such research, one can shed light on Christianity's earliest years, as well as illuminating the history of the texts themselves and the communities that composed them. This is perhaps the inevitable result of the search for any "historical" character found in the gospels, that one learns more about early Christianity than about the characters in the early Christian texts.

Perhaps it is this elusive nature that makes these first Christians so attractive, and few are more elusive than the Magdalene. Before delving into this cumulative character, it will be helpful to clarify a few of the terms used to describe her. First, the term “historical Mary” is little more than just that, a term. Virtually all that is known of Mary of Magdala comes ultimately from the texts that have been inherited from the cultural milieu of the first- second- and sometimes third-century Greco-Roman world. These texts are not “historical” strictly speaking, meaning they were *not* written to be unbiased or factual and objective accounts of what actually happened. Rather, these texts were written to communicate a religio-political message to an ancient Jewish and Hellenistic audience.

In fact, Elaine Pagels points out in *The Gnostic Gospels* just how entangled politics and theology were at the time these proto-Christian¹ texts were composed. In the Roman Empire, Pagels asserts, “politics and religion formed an inseparable unity.”² Robert J. Miller, editor of *The Complete Gospels*, continues this thought and asserts that the early Christian texts cannot rightly be called “historical” in the matter-of-fact sense, for what one finds in the gospels is “something other than sheer historical report.”³ Nonetheless, reconstructing at least a hypothetical Mary is worthwhile as this can shed light on her textual and even traditional characterizations. To oversimplify, the “historical” Mary, or rather the traditional belief in her historical reality, had a direct

¹ The early Christian texts, movement, and community in general will sometimes be referred to as “proto-Christian,” in that Christianity as we know it did not yet exist. The term “proto-Christian” encompasses what would later evolve into Christianity proper, including elements that would now be deemed Jewish, pagan, or even heretical, some of which were ultimately shed as orthodoxy became established. “Proto-Christian” is thus something of a blanket term covering the widely divergent elements of pre-orthodox Christianity.

² Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1979), 36.

³ Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1994), 400. Most gospel quotes, unless otherwise noted, will be taken from this translation.

bearing on the development of the textual Mary, which in turn had a direct bearing on the development of the traditional Mary. All in all, it can be said that for Mary of Magdala, history is text and text is history, as the textual evidence is all that is left from which to reconstruct her. As such, the Mary one meets in the proto-Christian texts should not be called “historical,” despite what I suggested at the outset, but rather should be termed “textual,” all the while bearing in mind that what one sees in the texts is a persistent belief in the “historical” figure of Mary, rather than the “historical” Mary herself.⁴

This leads to the second term, “textual Mary.” She is simply the Mary from the texts, which for my purposes include the four Canonical gospels and five of the so-called Gnostic writings dated from the first through third centuries C.E., namely the gospels of *Philip*, *Thomas*, and *Mary* as well as the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Dialogue of the Saviour*. In the canonical gospels, she is a woman with a questionable past, if a past is given to her at all. Her lines are short and her role is small, though noteworthy. In the Gnostic texts, however, new layers are added to her character as she plays much more than a minor part in some of these works. Indeed, she can be seen taking the reins of the ministry after the resurrection, imparting wisdom to the other disciples, and is referred to as “a woman who

⁴ Claiming that early Christian texts cannot be called historical raises important questions. For instance, are we looking at history or literature when we open these works (bearing in mind that there was only a blurred distinction in antiquity)? Also, if there is, strictly speaking, no historical Mary of Magdala, then why has so much ink been spilled on her account? Perhaps it will suffice to say that the study of these texts and any character carefully pressed within their pages is a worthwhile endeavor if only for the tangible history that these texts have created. In other words, belief influences history by virtue of the fact that we act according to our beliefs, and these actions in turn affect history. For this reason, the historical significance of Mary stands, despite the tentative labeling of her as a primarily textual figure rather than as historical.

fully understood.”⁵ Clearly, the textual Mary is a widely divergent character who progressively develops from one text to another.

This leaves the third term regarding Mary, “traditional or medieval Mary.” She is the Mary who sits submissively at Christ’s feet, hair flowing, tears streaming, an alabaster jar of costly myrrh emptied by her side, filling the very air with a sense of mystery as she weeps tears of penitence. The noisy sounds of a banquet clang behind as His friends look on in disgust. Who is this sinful woman who would dare touch their Lord so boldly after touching countless strangers? She is the medieval image of Mary of Magdala, an image that persists today as the definitive Mary of Magdala for many believers. Did such a Mary ever exist? In the case of the medieval Mary, any evidence for her historical existence is perhaps a secondary issue as belief in the image alone has been enough to make an indelible mark on Christianity’s development. For we act according to our beliefs, and many have long believed in the veracity of this cumulative figure. In this sense, then, tradition creates the very “history” in which it believes.

The image of the medieval Mary is also significant in that this is the image most often condemned by modern scholars. While some modern scholarship has put forth significant effort in condemning the medieval image of Mary as whore, such effort relies on a prior understanding of just how this worrisome image came to be. As such, the textual and “historical,” as well as the medieval, will be explored in detail, in successive chapters.

When investigating Mary’s conflated character, I will often employ theatrical terminology. Mary (alongside the other disciples, and even Jesus himself) will be

⁵ *Dialogue of the Savior* 20:2. The unknown author says this in reference to her comment regarding Jesus’ teaching. In this passage she speaks as if she were co-lecturing with Jesus, not as one of the other disciples who are asking questions of him. She also takes on this persona in the *Gospel of Mary*.

presented as a cumulative character in a connected series of texts. There are several reasons for viewing Mary and the other gospel characters in this light. First and foremost, because the gospels were often recited and/or delivered orally during their first few centuries, and not read quietly to oneself, it is fitting to view the gospels as works to be seen and heard, as well as literature to be read. In fact, “a gospel, like drama, is a primarily oral event.”⁶ This is not surprising given the fact that the principle means of communication during this time was oral rather than written. Ultimately, Christianity began with the spoken word rather than the written word.⁷ As such, it is easy to imagine the gospels transmitted orally, and easy to imagine them recited, or even performed, for an audience that saw Mary as a recurring character in the many texts utilized in their developing religion.

Furthermore, because the gospels can be viewed as dramatic undertakings of a sort, it is possible to view Mary as a character that evolves from text to text. Her different images are simply layers added with each telling of the same story, much like the Greek tragedies in which the characters differ from playwright to playwright while the mythos, the story itself, remains the same. Oedipus will always kill his father and wed his mother, just as surely as Jesus will die as the Magdalene mourns-- no matter who tells the story, or when or why.

Another reason to view Mary as a dramatic figure is that she is still on the stage, an ever-developing character who has been interpreted time and again. Most recently,

⁶ Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr., *Tragic Posture and Tragic Vision* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1994), 190.

⁷ It is interesting to note that much of the language of the New Testament was not educated Greek but rather *koine*, the common Greek of the marketplace and the home. This is likely because much of these works were oral before they were textual. Karen King asserts that the language of early Christianity was “the living spoken word,” which over time developed into literature. See Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 75.

she has been cast as Jesus' clandestine bride, a woman who spawned a secret royal bloodline. This latest image of the character of Mary is but one in a line of many--the disciple, the whore, and now the wife. The purpose of the theatrical analogy is not to assert that the gospels were intended to be viewed as plays, but rather to assist in making a point--that point is to show that the divergent texts and traditions about Mary of Magdala are not opposed, but rather that the Mary we encounter here is a character, a cumulative character in an ongoing and ever-developing religion that has appropriated the figure of Mary in order to send a message to its audience, a message that gained a layer with each passing generation. In the end, the use of the theatrical analogy will aid in demonstrating that the various images of Mary of Magdala are not contradictory and unrelated, but are instead the cumulative layers of one continuously developing character. By viewing Mary as a character, rather than as a concrete historical personage, it is easier to envision her textual and traditional images as cumulative layers stacked one upon the other, rather than seeing each as a distinct manifestation to be compared against a genuinely historical figure.

Ultimately, because she can be seen as such a cumulative character, her different images should not be viewed as conflicting but instead as evidence of the evolution, and sometimes devolution, of her character. Will hers be a tragic end? This is what the modern audience longs to know, but as of yet no ending has been written for Mary as layers are still being added to her character. Perhaps it is not the ending that should concern us, but rather the beginning, as it must be determined just how Mary's different images came to be. As such, Mary's beginning should be carefully explored. As the enigmatic *Gospel of Thomas* says, "Have you found the beginning, then, that you are

looking for the end? You see, the end will be where the beginning is. Congratulations to the one who stands at the beginning: that one will know the end.”⁸ With this in mind, I must turn your attention to the beginning, to what scholars deem the first textual appearance of the complex character of Mary of Magdala.

⁸ *Gospel of Thomas* 18:2-3.

The Canonical Mary

All in all, there is incredibly little information regarding the canonical Mary, thereby making any endeavor to interpret her divergent roles in these gospels complex at best. This is not helped by the fact that there are competing and often contradictory textual traditions, most significantly between *Luke* and *John*, as will be seen. All four gospels present progressively developing portrayals of Mary of Magdala. In all of these gospels, she is barely seen until Jesus' crucifixion where she performs a small but critical part.⁹ For this reason, I will here deal only with the canonical resurrection scenes, as this role is that which gives her character its significance. As such, the canon's resurrection accounts will now be examined one by one.

In *Mark's* version of the resurrection, Mary of Magdala stands at a distance from the cross, watching him die. She is not alone but stands alongside another Mary, referred to as the mother of James,¹⁰ and Salome.¹¹ In *Mark*, which is considered to be the oldest

⁹ I will now deal only with the Biblical verses which explicitly state the full name *Mary of Magdala* and not those verses that mention other Marys or unknown women who later became associated with the Magdalene's figure. These other verses will be addressed in the section entitled *The Medieval Magdalene* on pages 77-101.

¹⁰ This Mary is possibly the mother of Jesus as James is his brother, or possibly the mother of another James, the brother of John. The text does not specify.

¹¹ According to *Luke* 3:1, Tiberius was emperor when Jesus was crucified. He reigned from 14-37 C.E. This explains why the women watch the crucifixion from a distance--because Roman authorities would not have allowed mourning at the cross. According to Seutonius, "the relatives were forbidden to go into mourning" under Tiberius' reign [Seutonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 61.2, Robert Graves, trans. (London, UK: Penguin, 1957), 144. Many scholars have used this to challenge the validity of the crucifixion scenes in the gospels, asserting that it could not have happened this way as Roman law prohibited the actions described, and yet it can also be argued that Roman law is the reason the *women* (as men would have been perceived as more of a threat) were watching *from a distance*. For more on this subject, see Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2004), 209.

of the four canonical gospels, we do not meet Mary of Magdala until 15:40, though it is asserted here that she has been a part of Jesus' ministry since his early days in Galilee and has followed him to Jerusalem. She watches from a distance, with the intention of returning the next day to anoint the body. The three faithful women look on as Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus. The next morning, they return to an empty tomb where "a young man" tells them that Jesus has risen. He then commissions them to go and tell the disciples the news of the resurrection. They do not, however, carry out this crucial task. In fact, *Mark* concludes in 16:8 that "they didn't breathe a word of it to anyone" because they were afraid.¹²

This is likely where *Mark* ends, although early translators and copyists have allegedly added material in order to downplay the abrupt ending originally given. In the supplementary endings, we read that Jesus appears to his male disciples and instructs them to continue his ministry.¹³ This is only after he *first* appears to Mary of Magdala and instructs her to tell the disciples of his resurrection, which she immediately does, though she is not believed, hence Jesus' appearance to the male disciples himself. These multiple endings of *Mark* add a layer to the character of Mary of Magdala, as well as posing interesting implications as regards subsequent Church leadership and women's roles in the Church.

¹² This story can be found in *Mark* 15:40-16:8. For a discussion regarding this abrupt ending of *Mark*, see Ruprecht, 248-255.

¹³ Miller, 12. The two supplementary endings of *Mark* are simply called the "longer" and "shorter" endings. In the shorter, Jesus appears only to Peter. In the longer, he appears to Mary and then the other disciples.

One such implication can be found in the original ending of *Mark*,¹⁴ at 16:8, in which the three faithful women run away in fear. Here is presented a possible justification for the undermining of feminine authority in the Church. After all, the women fail to perform their appointed task. They do not tell the disciples of the resurrection, which is arguably the most crucial moment in the history of Christianity. By running away in fear, have they perhaps forfeited any future apostolic authority, despite the claim that they first saw the risen Christ?

One must not forget that, if *Mark* ends at 16:8, there are *no* resurrection appearances in the original version of this gospel. Because later apostolic authority, and hence ecclesiastical succession, hinges in large part on who receives the premier resurrection appearance, the addition of a resurrection appearance first to Mary and then to the male disciples calls into question the intent of the later Markan additions. What could be gained by adding a resurrection appearance to Mary and only afterward to the male disciples? If it were the writer's intent to lend authority to Mary by having Jesus appear to her, then why bother including an appearance to the men at all? Conversely, if it were the author's intent to lend authority to the male disciples, then why have Jesus appear to Mary, especially *first* to Mary? These are only some of the questions that come to mind when confronted with the longer ending of *Mark*, 16:9-20.¹⁵

¹⁴ I am not considering here what has come to be known as "Secret Mark," but rather the text accepted into the Orthodox canon. This is because "Secret Mark," or at least the fragments we have of it, makes no further mention of Mary of Magdala. "Secret Mark" is a different version of *Mark* that is known only through a second-century letter from Clement of Alexandria. See Miller, 12. This elusive text is noteworthy, however, because it represents an esoteric tradition within the early orthodox community. Though the author of the text may not have been orthodox, those using the text often were and such secret knowledge/teaching is what the orthodox pointed out as a corruption of heresy. And so, in the history of "Secret Mark" we see evidence of the orthodox practicing that which they condemn.

¹⁵ Another question that must be addressed is that of the stigma of demon possession tacked on to Mary in 16:9. The reasons for this are complex and will be discussed at greater length below. See also footnote 17.

To answer these questions, it may be helpful to look at yet another version of *Mark*, for the above is only the longer of two distinct additional endings. In the shorter ending, which consists of a single additional verse, Jesus appears only to Peter and commissions him and the other followers to continue the ministry.¹⁶ The implications of this shorter addition are perhaps obvious. Jesus appears to Peter alone and gives him the authority to continue his work after the women have run away in fear without telling anyone of the resurrection. It seems reasonable to say that this ambitious redactor wanted to lend credence to the Petrine line of succession that would later become so near and dear to Catholic orthodoxy.

But what of our other mysterious writer, the author of *Mark* 16:9-20, the addition to *Mark* that has been accepted into the canon? He has Jesus appear to Mary, and *then* to the men. This time, Mary does tell the disciples, but she is not believed, at which point an irritated Jesus himself must step in and inform the disciples of his resurrection, all the while rebuking them for not believing Mary. It is tempting to interpret this as a feminist and assert that Jesus himself condemns male authority for not listening to the divinely commissioned female, represented here by Mary of Magdala. On the other hand, it is just as plausible to claim that Jesus did try to utilize women in his ministry, but for whatever reason they failed in their task. Jesus then bypasses the female and gives authority directly to the male. Perhaps Mary is not believed because she is branded in 16:9 as a former demoniac, a stigma that could forever undermine one's credibility.¹⁷ Either

¹⁶ Ruprecht, 248-249.

¹⁷ Many scholars claim that the charge of demon-possession is symbolic of the power to prophecy, a dangerous charge to place on a woman at the time of the gospel writing because prophecy in the first-century Jewish world had long been associated with both sexual deviance and demon possession, at least in the case of female prophets--though it must be noted that this was not the case in the Greco-Roman world as a whole, as is evinced by the oracle at Delphi in Greece and the Vestals in Rome. See R.S. Kraemer and M.R. D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 343.

scenario could be convincingly argued. Whatever the case may be, Mary is an integral part of the resurrection account in *Mark* and as such was perhaps believed to have played this role historically, otherwise she likely would not have been included at such a crucial moment in a male-centered text. At the very least, it can be said that her presence in the texts reveals a historical *belief* in the significance of her figure. As such, there may be a trace of the historical Mary here, underneath the opaque layers of Mark's gospel message.

That the figure of Mary was, on some level, historically significant is evinced by the fact that Jesus appears *first* to Mary and the other women.¹⁸ There must be a reason, for if the Markan redactor wanted to lend credence to the Petrine line of succession, the run-away Mary of 16:8 would by then have been very far away. But here she is, the *first* to see the risen Jesus. Thus, it is possible that the longer addition to *Mark* was written in order to give further credence to the role of Mary of Magdala (not to mention the possibility that this could simply be the preserved memory of Mary as perceived by the community in general). Of course, this does not explain why this redactor chose to include Jesus' appearance to the male disciples at all, or why Mary is labeled a former demoniac. Perhaps this was simply the way the story was remembered. Perhaps this was to give *an* authority to Mary and *supreme* authority to Peter and the other male disciples.

See also Amy Jill Levine, *A Feminist Companion to Mark* (London, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 201. This issue of the seven demons is far too complex to warrant discussion right now, and yet this figures largely in the medieval conception of Mary and cannot be ignored. Here, I will briefly state that scholars attribute the alleged possession to anything from a "psychosomatic condition" to severe illness. See Ingrid Maisch, *Mary of Magdala: The Image of a Woman Through the Centuries* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 3. Many reasons other than genuine possession (unless one turns to religious sources) are cited and yet most agree that the stigma of possession would have undermined her credibility as a witness to the resurrection on many levels. This is an issue that will figure more prominently in the section entitled *The Medieval Magdalene* on pages 77-101.

¹⁸ It is also important to remember that if *Mark* ends at 16:8, it is still the women who are first told of the risen Christ, though they do not see Jesus himself.

On the other hand, the feminist reader could say that this was done to show how pig-headed the male disciples could be toward a female prophet (symbolized by the possession), or she could admit that it is ultimately the men who are given the authority to spread the gospel as Jesus pushes aside a frustrated Mary. There are numerous possible interpretations.

Just what is the reader to do with three endings to one gospel? It could be the case that the two additional endings were composed by competitive communities of proto-Christians, as were many of the early Christian writings. Perhaps one was composed in response to the other, which in turn was composed in response to *Mark's* original abrupt ending. The interpretations and conjectures are endless here. All that can be said with any degree of certainty is that evident in the two different additions to *Mark* are the presence of two distinct resurrection traditions: one in which it is Mary who first sees the risen Lord, and one in which it is Peter.¹⁹ This is the ultimate significance of these different endings--the resurrection appearance is given to two different figures who, in hindsight, we remember in opposing proto-Christian camps.

Matthew's gospel, however, presents only one resurrection tradition. *Matthew* is the most quoted and influential of the canonical gospels, at least in the Catholic tradition, and repeats almost verbatim ninety percent of *Mark*.²⁰ For this reason, Mary's character receives no additional layers in *Matthew*. In fact, she appears on the scene in exactly the same place here as in *Mark*--watching the crucifixion from a distance, alongside "Mary

¹⁹ This, of course, implies that there were competing versions of proto-Christianity in the years before orthodoxy became entrenched. Scholars, such as Schaberg, Pagels, and Ann Graham Brock [in *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003)], often point to Peter as the leader of one brand of Christianity and to Mary of Magdala as the leader of another. This is a much contested subject to which we will soon return in the section entitled *Apostolic Dispute* on pages 50-68.

²⁰ Miller, 55.

the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee,”²¹ all of whom have followed Jesus from Galilee. The next day Mary of Magdala and “the other Mary”²² go to the tomb to anoint the body and there encounter an angel (no longer simply a young man as in *Mark*) who tells them of the resurrection and orders them to return to the disciples and share the news. Unlike the Markan Mary, Matthew’s Mary and her companion run to the disciples “full of apprehension and an overpowering joy.”²³ Jesus intercepts the women on the road and instructs them to tell the disciples to go instead to Galilee where he will meet them. The women do as instructed and Jesus meets the remaining eleven male disciples in Galilee. The audience never hears from either Mary again. *Matthew* concludes by telling us that Jesus has commissioned the male disciples to continue his work with no further mention of the women or their role.

What is one to make of Matthew’s account of the resurrection as it concerns the role of Mary of Magdala? It is certain that she witnessed the crucifixion after having followed Jesus from his early days in Galilee. It is certain that the risen Jesus appeared *first* to her and to the “other Mary.” It is certain that she carried out his instructions and relayed the news to the male disciples. This scanty account is all *Matthew* relates about Mary. She takes on the role of supporting actress for the male disciples, and though she does her job well this time, she is merely a messenger for the men. But still, she is preserved in the text as a premier witness to Christ’s resurrection, and so likely was believed to have been such by those in Matthew’s community. Nonetheless, despite the

²¹ *Matthew* 27:56.

²² *Matthew* 28:1. It is unclear who this “other Mary” is. It is tempting to assume, however, from the way this is said that Mary of Magdala is the more important of the two women, and yet this is just an assumption. That Mary of Magdala is listed first and is specifically identified is nonetheless significant. We will examine below the importance of her order in the listing of the women as well as that of the consistency of her specified name. See *A Historical Mary?* on pages 69-76.

²³ *Matthew* 28:8.

fact that Jesus appeared first to both Marys, these women are simply the messengers, tools for the male disciples who are meant to carry on Jesus' ministry. In this respect she is not so different from her Markan counterpart.

Unlike *Mark's* account, however, *Matthew* is not complicated by later additions that reveal competing claims to the premier resurrection appearance. It is clearly Mary of Magdala and the "other Mary" who see Jesus first. It is equally clear that it is the male disciples who are told by Jesus himself to continue his work while the women get no further instruction, as their role is completed by delivering the Easter message.

Perhaps *Luke* can fill the void left by *Mark's* and *Matthew's* brief but telling mention of Mary. *Luke's* account of Jesus' resurrection appearances, the most detailed of the three Synoptic gospels, does give Mary an expanded role. She is introduced much sooner in this gospel as the woman "from whom seven demons had taken their leave."²⁴ Also, *Luke* tells us that Mary, along with many other women, supported Jesus and his ministry "out of their resources."²⁵ This is the only canonical mention of Mary outside of the resurrection accounts, and even in *Luke* she is not mentioned again until the crucifixion, which she watches, as in *Mark* and *Matthew*, from a distance with the other women. They return the next day with the intention of anointing the body, only to meet two angelic figures (not one, as in *Matthew*) who tell them of the resurrection, instructing them to relate this news to the remaining eleven male disciples. They do this, but are not believed. Peter, however, who seems to be intentionally portrayed here as the only

²⁴ *Luke* 8:2. See also footnote 17.

²⁵ *Luke* 8:3. This, of course, implies that the women had resources, i.e., they supported Jesus and the disciples financially. We do not really know what *Luke* means by this except that the women were somehow contributing to the Jesus movement from their own resources. It is interesting to note that it is only in *Luke* that the women support Jesus and the group of disciples as a whole. In the other gospels where this is mentioned (*Matthew* 27:55 and *Mark* 15:41), the women support *only* Jesus. See Brock, 33.

believer among the men, rushes to the tomb only to see a few linen wrappings. He leaves the empty tomb immediately and seems confused.²⁶

So far, *Luke*'s account is fairly clear. The women (Mary of Magdala is again listed first) go to the tomb, learn of the resurrection, tell the disciples who do not believe them, whereupon the ostensibly faithful Peter rushes to the tomb and also finds it empty. As Peter returns from the empty tomb, *Luke*'s account takes a considerable detour from *Mark* and *Matthew*. He relates that "two of them" (presumably followers, though not of the original twelve disciples) are walking to Emmaus when Jesus appears to them in disguise. Cleopas²⁷ and Jesus carry on a conversation about Jesus' crucifixion. Cleopas tells the still unrecognized Jesus that the women first told them about the empty tomb, that "some" of them went to the tomb to see it empty for themselves (in verse 12 it is only Peter who goes), "but nobody saw him."²⁸ Then Jesus, Cleopas, and his unnamed companion (who may be Luke as he writes as an eyewitness?) sit down for a meal, whereupon the two recognize the traveler as Jesus. At that same instant, he disappears. Cleopas and his companion quickly return to Jerusalem and are told by the remaining eleven that Jesus has appeared to Simon (Peter).²⁹ This is the first time Peter is mentioned (as Simon) after he walked away from the empty tomb *without* having seen Jesus.

²⁶ See *Luke* 24:12.

²⁷ Cleopas (or Clopas) is a character of unknown origin. Eusebius tells us that he was Joseph's brother and, hence, Jesus' uncle. His son, Simeon, was the second bishop of Jerusalem. See Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, III. 11 and 22, G.A. Williamson, trans. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1989), 79 and 83. What is interesting about him is that he is given a Greek name. This is perhaps a very significant fact concerning the intent of Luke's gospel which, among other things, seems to have been the spreading of the new faith to the Greek world, which implies distancing Christianity from its Jewish roots.

²⁸ *Luke* 24:24.

²⁹ It is unclear in this verse (*Luke* 24:34) who actually does the "saying." If the group of disciples tells Cleopas and his friend of the appearance to Simon-Peter, the accusative form must be used as it is in some manuscripts. In one manuscript tradition, however, the nominative form is used, meaning that Cleopas tells the disciples of the appearance to Simon-Peter. Admittedly, this doesn't make as much sense in the story, and yet the variation does exist. This "highlights the awkwardness of this text." See Brock, 19-40 for a detailed examination of other textual difficulties in *Luke* as well as this gospel's favoring of Peter. We will

I will quickly recap the highlights of this confusing account. Mary of Magdala and the other women go to the tomb to find it empty, whereupon two angels tell them of the resurrection, news which they then share with the eleven disciples. They do this but are not believed. Peter, however, runs to the tomb and also finds it empty. Cleopas and his friend meet a disguised Jesus on the road and tell him that *some* of the disciples (not just Peter, as in verse 12) saw the empty tomb after hearing of it from Mary. While eating, Cleopas and his friend recognize Jesus, who instantly vanishes. They return to Jerusalem and are told (or they do the telling, see footnote 29) that a risen Jesus has appeared to Simon, i.e., Peter. In the end, no one is commissioned by Jesus to spread the gospel. Rather, the male disciples are told to remain in the city and wait for the Pentecost (after which they will be instructed to evangelize).

What are we to make of this puzzling account? We first read that Peter goes to the empty tomb alone (verse 12), and yet Cleopas tells us that Peter went to the tomb with some of the others and that none of them saw anything. A minor discrepancy, yes, but not something that a careful author would have overlooked, which is why many scholars believe verse 12 to be a later addition.³⁰ More significantly, Peter does *not* see Jesus at the tomb in verse 12 (inauthentic?), but later Cleopas and his friend are told that Peter is the premier resurrection witness. According to a straightforward reading, that premier witness is Cleopas. The alleged appearance to Simon (Peter) is not related in the text

look at this more closely when we examine the issue of contested leadership in the early church. See *Apostolic Dispute* on pages 50-68.

³⁰ See the Revised Standard Version's translation of *Luke* (as this translation makes express note of the addition) as well as Brock, 35. She tells us that many manuscripts do not have this verse. It is also omitted in the writings of Marcion where he quotes *Luke*, and in half of the references to *Luke* in Eusebius. On the other hand, Ben Witherington wants to include 24:12 as authentically Lukan, claiming that this verse serves as an apology for the male disciples' refusal to believe the women. See Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Church* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 132.

aside from what Cleopas is told. *Luke* relates nothing else about the Petrine appearance, which is strange for something so arguably central to the story.³¹

Whatever one makes of Peter's Lukan protophany (the act of seeing the risen Christ first), it cannot be overlooked that Mary of Magdala receives no resurrection appearance in *Luke's* account, which reports, albeit confusedly, that Jesus appears first to Peter. As such, *Luke* adds a layer to Mary's character by taking from her the precious protophany, an event related in the preceding gospels. This reduces her role while adding to that of Peter, who must be credited with the premier resurrection appearance in *Luke*.

So far, *Mark* does not relate a resurrection appearance, which later redactors sought to modify by adding an appearance to Mary in 16:9-20. This contradicts the shorter Markan appendix in which it is Peter who first sees the risen Christ. In the canonical Markan ending, however, it is Mary who first sees the risen Christ. This is also the case in *Matthew*, which posits outright that it was Mary who first saw the resurrected Christ. *Luke*, on the other hand, tells us that it was Peter who was the premier witness. Whether *Luke* deliberately alters the account of the protophany, or whether there were contrasting versions of events remains to be seen. Whatever the case, *Luke* does consistently alter *Matthew* and *Mark* in favor of Peter, as will soon be examined. Now the closing of *John*, the only gospel not tied to the Synoptic tradition, will be examined.

Picture, if you will, three crosses erected hastily against the desert horizon, three criminals hanging in the afternoon sun. Here she stands, Mary of Magdala, not at a distance, but "by the cross" with three other women including the heartbroken mother of

³¹ Irenaeus was not bothered by the discrepancies found in and among the gospels. He explains that the gospels were given to us "under four forms, but bound together by one spirit," a conception he termed the "fourfold gospel." See Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, 3, 2.8, as taken from Joseph C. Ayer, *A Source Book for Ancient Church History: From the Apostolic Age to the Close of the Conciliar Period* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 120.

Jesus. This is the scene depicted in *John* 19, where the reader is first introduced to the Johannine Mary of Magdala (she is first named in verse 25). In chapter 20, Mary sees the empty tomb and rushes to tell the disciples who then return there as a group. Peter and the others leave upon seeing the tomb empty, but Mary stays and then sees (but does not initially recognize) the risen Christ, imploring him for the return of her Lord's body. After having addressed him as the gardener, she soon recognizes the man as Jesus, at which point he instructs her to tell the disciples of the resurrection. According to 20:18, she tells them everything.

Jesus then appears to the gathered disciples and commissions them *as a group* to continue his ministry. It is not until chapter 21 (added later?) that Jesus instructs Peter specifically to feed the lambs and shepherd the sheep, i.e., to take over as leader of his ministry. If chapter 21 is a later appendix to the original gospel, as many scholars believe to be the case,³² then it is possible that the author of this appendix is trying to solidify Peter's precarious claim as Jesus' successor.³³ Whatever the case may be regarding chapter 21, Mary of Magdala has clearly seen the risen Christ first in *John*, and this time is the only one to receive the protophany. Here *John* adds yet another layer to Mary's cumulative canonical character, that of the lone recipient of the protophany. For her to have been given such a significant role likely indicates that in the proto-Christian community there existed a belief in the importance of Mary's part in the Easter scene.

³² Miller, 199.

³³ It is also sometimes contended that chapter twenty-one was added in order to stress the significance of the role of the Beloved Disciple over that of Peter and even Thomas who here earns the title "Doubter." For this reason, Elaine Pagels asserts that John's intention was not to elevate anyone but rather to denigrate Thomas. See Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Gospel of Thomas* (New York, NY: Random House, 2003), 58 and 70. Pagels is here summarizing from the following monograph: Gregory Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minn., MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995). While these are valid interpretations and most certainly reflect what is going on in the final chapter of this gospel, it remains the case that Peter is expressly commissioned by Christ himself to "feed the sheep" and hence to shepherd the new faith.

Whether historically grounded or not, the belief in the significance of her figure was such that she could not be written out of the texts. That Mary is presented as having seen the risen Christ first is no small matter as countless ecclesiasts and even the pope rest their authority in part on the Petrine protophany, which, as we have seen, only occurs in one of four canonical gospels, as well as in Paul's account.³⁴

Four distinct resurrection scenes taken from the canonical gospels have now been reviewed, and in each one Mary of Magdala performs a small but crucial role. But what have these texts actually shown us about her character? Precious little. She was at the crucifixion, either at a distance or at the foot of the cross, after having traveled with Jesus from Galilee. She watches the burial in order to return to his tomb the next day to anoint the body, but she always finds the tomb empty. Then she either flees in fear (*Mark* 16:8), or she *first* sees the risen Christ and announces his resurrection to the disciples (*Mark* 16:9-10; *Matthew* 28:9-10; *John* 20:14-18), or she is told of the resurrection by two angelic beings and simply passes on this news.³⁵

The fact that Mary of Magdala is present repeatedly throughout the gospels at this critical moment in all four accounts brings to light the importance of her character, as such male-centered works could simply have failed to mention her consistent role had she not been a figure of at least some perceived historical significance. It seems, then, that something of the historical underlies the textual, even if this is only a proto-Christian belief in her veracity, else she would likely not have been included in the resurrection

³⁴ Outside of the gospels, Peter is reported to have been the first to see the risen Christ in *I Corinthians* 15:5.

³⁵ *Luke* 24:1-11. Note that *Luke* does not relate a specific angelic commissioning of the women, i.e., they are not told to relate the news of the resurrection to the male disciples, an omission which serves to downplay the significance of their role.

accounts at all. And so she is mentioned, albeit sketchily, and layers are added to her role with each gospel.

Was Mary of Magdala considered an apostle in the proto-Christian community? It could be argued that she is an apostle in the Pauline sense of the word, and yet this interpretation has its difficulties. For instance, in *I Corinthians* 9:1, Paul says, “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” Because Mary witnessed first-hand the resurrected Christ, she can claim apostleship according to the apparent definition implied in this verse. Thus, for scholars like Thompson, Mary of Magdala qualifies as an apostle.³⁶ But is this the case? One verse later, Paul admits that he is *not* an apostle according to others. So, it seems that a segment of the proto-Christian community required more than a visitation by the resurrected Christ as a claim to apostleship. Paul himself implies this as well, and asserts that he was specifically “appointed” as an apostle in *I Corinthians* 12:28, *I Timothy* 2:7, and *II Timothy* 1:11.³⁷ Also, because Paul tells us in *I Corinthians* 15:6 that Jesus had appeared to more than 500 “brothers” after the resurrection, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that there were further qualifications for apostleship. For, if seeing the risen Christ was all that was required for apostleship, this would not have been so selective a position. As such, a specific verbal appointment or the like may very well have been necessary in the eyes of the growing proto-Christian community. What the exact nature of such an appointment entails is uncertain.

³⁶ Mary R. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala: Apostle and Leader* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 25.

³⁷ In *I Corinthians* 12:28 the verb *etheto* is used and translates as “made, set, or established.” In *I Timothy* 2:7 and *II Timothy* 1:11 the passive form is used, *etethen*, which has roughly the same meaning. See Kurt Aland, et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament, Third Edition* (New York, NY: American Bible Society, 1975).

Other uncertainties further complicate Mary's questionable status as apostle. *Acts* 1:21 relates, "it is necessary to choose one of the *men*" to replace Judas as apostle. Does Luke intend to prohibit women from claiming this position? The answer may well be yes, since Luke uses the gender-specific word *andres* (men) rather than *anthropoi* (people).³⁸ One might also point to Junia of *Romans* 16 as "proof" of female apostleship, and yet this is inconclusive as Junia (feminine) is referred to as Junius (masculine) in some translations (such as the NIV). It is likely, however, that Junia was originally feminine as a gender shift in the other direction is difficult to imagine, not to mention the fact that the older manuscripts contain the feminine form of the name.³⁹ As such, it is reasonable to conclude that Junia was indeed a female apostle. Nevertheless, one must remember that it was Paul who named her as such, and according to *Acts* 1:21, Paul himself does not qualify as an apostle. And yet many still regarded him as such. Clearly, this is further evidence of dispute within the diverse proto-Christian community. As such, Mary's status as apostle (if such a status can be granted to her given the inconsistent and varied meanings of this term) may have been both affirmed and denied in the early years of Christianity depending on the proto-Christian group in question.

Most factions would have granted the textual Mary discipleship, rather than the weightier apostleship, in the sense that she at least followed, heard, and believed in Jesus. Her name, more often than not, heads the list of female followers who provided for him and the other male disciples. She was at the crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb. She

³⁸ See Brock, 149-151 for further discussion.

³⁹ The critical apparatus accompanying *Romans* 16:7 of the Revised Standard Version indicates this. Also, The Greek New Testament opts for the feminine form of the name, 574.

was an integral part of Jesus' activities. This places her, "without question, prominent among the disciples of Jesus."⁴⁰

The prominence of the canonical Mary cannot be denied, for the use of this figure as a lens through which to view the earliest years of Christianity is potentially quite revealing--and this is the value of any investigation into the "historical" Mary. Indeed, though one cannot learn about her as an actual historical entity from her scanty role in these gospel accounts, it is nevertheless possible to discern valuable information via her figure regarding the nature of Jesus' ministry. For instance, it is clear that from its earliest days in Galilee, women were a vital component of Jesus' company, so much so that in three of the four gospels it is the women--or Mary alone--who are given the critical task of relating the news of the resurrection, and this after the women--or Mary alone--are appeared to *first*. These two points are of immense significance regarding the legitimacy of ecclesiastical succession, as well as the very current issue of women in positions of leadership within the church.

Her figure is also remarkable in that she is one of the more consistent characters in the canon's various resurrection scenes. She is listed first at the empty tomb in each of the four gospels, texts which, despite their discrepancies, all place Mary of Magdala as the one present at what is regarded, by many believers, as Christianity's most critical moment. Because these texts do have a significant range of variation, it is all the more imperative to note the general stability of the role played by this Mary. For such divergent works to have preserved her role in much the same manner, despite the subtle layers added to her character in each text, it is clear that in her the reader can witness the

⁴⁰ Thompson, 26. Whether or not the text reflects the historical situation in which this was written remains to be seen. I will examine in more detail what can be posited regarding the possible role of the historical Mary in *A Historical Mary?* on pages 69-76.

staying power of the proto-Christian belief in the significance of the role of Mary of Magdala.

Furthermore, the persistence of this belief as it is preserved in the canon is noteworthy in that it hints at the contentious issue of religious authority as regards who received the protophany. As we have seen, whoever was credited with the premier resurrection appearance was legitimized as a leader in the new faith. According to Elaine Pagels, this issue must be examined politically because such an occurrence “legitimizes the authority of certain men who claim to exercise exclusive leadership over the churches as the successors of the apostle Peter.”⁴¹ Because the Orthodox Catholic church recognizes Peter as the premier witness to the resurrection, and because Jesus is recorded as having said to Peter in *Matthew* 16:18, “on this rock I will build my Church,” subsequent leadership derives from him.⁴²

In the second century, this fact was used to legitimize the so-called apostolic succession of bishops. Schaberg, too, asserts that “the claim to have received a resurrection appearance functioned in the early church to authenticate a person’s claim to apostleship,” in that for early Christians, having received a resurrection appearance was equated with the authority to proclaim oneself legitimately as part of the foundation of orthodoxy.⁴³ Indeed, the resurrection witness had a claim to authority unlike any other, for such a close link to Jesus affirmed one’s qualification to espouse the gospel. This tenacious belief persisted in large part due to documents such as the *First Epistle of Clement* (96 or 97 C.E.), which declares, “the apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus, the Christ, was sent from God. Thus Christ is from God and the

⁴¹ Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 6-7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8, 11.

⁴³ Schaberg, 221, 235.

apostles from Christ.”⁴⁴ Other early sources, such as Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* (dated to roughly 175), appeal to apostolic tradition in order to legitimate contemporary church authority. Irenaeus says that authority should be based upon “the tradition derived from the Apostles of the greatest, most ancient, and universally known Church, founded and established by the two most glorious Apostles Peter and Paul.”⁴⁵ Tertullian follows suit and says, “if the Lord Jesus Christ sent Apostles to preach, others than those whom Christ appointed ought not be received as preachers.” He goes on to say that the doctrine taught by the apostolic churches should be regarded as truth, for their teachings came “from the Apostles, the Apostles from Christ, Christ from God.”⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, there was a direct connection linking God to Jesus to the Apostles, and one had to have at minimum seen the risen Christ in order to be counted among the apostles.⁴⁷ As such, the enormity of receiving a resurrection appearance cannot be glossed over, for in the minds of many early Christians, this was necessary in establishing legitimate authority in the burgeoning church.

That such a link to Christ gave one the authority to teach the gospel and preach its message confirms the significance of the character of Mary of Magdala as regards the expanding roles of women involved in Christianity today. After all, *if* Jesus himself chose to bestow authority upon a woman (by appearing first to her, as a premier appearance was a sign of favor and authority), a challenge to the woman who prefers the pulpit to the pew becomes problematic. Of course, it is the cumbersome *if* in the previous

⁴⁴ Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 62.

⁴⁵ Ayer, 112.

⁴⁶ Ayer, 115.

⁴⁷ Because Mary witnessed the resurrected Christ, she can rightly claim apostleship if one loosely interprets the Pauline requirements for this station. It seems, though, that one also had to be verbally appointed by Jesus in some sense, as Paul himself alludes to some sort of appointment. Was Mary appointed? Perhaps, if Jesus’ commissioning her to tell the others of the resurrection counts as an appointment, and yet we simply do not know what such an appointment entailed as Paul never relates this in any of his letters.

sentence that caused a rift in the early church, a rift that disrupts many congregations still today.

Of course, Peter's significance lies in his counter-claim to having been the first witness of the resurrection. The Bishops of Rome trace their authority back to Peter who, they assert, was the first witness of the risen Christ and "hence the rightful leader of the church"⁴⁸ due in part to his receiving the protophany. One obvious question emerges from this sweeping assertion--what of the protophany to Mary of Magdala as it is recorded in the longer (and canonically accepted!) ending of *Mark*, as well as in *Matthew* and *John*? As a testament to the historical significance of her figure, she receives the first appearance in three out of four gospels, and yet the Pope traces his authority back to the premier appearance to Peter (as well as Jesus' famous words from *Matthew* 16:18). What the modern gospel audience is to make of this incongruity is a puzzle indeed, one with several pieces tragically missing. It must suffice to say that the significance of the protophany, whether believed to belong to Peter or Mary, is of enormous importance and cannot be treated lightly, for this issue looms largely within the greater issue of authority, over which there was much disagreement between those who would later be labeled as either orthodox or heretical.⁴⁹

Stopping precariously with the potentially contentious nature of the canonical Mary, I will now turn to the Gnostic Mary, a character presented in much richer detail as

⁴⁸ Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 8 and 11. That the Pope traces his leadership back to Peter due to the latter's alleged protophany is highly significant when one considers the enormous papal influence on the religiosity of the Middle Ages, particularly as regards its depiction of Mary of Magdala.

⁴⁹ It could be the case that Mary's witness was deemed unreliable simply because she was a woman. At the time, women were not considered viable witnesses and were, in fact, not allowed to bear witness according to Talmudic law. See Leonard Swidler, *Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), 115.

these alleged heretics added several layers to her character, layers that expand significantly Mary's brief canonical role.

The Gnostic Mary

Before examining the Gnostic texts, it will be helpful to explore briefly the contentious term *Gnosticism*. It derives from the Greek word *gnôsis*, meaning “knowledge,” which in this context indicates a kind of self-knowledge or secret insight which is deemed crucial as to know oneself is a critical step on the path to knowing God. In this diversified system, “the self and the divine are identical,”⁵⁰ i.e., the divine resides within the self. Gnosticism itself, as an “ism,” is more difficult to define, for there is no single set of beliefs or established system that was followed by its alleged adherents. It must be stressed that Gnosticism was “not a unified phenomenon.” Nor was it ever a “clear-cut group or sect or movement” with any clear relationship among the widely divergent texts now labeled by modern scholars as Gnostic.⁵¹ In short, there was no such religion. Rather, Hans Jonas defines Gnosticism as a “collective heading for a manifoldness of sectarian doctrines appearing within and around Christianity during its first critical centuries.”⁵² And “manifoldness” is the key. In fact, it may be fitting to define Gnosticism as a diverse collection of proto-Christian beliefs (steeped in Greek philosophical speculation) that shared the common fate of running counter to what would later become orthodoxy. And yet, for lack of a better term, and because I cannot here elucidate in detail the different proto-Christian communities ultimately excluded from the

⁵⁰ Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, xx.

⁵¹ Schaberg, 123-124.

⁵² Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958), 32.

orthodox mainstream, I will use the word Gnostic as a sort of blanket term in order to describe the group(s) that once shared the belief in the importance of one's *gnōsis* and in the inherent corruption of the material world (corresponding to the sanctity of the spiritual), just as they now share the label of "heretic."

Orthodoxy and heresy, it must be remembered, are anachronistic terms concerning the first few centuries after the crucifixion, as early Christianity was never so neatly divided into these competing factions. Such labels are clear only in hindsight. Also, it remained unclear for some time who would come out of this sectarian struggle as orthodox and who as heretic. It must also be remembered that the alleged heretic of the time saw himself/herself as a true Christian. And yet there was vehement disagreement over the nature of true Christian belief. Why? What made Gnosticism so different? This is a complicated question with an equally complicated answer. To oversimplify, much of the dispute came down to the nature of God--the creator God of *Genesis*, commonly called the Demi-urge in many Gnostic texts. That this God was not seen as the true (or only) God is perhaps the primary reason early polemicists like Irenaeus (late second century) and Tertullian (160-230 C.E.) rejected Gnosticism so fervently. This (coupled with the perception that the Gnostics believed salvation to come from within, and as such failed in the eyes of the orthodox to acknowledge the significance of the crucifixion) renders the often scathing words of the polemicists' attacks more understandable.⁵³ This is certainly the case when one considers the fear of martyrdom, a punishment meted out to those who firmly believed in the corporeal nature of the crucifixion/resurrection, an

⁵³ For discussion on early orthodox views of Gnostic belief, see King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 26-27, 44-47; Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 28-29, 121-123, 144-145; and Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 167.

event denied in part by the Gnostics who held docetic-oriented (anti-physical) views and generally believed the material realm to be inherently corrupt.

With this in mind, my task in this chapter is to determine whether or not the Magdalene can be rightly viewed as having a Gnostic layer as part of her cumulative character. This must be determined in order to demonstrate further the progressive nature of Mary's role as she slowly grows into her fleshed out medieval persona, the traditional Mary who is not disconnected from, but rather added to, her previous textual layers. Subsequently, it must also be determined whether or not texts such as the gospels of *Thomas*, *Philip*, and *Mary*, as well as *The Dialogue of the Savior*, and the *Pistis Sophia*, texts that feature Mary's character, should be called "Gnostic" or rather simply "non-canonical." If termed non-canonical, it is reasonable to propose that these texts were excluded from the canon due to their curious message. Non-canonical does not, however, carry with it the same implications as the term Gnostic, which is a term consistently invoked by orthodox Christian rhetoric as "false," and hence is pejorative not descriptive. If Gnostic, is it the case that these texts were rejected from the canon because they were written by opposing forces within the proto-Christian community as a response (or even rebuttal) to the texts now included in the canon? If so, the Mary of the Gnostic texts can be viewed as a character employed to contest what was slowly emerging as catholic orthodoxy. There is no definitive way to determine this, and yet what we know of the cultural milieu of the first few centuries seems to support the idea.

In this setting, one does not call a female member of one's *own* community dishonorable, shameful, or unchaste in any way. Rather, this is done to the female

members of one's opponent's community in order to shame the opposing faction.⁵⁴ With this in mind when considering Mary's reputation in early polemic sources,⁵⁵ it is reasonable to propose that the figure of Mary was viewed by some as an opponent to the development of orthodoxy. As such, it may be appropriate to tentatively label as Gnostic the texts of *Thomas*, *Philip*, and *Mary*, *The Dialogue of the Savior*, and the *Pistis Sophia*, in that they present a point of view in conflict with the canonical texts.

With this precarious answer in hand, it must be stressed that neither orthodox nor Gnostic existed as an identifiable religion at the time these texts were composed. And yet, because these categories do exist for the modern audience, and because her posthumous character was appropriated by the authors of these texts, the Gnostic role of Mary must be viewed with this in mind: the Gnostic texts that feature the Magdalene are labeled as Gnostic simply because all expound to some degree the common belief in the importance of *gnôsis* in regards to salvation. Also, because most were found together at Nag Hammadi, these texts have been placed in the same ill-fitting category. As such, they are only very superficially Gnostic, for in their pages there is no direct mention of the deceitful nature of the creator God, a telling mark of many Gnostic works.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ The importance of the honor/shame dichotomy must be stressed here. In this early period, women's chastity/honor had a direct bearing on the men's reputations within a given family/community. As such, it seems odd that Mary would be considered a whore in some early Christian communities if she was considered a proponent of their particular brand of Christianity. For this reason, it seems likely that she was initially viewed *not* as a member of the emerging orthodox community but rather as a member of the heretical or Gnostic faction. In other words, it seems likely that Mary was viewed as a member of a community that the mainstream Christians wanted to shame. See Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28.

⁵⁵ Irenaeus directly equates the teaching of Mary with false teaching in *Against Heresies* 1.25.6. See also Kraemer and D'Angelo, 342. This is significant in that a woman regarded as a false teacher was also often regarded as sexually licentious. See pages 84-86 of the chapter *The Medieval Magdalene*.

⁵⁶ The *Gospel of Philip* does indirectly allude to the 'Demi-urge,' the creator-God of *Genesis*. *Philip* 74:10 says, "when *He* said, 'eat this, do not eat that,' it became the beginning of death." Also, *Philip* 75:4 says, "The world came about through a mistake." Both verses implicitly find fault with the Demi-urge, a compelling reason to label this text as Gnostic.

So now, the question remains. Can the figure of the Magdalene be fairly characterized as Gnostic? To answer this complex question, the Gnostic texts will be examined, texts in which Mary “has been given a voice that is powerful, insistent, and courageous,”⁵⁷ as she is one of their more prominent characters. But what exactly does this outspoken Mary have to say? This will be answered by excerpts from the gospels of *Thomas*, *Philip*, and *Mary*, as well as *The Dialogue of the Savior*, and the *Pistis Sophia*.⁵⁸ These five works add further multifaceted layers to Mary’s character, for within them she speaks very different lines than her canonical counterpart.

The Gnostic gospels in question were written in the names of Thomas, Philip, and Mary. The Gospel of *Thomas*, which derives from the latter half of the first century as do the canonical gospels, is a collection of Jesus’ sayings and not a story of his life. As such there is no crucifixion/resurrection scene, and hence no protophany.⁵⁹ This is because, generally speaking, authority in Gnostic circles did not stem from witnessing the resurrection, as a belief in bodily resurrection was absent from this docetic system which viewed the material/fleshly world as corrupt. Jesus would instead return in spirit and/or be seen in visions.⁶⁰ In the absence of a resurrection or protophany, the significance of Mary of Magdala is presented in a decidedly different light. In *Thomas*, she is portrayed as a member of the group around Jesus, i.e., she is on par with the male disciples rather than in a supporting role. She is an active presence in the conversation, asking questions of Jesus alongside the others.

⁵⁷ Schaberg, 141.

⁵⁸ These texts are dated as follows: *Thomas*, latter half of the first century; *Philip*, third century; *Mary*, second century; *Dialogue*, second century; *Pistis Sophia*, third century.

⁵⁹ Instead, leadership is directly bequeathed by Jesus to James the Just in 12:1-2.

⁶⁰ Given orthodoxy’s stress on the bodily resurrection, the absence of this pivotal event is perhaps another pressing reason these gospels were not included in the canon.

To come to the point, in *Thomas* Mary is not merely the canonical messenger. This text adds another layer to her developing character as she becomes a prominent member of the group surrounding Jesus. This is evinced in her dispute with Peter as seen in texts like *Thomas* 114. This scene is known primarily for its disclosure of the apparent dispute between Peter and Mary, a dispute that will surface in many of the Gnostic texts. Here Peter says, “Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life.” To this Jesus replies, “I will guide her to make her male.” This response makes even the most casual feminist cringe, and yet the context in which this was spoken must be noted, albeit briefly due to its complexity. To oversimplify, this was a world in which the feminine was symbolically viewed as the representative of the corrupted material realm, whereas the male was seen to represent the purer spiritual realm. Hence, “making one male” implied the transcendence of the material and a return to the spiritual--the general goal of the Gnostic thinker. The issue of gender transcendence is complicated and has many possible interpretations, yet we must revisit this at a later point. For now, it will simply be said that the disparagement of the physical and stress on the spiritual within *Thomas* does place the text, as well as Mary’s character, loosely in the Gnostic category, thereby adding a Gnostic layer to Mary’s development. Can the same be said for the *Gospel of Philip*?

In this gospel, Mary is introduced in 59:8-9 as “the one who was called his companion.”⁶¹ The term ‘companion,’ which has sparked much debate, is believed to be a translation of the Greek term *koinōnos*, meaning perhaps marriage partner, co-worker, business partner, friend, companion in faith, or simply participant. In *II Corinthians*

⁶¹James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1990), 145.

8:23, the term likely means evangelical co-worker; in *Philemon* 1:7, a partner in the faith; and in less prominent works such as *Malachi* 2:14 and *III Macabees* 4:6, the term implies a marriage partner. It is not possible to determine the meaning of *koinōnos* as it is intended in *Philip*.

The contentious aspect of the term is, of course, marriage partner. This translation does not appear in all sources, such as the Liddell and Scott *Greek-English Lexicon*,⁶² and yet it seems reasonable to assume that something beyond a companion-in-faith or disciple/teacher relationship is intended, as such a relationship would easily have been expressed by more common terms, such as *mathētes* (student-disciple) or *apostolos* (apostle). Also, this term is problematic in that the Nag Hammadi text of *Philip* is in Coptic, whereas *koinōnos* is a Greek term. *Philip* was probably written in Syria, so it likely was Greek in its original form, but there is no extant Greek manuscript. So, why all the uproar about a Greek term when its Coptic equivalent is what one sees in the extant Nag Hammadi manuscript?⁶³ This is an odd situation at best, and hopelessly convoluted by countless scholarly (and not-so-scholarly) opinions. As such, it is not possible to translate *koinōnos* definitively, nor its Coptic equivalent.

Whichever meaning is more aptly applied to Mary, the essence of the word hinges on the idea of sharing something in common.⁶⁴ Clearly, the Mary one sees in the texts did share a special bond with Jesus, as no one else is referred to in this way, and yet the nature of this relationship is made uncertain by the multiple meanings of the word *koinōnos*, a term which may not be as broad as is alleged in some sources.

⁶² Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon: Vol. I* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1940), 383.

⁶³ Antii Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1996), 154-156.

⁶⁴ Schaberg, 152.

If ‘marriage partner’ is a possible translation, I must pause here to explore briefly the first-century symbolism associated with the notion of the symbolic marital union and, consequently, that of the fallen woman.⁶⁵ In this system of thought, the soul was represented as a fallen woman, specifically a prostitute, who could only be saved by a male redeemer figure. The union of the fallen female soul with the male redeemer was a common way of representing salvation. One couple in particular was recognized as a tangible symbol of this salvific union: the vague figure of Simon Magus and his companion Helen.⁶⁶ Jesus and Mary were likewise seen as symbols of the redeemer and fallen soul and were often popularly compared to Simon and Helen, who are discussed at length in the writings of Irenaeus.⁶⁷

The Gospel of Philip presents this symbolic union rather ambiguously. However, Mary’s performance *can* be interpreted as that of a wife--even if only on the symbolic level. It seems that her role is to play one-half of the union prescribed by the Gnostic notion of the sacramental bridal chamber, or syzygy, a symbolic union meant to represent the pre-Fall unity of mankind before the separation of Eve from Adam’s side (a union that implies an androgynous and asexual state). As stated in *Philip* 65, when man and woman are so united, they cannot easily be defiled. Mary’s partner in this alleged union, Jesus, is said to have “loved her more than the other disciples” and to have “kissed her often” according to *Philip* 63:33-36. Whether a symbolic or a literal kiss, it was “by a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ For discussion of the soul as represented by a fallen woman, or prostitute, see PHEME PERKINS, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minn., MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993), 171-174.

⁶⁶ Simon is mentioned briefly in *Acts* 8:9-25 and later described in detail by Irenaeus, who also discusses at length the character of Helen, a woman believed to have been the reincarnated Helen of Troy. Eusebius describes Simon as “the first architect of all heresy,” in *History of the Church*, II.13.5-15.1.

⁶⁷ See Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*, I.23.3.

⁶⁸ *Gospel of Philip* 59:3-4.

This of course, raises the question of sexual relations between Jesus and Mary. If their relationship can be described as a marriage in any way, this is a fair question and yet one impossible to answer. Though no one can know exactly what happened between Jesus and Mary, one can read closely as this text adds another layer to the character of Mary, that of the spiritually symbolic wife.

What one sees in *Philip* is a gospel that berates physical sexuality and places the state of virgin celibacy upon the highest gilt pedestal. This, coupled with the fact that many groups of proto-Christians called for a withdrawal from or a shunning of the corrupted material realm, does not bode well for the physical aspects of marriage, not to mention the fact that this gospel allows only “virgins” to enter the symbolic bridal chamber.⁶⁹ Also, according to *Philip* 81:34-82:10, defiled women are *any* women who have participated in sexual intercourse, and such women are not allowed in the bridal chamber. Thus, it is not unreasonable to say that the relationship *Philip* portrays between Jesus and Mary may have been seen as a symbolic and likely celibate marriage in so far as sexuality is presented in the text at all.⁷⁰

Such a symbolic marriage represents the Gnostic notion of syzygy, mentioned above as the primordial union that was humanity’s naturally androgynous state before

⁶⁹ Whether or not the text is referring here to symbolic or physical virginity is uncertain. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is referred to in 55:24-30 as a virgin, but as *not* having conceived by the Holy Spirit. Whether or not this implies that she conceived Jesus physically or in some spiritual manner is indeterminate. Later in the text, however, Joseph is identified as Jesus’ father (*Philip* 73:9-14). The text is, again, ambiguous. Nonetheless, even a symbolic virginity demeans material sexuality to some extent.

⁷⁰ Whatever assumptions are made, it must be remembered that the characters within the texts are presented in such a way as to support the beliefs of the author and may not reflect what happened historically. As such, while it may be easy to assume that the relationship between Jesus and Mary was a symbolic union/marriage, it is well nigh impossible to determine whether or not there was any such relationship in reality. It does *not*, however, seem like a stretch to say that there was something of a special bond between them as this is preserved in one form or another in several texts, perhaps as evidence of a genuine preserved memory.

Eve was separated from Adam's side.⁷¹ Such primordial androgyny and asexual gender transcendence, believed to be the state of humanity before the Fall, comes up time and again in Gnostic texts and was represented by the bridal chamber in which humanity is symbolically reunited with its pure spiritual source.⁷² The *Gospel of Philip* seems to present Mary and Jesus as one such symbolic union. Their relationship, however, is veiled in mystery as the *Gospel of Philip* is an incomplete and ambiguous text that leaves the nature of the relationship between Jesus and Mary open to interpretation (perhaps intentionally?).

Whether sexual or celibate, symbolic or literal, one element stands out of this text: Mary was Jesus' *koinōnos*,⁷³ which means at the least that she shared a unique bond with him, a bond that stands whether the term is interpreted as marriage partner or not. This is what must be remembered, for it may be the case that such a bond was *believed* to have existed between them by some in the proto-Christian community. With its ambiguous portrayal of this relationship, *Philip* has added another layer to Mary's character, a layer that casts her as the "companion" of Christ. The significance of this lies in the possibility that such a relationship can be interpreted symbolically, with Mary as representative of the fallen soul (regarded popularly as a prostitute), that is saved from sin by a redeemer figure named Jesus. Within this notion of the salvific union, we may have in *Philip* the first allusion to Mary as a prostitute, even if this is only symbolic.

⁷¹ Maisch, 22.

⁷² This was a fairly common notion in antiquity among philosophers. The most popular representation of pre-fall androgyny can be found in the speech by Aristophanes as told in Plato's *Symposium*.

⁷³ Because nowhere in the extant literature is anyone else referred to as *koinōnos*, it is not unreasonable to assume that Jesus and Mary viewed no other figures as a *koinōnos*. This is, however, just an assumption and, given the varied meanings of the word, it certainly would have been possible to have had more than one *koinōnos*. And yet, because Mary is the only figure given this appellation, it is certainly possible that she can be seen as Jesus' only *koinōnos*. If she is the only one, theirs is a special relationship indeed.

Whether this interpretation is employed or not, something was different in this relationship, something existed between the two of them, at least according to *Philip*, that was not a part of Jesus' relationship with any other follower, as no one else is referred to by this term. For this reason, Mary became an object of resentment for the other disciples, all of whom likely wanted to be favored by their much-loved teacher. In the first few verses of chapter 64, the disciples ask, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" In 64:5-10 Jesus replies enigmatically, "Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light and he who is blind will remain in darkness." Perhaps this implies that Jesus has seen Mary in the light and hence understands her worthiness whereas the disciples have remained blind to her; or perhaps Jesus is implying that Mary herself has seen the light of his teaching while they have not. On the other hand, because *Philip* was composed relatively late, perhaps as late as the third century, this statement could be a reference to the rising power of orthodoxy which is equated here with blindness for not having understood Mary's (Gnosticism's) true worth.⁷⁴ If this is the case, it is important to note the persistence of the belief in the significance of the Magdalene, for here she is presented two centuries after the fact as being Jesus' special companion, and also as a possible representative of Gnosticism. Either way, conflict between Mary and the other disciples is evident, as can be seen in the *Pistis Sophia*. Before we turn to this text, however, we must first watch as Mary shifts from the role of companion to that of authority figure in the gospel named for her.

⁷⁴ Mary was often viewed as symbolic of the Gnostic position. See Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 14 and 64-65; as well as Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1993), 36.

Mary, remembered by Philip as Jesus' *koinōnos*, gains another layer in *The Gospel of Mary*, a text in which she is cast in a leadership role, a layer of her character that was nearly forgotten for 1500 years.⁷⁵ This gospel begins with Jesus' address to a group of troubled disciples, a comparatively more composed Mary among them. Jesus quickly leaves with the implication that he will not return. As the distraught disciples fret over their own safety, Mary easily takes charge of the situation, comforting and encouraging the others. At first, all are comfortable with Mary's outspokenness, as if this were nothing out of the ordinary. Peter then implores her to share with them the teachings of Jesus that only she had received. Clearly, prior to this Mary had been given privileged information by Jesus, perhaps in the first six pages of the manuscript which are unfortunately missing. In 6:3, Mary answers, "I will report to you as much as I remember that you don't know."⁷⁶ Mary asserts that she has seen Jesus in a vision and then another four pages are missing.

The text resumes with Mary still talking, now about the ascension of the soul as it is released from the material realm. Peter and Andrew immediately turn on Mary, for they do not accept her message as valid but as incongruous with Jesus' thought. Peter, here possibly symbolic of the orthodox position, takes the disagreement a step further and says, "Has the savior spoken secretly to a woman and not openly so that we would all hear? Surely he did not wish to indicate that she is more worthy than we."⁷⁷ Curiously, the stress on gender in the previous verse is more prominent in the later Coptic translation

⁷⁵ This number is based on the age of the earliest manuscript of *Mary*, which is dated from the fifth century. See Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003), 3.

⁷⁶ Miller, 363.

⁷⁷ *Gospel of Mary* 10:3-4. See Miller, 365. More time will be spent on the symbolic value of the characters of both Peter and Mary in the section *Apostolic Dispute* on pages 50-68.

than in the earlier Greek, where it is Mary's teaching that is challenged rather than her teaching *as a woman*.⁷⁸ In other words, the earlier text was more concerned with the teaching itself, whereas the later was more concerned with the gender of the teacher. This likely reflects a change in the status of women in the early Christian communities in the century or so that elapsed between the drafting of these two manuscripts, not to mention the regional diversity between Egypt and Syria. Indeed, the Greek text as a whole seems to imply that leadership should be based on spiritual achievement rather than on gender, something more directly challenged in the later Coptic text.⁷⁹

In both manuscripts, however, Levi quickly comes to the defense of the now weeping Mary, and chastises both Peter and Andrew for their harsh words. After all, reasons Levi, "if the savior considered her to be worthy, who are you to disregard her? For he knew her completely and loved her devotedly."⁸⁰ Regrettably, in the midst of its enigmatic teachings and obvious dispute, this gospel raises as many questions as it answers. And yet one consistent certainty remains: All of Jesus' followers knew that Mary shared a unique and intimate bond with Jesus. Indeed, theirs was a relationship which sowed envy among the remaining disciples as evinced in the bitter words of Andrew, and especially of Peter. Of course, it is impossible to determine whether or not such bitterness ever existed among the disciples, but it does seem likely given the recurrence of this theme in the texts. If historical, such dispute can be used as evidence for the importance of Mary's figure in the early years of Christianity.

⁷⁸ Miller, 359. Also, see Schaberg, 168.

⁷⁹ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 55-56. This is one of the more significant features of the *Gospel of Mary* which seems to ask the overarching question: Should authority be based on discipleship and/or commission, or should it rather be based on spiritual understanding? The implications of this question are obvious as the former is the basis of authority for the orthodox while the latter is more important to the various Gnostic groups. Here we seem to have another example of Peter standing as representative of the orthodox position while Mary is representative of the Gnostic position.

⁸⁰ *Gospel of Mary* 10:9. See Miller, 365.

Furthermore, the fact that the Mary of *Mary* receives private instruction from Jesus and then feels free to impart this wisdom to the disciples after his departure is also indicative of a high position in this group. That she does not waver upon receiving the vision (in 7:3-4) earns her high praise from Jesus and indicates once again her superior spirituality as, according to ancient thought, only one of high moral and mental ability could receive any such vision.⁸¹ This spiritually elite status earned her a special place beside the savior, and as a result, in *front* of the others. Peter in particular finds her elevated position unacceptable.⁸²

Thus it would seem that the *Gospel of Mary* places Mary of Magdala in a position of leadership among the disciples. Was she ever such a figure in the minds of early Christians? This question cannot be answered but only suggested by Mary's high standing in this text. If the historical is ultimately unobtainable, perhaps the next text, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, can reveal further layers of Mary's role. In the *Dialogue*, Mary is part of an elite group, hand-picked by Christ for a particular revelation. In chapters 17-41 of Miller's version of the gospel, she is taken aside by Jesus, along with Matthew and Judas, and shown "the end of heaven and earth" in a sort of external view that allows them to see the workings of the cosmos. All in all, roughly one-third (fourteen) of all direct references to a disciple are made to Mary. Of these fourteen, Mary responds thirteen times in a prominent and convincing tone, earning her the highest compliment paid to any disciple in the text: "She spoke this word as a woman who fully

⁸¹ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 84. See also Marjanen, 111.

⁸² Interestingly, Thomas also received secret teachings from Jesus, but was afraid to reveal them to the disciples. In *The Gospel of Thomas* 13:8, Thomas says, "If I tell you one of the sayings he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me." From this, it seems that Jesus' secret teachings were very different than his teachings to the disciples in general, hence the reason Mary's revelation garnered antipathy from Peter and Andrew.

understood.”⁸³ Mary receives another highly positive affirmation from Jesus himself when he says in 24:2 that she has “come to reveal the greatness of the revealer.”⁸⁴ This is an intriguing verse for its possible implications. Here, Mary is given the task of spreading Jesus’ teachings, i.e., she is directly assigned a missionary and even leadership role in the coming religious movement. That a position of leadership is a possibility adds another layer to Mary’s textual role.

There is further textual evidence that lends itself to the idea that Mary was a leader in some capacity. For instance, Mary is not assigned the typical savior-to-disciple dialogue arrangement.⁸⁵ Rather, hers is the role of clarifier and even interpreter. In short, she is not given only interrogative lines, but rather her voice is demonstrative and even authoritative. This is indicative of deep spiritual wisdom and understanding, a crucial component for anyone purported to have led a religious movement that focuses explicitly on inward spiritual cultivation. Regrettably, one cannot determine with any certainty whether Mary was ever believed to have been such a leader from the *Dialogue*, for this text, like other Gnostic texts, only hints at the possibility.

This possibility is further suggested in the enigmatic text *Pistis Sophia*, which means “Faith-Wisdom.” What layers will be added to the character of Mary in a text named for a female manifestation of the divine?⁸⁶ What is found is another layer

⁸³ *Dialogue of the Savior* 20:2. See Miller, 353 as well as Brock, 98.

⁸⁴ In 31:2, Jesus says, “the one who sees is the one who reveals.” This is likely a reference to himself as he alludes repeatedly throughout the Gnostic gospels to the ability to see in the abstract sense. Interestingly, it need not be only Jesus who is considered a revealer, for (in the Gnostic tradition) both savior and disciple can become equals, as seen in *The Apocryphon of James* 5:19-20 as well as *The Gospel of Philip* 67:26-27.

⁸⁵ Brock, 99.

⁸⁶ *Pistis Sophia* is a divine entity alleged (within the text of *Pistis Sophia*) to have fallen from the heavenly realm but to have repented, and as such to be “destined for salvation and deliverance.” See Marvin Meyer, *The Gospels of Mary* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2004), 64. This text was composed sometime in the third century, so it is relatively late compared to other texts. I have chosen to include it because of the

implying leadership, for Mary takes the lead as this text's foremost player. In fact, she speaks out by interpreting the sometimes enigmatic teachings of Jesus, for which he praises her repeatedly. What follows is a sampling of Jesus' praise of Mary in *Pistis Sophia*: "Well done, Mary. You are more blessed than all women on earth, because you will be the fullness of fullnesses and the completion of completions." Jesus also says, "Well done, Mary, pure spiritual woman. This is the interpretation of the Word."⁸⁷ Mary is called "the happy one, beautiful in her speaking," and "pure spiritual Mariham," as well as "inheritor of the light."⁸⁸ Also, Jesus describes her as "straining towards the heavens more than all [her] brothers."⁸⁹ Obviously, what we are presented with here is a woman believed to have been actively involved in Jesus' ministry, a woman singled out by her group's founder, at least in this text, as the one who most clearly understood his teachings.

Here I must stress the significance of the Gnostic construction of the textual Mary. Though the Gnostic texts do not state explicitly who this woman was, or exactly what she was doing, one can glean important information about the formative years of Christianity by close examination of her character. For instance, it is possible to discern more clearly here than in the canonical gospels evidence suggesting a dispute over religious authority following Jesus' death. The clash between Mary and Peter reveals that, true to form, the sudden absence of a charismatic leader created a power vacuum which instigated a struggle for authority among his followers. Whether Peter and Mary were actually opposed in an early authority struggle, or were simply symbolic

unique role it gives to Mary of Magdala. That such a text was written as late as the third century is a testament to the fact that the belief in her significance was not so easily forgotten.

⁸⁷ Meyer, 66-69.

⁸⁸ Haskins, 41.

⁸⁹ Haskins, 49.

figureheads chosen by competing proto-Christian factions remains to be seen, but it is clear that the struggle for authority and form in the first few centuries of Christianity was certainly real, and what is now known as orthodoxy emerged as the winner.

But what of the losers of this struggle, those proto-Christians represented by the figure of Mary of Magdala who were branded by posterity as Gnostic and even heretical? This is where the significance of the Gnostic Mary comes into play. By careful consideration of her character, as it is presented in the recently discovered Nag Hammadi texts, the voice of the so-called heretic can be heard. She gives voice to their teachings whereas previously one could only learn of the Gnostic experience through the skewed words of their orthodox opponents, primarily polemicists such as Irenaeus and Tertullian. By looking closely at the Gnostic Mary, one can take a more direct look at this once-buried chapter of the Christian past.

And now to return briefly to the *Pistis Sophia*. In its conclusion, Peter again complains of the favoritism shown to Mary. He protests on behalf of the others, “we cannot endure this woman who gets in our way and does not let any of us speak, though she talks all the time.” Jesus quickly reprimands Peter and declares, “Let anyone in whom the power of the spirit has arisen...come forward and speak.”⁹⁰ This and further instances of conflict between Peter and Mary will be examined in the following chapter.

In closing this chapter, it is important that any reader taking in the preceding texts understand that Gnosticism was not in any way an ancient haven for our modern conceptions of feminism. The Gnostic Mary cannot be the heroine that so many modern people want her to be. She cannot be an idealized feminist defending early Christianity against the onslaught of a misogynistic and patriarchal orthodoxy. Rather, she is a

⁹⁰ Meyer, 68.

believer in a faith that sought to transcend the material restrictions of gender altogether. In truth, rather than embrace her femininity she chose to shun it, or so the Gnostic texts seem to imply.

Further implied is the notion that for a woman to be considered a legitimate spiritual authority, she had to overcome first the limitations of her gender by eschewing as much as possible the social and physical aspects of her femininity. Two prominent examples of women renouncing their feminine sexuality can be found in the lives of Thecla and Perpetua.⁹¹ Thecla is said to have left her marriage and vowed celibacy in order to preach the gospel message alongside Paul. It seems that in order to be taken seriously, she had to leave traditional gender roles behind.⁹² Perpetua, the famous martyr, had to likewise give up her gender identification as this was an “obstacle to her becoming a true martyr.” Thus, Perpetua was andronized through a vision (despite the fact that she had just given birth!) just before her martyrdom. In the language of the day, her gender had been overcome and “transformed into maleness.”⁹³ This falls in line well with the Gnostic texts that call for a transformation of the female into the male, such as *Thomas* 114:2-3, in which Jesus says, “I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female that makes herself male will enter the domain of heaven.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ According to the apocryphal text, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla is said to have traveled and evangelized with Paul during the first century. Perpetua was martyred in Rome in the late second century and is featured in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, 8.1. On Thecla, see Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 26-30. On Perpetua, see Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2004), 118-123.

⁹² Witherington, 195.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹⁴ This is a common notion in proto-Christianity and remained so even in orthodox circles as evinced in *Galatians* 3:28, where Paul asserts that there is “neither male nor female” as all became one under Christ.

This and other verses like it grew out of the contemporaneous view that the female represented and even embodied the corrupt material realm, whereas the male represented and embodied the pure spiritual realm. Ultimately, the female was to be united with the male, but not in an equal sense. Rather, the female was subsumed into the male and as such was eventually lost.⁹⁵ In fact, in order to achieve the spiritual aim of Gnosticism “women had to lose their femaleness in order to be subsumed into the larger ‘male’ group.”⁹⁶ It must be pointed out, however, that the male disciples were also required to “become men” in the sense that they had to transcend physical limitations/desires and “put on the perfect man,” meaning the purely spiritual man. Levi tells the disciples in *The Gospel of Mary* 18:15-20 that they should not attack Mary for her gender and should not concern themselves with such material limitations as all must symbolically become male.⁹⁷ Indeed, Mary had already reminded them of their transformation in 9:20 where, in an effort to comfort the bereaved disciples, she says, “Do not weep and do not grieve...for he has prepared *us* and made *us* into men.”⁹⁸ For the most part, however, because of this symbolism, femininity quickly became equated with evil, whereas masculinity became equated with spiritual goodness. With this viewpoint present in the culture, it is no small wonder that the female was viewed with suspicion, particularly in religious/spiritual matters, despite the fact that both genders had to become male symbolically in order to attain spiritual enlightenment. Such seems to have been the achievement of the Gnostic Mary.

Again, a sense of spiritual perfection included a sense of gender transcendence for both men and women, indicative of a transcendence of the material altogether.

⁹⁵ Meyer, 81-82.

⁹⁶ Haskins, 40.

⁹⁷ Taken from the *Gospel of Mary* 18:15-20, as translated in Robinson's *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, at 527, which more clearly emphasizes the need for universal gender transcendence.

⁹⁸ *Gospel of Mary* 9:20. See Robinson, 525.

Because of this, the modern feminist will have a hard time claiming this Mary as an early spokesperson for female leadership *as such* in the church. On the other hand, she must be acknowledged for having spiritually overcome what was then seen as the very real barrier erected by one's physical gender. Nonetheless, while it is likely that members of the proto-Christian community believed her to have been a remarkable woman, as the stubborn persistence of her presence in the early texts attests, it is just as likely that she was *not* calling for the equality of women *as women*, but instead as non-gendered Gnostic Christians. Rather, she was a pathfinder for the woman who could transcend and overcome her gender in order to be accepted into the male-dominated realm of the religious. To say this is not to make light of whatever role she played in the early Christian community, but rather to point out that hers was a role hard-won, in that she had to give up a part of herself in order to achieve it. These texts lead us to believe that what she gave up was her femininity--by overcoming social conceptions of gender and sexuality. All of this hints at the possibility that Mary was not on equal footing with the men *as a woman*, but rather that she was on a spiritual par with the other disciples as a non-gendered/asexual companion-in-faith. In other words, the Mary of these texts did not achieve a position of prominence as a woman who embraced her feminine gender, but rather as one who overcame the material and social limitations of that gender.

Despite the fact that it is hard for some in the modern audience to digest a Mary who was a leader *not* as a woman who embraced and even promoted her gender, but rather as a non-gendered and thereby spiritually elite figure, this was of immense significance to those communities of proto-Christians whose purpose it was to overcome the limitations of the physical/material realm and who would consequently only follow

one who had allegedly overcome such limitations already. In short, Mary may not be the ideal model of religious leadership when viewed through the lens of modern feminism, but her character in these texts should be viewed as that of a leader in some capacity, one who overcame the obstacles presented by her particular cultural-religious milieu.

I will now turn to the apostolic dispute seen in the texts. This was a dispute in which none were yet deemed orthodox or otherwise, a dispute that has the characters of Peter and Mary pitted one against the other in a struggle for authority that, unbeknownst to them, would chart the course of the next two thousand years of Christian history.

Apostolic Dispute

It is tempting indeed for the feminist reader to declare no one as better-suited to take over after Jesus' death than the follower Christ himself designated, in the *Pistis Sophia*, as the "inheritor of the light." And yet, tempting as such conclusions are, one still cannot assume to know the exact nature of the actual role being played out by Mary of Magdala historically. Nonetheless, when observing her in one text after another, it is possible to reconstruct a hypothetical role for Mary, an endeavor that sheds much needed light on the first few decades of Christianity, as well as on the development of Mary's character.

Very generally, what one can propose when placing the reticent canonical Mary beside the outspoken Gnostic Mary is that there were at least two fundamentally different modes of thought in the proto-Christian past: the so-called Gnostic, that revered the figure of Mary of Magdala, whether symbolically or literally, and the orthodox, that marginalized her almost to the point of anonymity. What the texts reveal of the historical situation in which they were written, in reference to the contrasting characterizations of Mary, is that there was a very real dispute between the proto-Christian sects that revered Mary as an authoritative figure, and those which asserted that the inheritor of Jesus' authority was Simon (called Peter in Greek, and regarded popularly as the "rock" upon whom the church was built). In short, the texts may reflect a genuine historical conflict

within the proto-Christian community.⁹⁹ It must be stressed, however, that this literature can be used as a lens through which to view the often querulous history of early Christianity, but not necessarily the history of the characters within the texts.

What the audience does see in the preserved texts is a general theme of contention between Peter and Mary that likely reflects the animosity felt by the would-be orthodox toward the issue of the status of women in the growing church.¹⁰⁰ This contention is veiled in the canon, but one can nonetheless see traces of it in the disciples' disbelief of the women regarding the empty tomb, particularly in *Luke* 24:11, where we read that "their story seemed nonsense to them, so they refused to believe the women."¹⁰¹ Further traces of this issue can be found in the absence altogether of the women's witness of the resurrection in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Indeed, nowhere in his writings is a woman credited with having received a resurrection appearance, an absence all the more glaring given the prominence of the female witnesses, especially Mary, within the four gospels.

More than traces are left in the Gnostic texts which, according to Brock, suggest "that the issue at stake involves leadership roles for women,"¹⁰² as embodied by the consistency of Peter's denial of the feminine which is in turn signified by Mary of Magdala. Meyer gets to the point quickly and says that "this hostility of Peter toward Mary... does reflect conflicting attitudes regarding women's roles and women's leadership in the church."¹⁰³ On a symbolic level, one can say that Mary served (and still

⁹⁹ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 85.

¹⁰⁰ This is likely because most texts that present a confrontation between Peter and Mary involve issues of gender, namely Mary's gender and whether or not this negates the validity of her message.

¹⁰¹ Miller, 172.

¹⁰² Brock, 84.

¹⁰³ Meyer, viii.

serves) as the representative of the female followers of Jesus, and more importantly, as the symbol for the comparative prominence of women in early non-orthodox Christian communities as opposed to the more orthodox-minded Christian factions.¹⁰⁴ In this light, the dispute evident in the textual tradition reflects the contextual dispute among early Christians regarding the roles of women and competing conceptions of spiritual authority. At least this is how it appears to the modern audience. It may or may not have seemed this way to those involved in the dispute.

In looking at this conflict, I will focus on those texts where Peter expressed a heated aversion for Mary, namely in the gospels of *Thomas*, *Philip*, and *Mary*, as well as in the *Pistis Sophia*. In *The Gospel of Thomas* 114 Peter says, “Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life.” In *The Gospel of Philip*, Mary becomes an object of resentment and envy for the male disciples as a group. In the first few verses of chapter 64, the disciples ask, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” The focus is on Peter again in the *Gospel of Mary*, where he says, “Has the savior spoken secretly to a woman and not openly so that we would all hear? Surely he did not wish to indicate that she is more worthy than we.”¹⁰⁵ Likewise, in the *Pistis Sophia* Peter complains, “we cannot endure this woman who gets in our way and does not let any of us speak, though she talks all the time.” Jesus rebukes Peter saying, “Let anyone in whom the power of the spirit has arisen... come forward and speak.”¹⁰⁶

For Pagels, the implications of *The Gospel of Mary* are plain in that Peter and Andrew are clearly symbolic of the orthodox position when they accuse Mary, here representing the Gnostic position, of making up bizarre and incongruous teachings for

¹⁰⁴ Schaberg, 190.

¹⁰⁵ *Mary* 10:3-4. See Miller, 365.

¹⁰⁶ Meyer, 68.

which she claims divine inspiration from Christ himself via a visionary experience of the risen Jesus. Continuing to urge a symbolic interpretation as regards the figures of Mary and Peter, Pagels attests that Mary “stands up” to Peter just as the Gnostics “who take her as their prototype challenge the authority of those priests and bishops who claim to be Peter’s successors.”¹⁰⁷ In short, it is not a stretch for the *modern* audience to look back and view the Gnostic Mary by and large as symbolic of the so-called heretical, and Peter as symbolic of the now orthodox, but it must be remembered that there were no such distinctions in the first few centuries of Christianity. Having said this, one can still view the figures of Peter and Mary as symbolic in the sense that they were used as figureheads for competing factions of proto-Christianity which, with our modern perspective, we now call orthodox and Gnostic and/or heretical.

Going a step beyond symbolism, it is worth noting that the disputes in the above-mentioned texts betray no straightforward literary dependence among them. This means that the tension between Peter and Mary portrayed in these texts likely grew out of separate traditions that endured in widespread areas over many years.¹⁰⁸ With this in mind, it is easy to presume that the textual conflict between the figures of Peter and Mary reveals a very real situation in which one strand of early Christianity allowed for leadership roles for its female adherents while another denied authority to the women in its ranks.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 14. It should be noted that it is Levi rather than the weeping Mary who stands up to Peter and Andrew (*Mary* 10:7-10), but he does so in her name after she sobbingly asks Peter why he doesn’t believe her. Thus the symbolism that Pagels points out is confirmed.

¹⁰⁸ Brock, 104.

¹⁰⁹ To reiterate, issues of gender and authority *are* historical even though the characters of Peter and Mary may not be, in so far as they and/or their dispute is presented in the texts, which, as has been shown, may utilize their characters as symbolic figureheads representative of the historical dispute.

It seems that the question of authority cannot be left aside, authority that involves the contentious issue of protophany. Of note here is the fact that neither Peter nor Mary receives an individual appearance from the risen Jesus within the same text, meaning perhaps that the authors intentionally chose *either* Peter *or* Mary as the recipient of an appearance, but never both. If this is the case, then it seems that the authors intentionally utilized one or the other of these characters as figureheads in order to further their version of Christianity, which in turn (and perhaps unintentionally) served to give a face to these competing factions, for Peter and Mary, in later generations, came to represent the conflict between the orthodox and the Gnostic.

Furthermore, this dispute is a prime example of text reflecting the historical milieu in which it was written as regards the nagging question of apostolic authority vis à vis the contradictory traditions of the premier resurrection appearances attested to either Peter or Mary.¹¹⁰ Though the scenario that unfolded between them, or perhaps just among the conflicting branches of early Christianity, cannot be established with any precision, it can be assumed that there was a definite rivalry between those who believed Mary to have seen the risen Lord first and those who reserved the honor of the protophany for Peter--or at least between those who appropriated these characters as the symbolic figureheads of their proto-Christian faction.

Lest one attempt to claim authority based on Mary's being the premier resurrection witness, as asserted in three of four gospels, an apostolic letter written by Pope John Paul II¹¹¹ reminds us that her role should still be regarded as minor. This letter declares that had Mary of Magdala been the premier or even the *only* witness to the

¹¹⁰ Brock, 102.

¹¹¹ Entitled *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), it is cited by Schaberg, at 224.

resurrected Christ, her function was merely temporary in that she was commissioned only to tell the apostles what she had seen so that they, these “concrete men,” could carry on the work of God. Her mission was to the apostles, whose mission in turn was to the rest of the world. In other words, the authority of Peter and the other men is permanent and public, while the authority of Mary and the other women is temporary and private.¹¹² This letter leaves one with the impression that the orthodox position was--and is--determined to downplay the significance of the role of Mary of Magdala.

But this story is far from over. I will now show how Ann Graham Brock demonstrates what she terms the inverse relationship between the figures of Peter and Mary as this is played out in the gospels of *Luke* and *John*. Brock contends, and I agree in part, that the author of *Luke* displayed an obvious preference for Peter, while the author of *John* preferred Mary of Magdala, and that within this inverse relationship, one is elevated while the other is denigrated. First, I will lay out the complexities Brock reveals regarding the character of Peter as he is represented in *Luke*, and then noticeably diminished in *John*. Because Brock reveals the reverse for the figure of Mary in these same gospels, the treatment of Peter’s character in these gospels must be examined closely for the reason that this relates inversely to their characterization of Mary. With this in mind, I will now look into *Luke*’s and *John*’s characterization of Peter

In *Luke*, the only canonical gospel that credits Peter with the protophany, Peter is consistently privileged by three means, namely supplementation, omission, and alteration.¹¹³ Examples of supplementation can be seen throughout the text as in the instance of Peter’s calling by Jesus in *Luke* 5:1-11. When compared to parallel verses of

¹¹² Schaberg, 224. This was written ten years after the Vatican officially expunged Mary’s allegedly sinful past by erasing accounts of her sinful life from the Roman Breviary. See also Schaberg, 99.

¹¹³ Brock, 19.

the same event in *Matthew* 4:18-20 and *Mark* 1:16-18, it becomes apparent that *Luke* clearly favors Peter. Perhaps most obvious here is the fact that *Luke* takes eleven verses to elaborate on what the three parallel verses in *Mark* and *Matthew* say about Peter's calling. In *Mark* and *Matthew*, Jesus calls both Peter and Andrew, at which point both put down their nets and follow him with neither speaking a word. In *Luke*, however, Andrew is not even mentioned, despite the lengthening of the narration in which Jesus singles Peter out from the group and says to *him alone* in verse 10 "from now on you will catch men." In this verse, the "you" is singular (*esu*) whereas in the parallel passages the "you" is plural (*humas*), indicative of the entire group of disciples.

In *John*, on the other hand, Peter receives no personal call from Jesus. Rather, it is his brother Andrew who brings Peter to Jesus in *John* 1:41-42. This overshadowing of Peter may have been deliberate, as Andrew is introduced first in *John*, and yet he is introduced only in terms of his relation to Peter. *John* 1:40 reads "Andrew, Simon Peter's brother," as if the reader will know who Peter is though he has not yet been introduced.¹¹⁴ Perhaps our author knew well that his audience would be familiar with Peter and so first introducing another character as his brother seemed perfectly sensible, as many would have known who this was. And yet the possibility remains that it could have been intentionally disrespectful in that Peter is not introduced in his own right, nor does he receive a direct call from Jesus. If intentional, the remainder of *John* should have equal or more direct denigrations of Peter. Brock is quick to point out that this is indeed the case.

The next example of the Johannine devaluation of Peter is more notable. The scene in question takes place in chapter six, at the point of Peter's Christological

¹¹⁴ Brock, 42.

confession of faith--or so it was in the other three gospels. In *John*, we have a decidedly less committed Peter. In *Mark* 8:29, *Matthew* 16:16, and *Luke* 9:20 Peter answers Jesus' question "Who do you think I am?" with the Christological confession "you are the Christ" in fundamentally the same way in each gospel. In *John* 6:69, however, Peter says "you are the holy one of God." While this phrase may sound innocuous enough to modern ears, it is not without significance that the only other places this phrase occurs in the gospels is where it is spoken by exorcised demons.¹¹⁵ Couple this with *Mark* 8:33 and *Matthew* 16:23, in which Jesus calls Peter "Satan," and we are presented with a very interesting and troubling situation. Is it the case that there is an underlying tradition hiding within these texts that equates Peter with Satan? That this is a possibility explains why the well-known "Get behind me, Satan!" declaration that Christ yells at Peter in *Mark* and *Matthew* is completely absent from *Luke*.¹¹⁶ Just after this omission, *Luke* again closely parallels *Mark* and *Matthew*, thus indicating that the omission was no accident. It seems to be the case that *Luke* wanted no part in this and so carefully removed this insinuation from his gospel.

An underlying equation of Peter with Satan is certainly a possibility, but it is unfortunately one that must simply be noted, for *John* is not yet finished with his denial of Peter. Upon Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial of him in *John* 13:37-38, Peter has said "I will lay down my life for you" to which Jesus bitterly predicts the denial. Contrast this with *Luke* 22:23, in which Peter says that he will go to prison and death, events supported

¹¹⁵ Brock, 43. The other two verses that utilize this phrase are *Mark* 1:24 and *Luke* 4:34.

¹¹⁶ Brock, 24. While it is the case that *Mark* and *Matthew* as well as *John* serve to deflate the character of Peter in this instance, it should not be assumed that this undermines Brock's hypothesis that *John* is unique in the degree to which this gospel seems to vilify his character, for in *John* she points out several additional instances of Peter's deflation when compared to the other gospels. In general, the reader gets the impression that *Mark* and *Matthew* are more straightforward in their retelling of the scenes related to Peter, whereas *John* exaggerates Peter's flaws just as *Luke* exaggerates his attributes.

by later tradition.¹¹⁷ In *John*, Peter's rashness is heightened by the prediction of the denial while in *Luke* his words are supported by early Christian history.¹¹⁸

In fact, the scene in which Jesus predicts Peter's denial is another telling example of the elevation of Peter in *Luke*. In all four gospels there is an account of the denial, and yet in *Luke* Jesus exonerates Peter for his actions before the denial ever takes place.

Immediately following the prediction in *Luke* 22:32 Jesus says, "And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." Peter will falter, yes, but *Luke* has commissioned him to lead the others nonetheless, to the effect that Peter is redeemed (for the denial) by Jesus himself and subsequently chosen as the leader of the group.¹¹⁹ Having Jesus expressly choose Peter as his successor, despite the latter's failings, appears to be a conscious attempt on the part of the author to clear Peter's name in an incident that very well could have compromised his post-resurrection status, for a denial of Christ could easily have been blown out of proportion by one's opponents as a denial of Christianity itself, which would in turn deprive one of any position of authority within the proto-Christian community. What these texts reveal is that there was some uncertainty as to Peter's legitimacy in the early church, and as such, the author of *Luke* wrote his gospel with the intention of bolstering the somewhat marred character of the Rock.

Getting back to Peter's denial, we find another omission as regards Peter's response to Jesus' prediction. In both *Mark* 14:31 and *Matthew* 26:35, Peter rejects his eventual denial saying, "I will never deny you." This statement is absent in *Luke*. This

¹¹⁷ Brock, 46.

¹¹⁸ *Luke* was written sometime around 90 C.E. See Miller, 6. Peter is said to have been martyred in Rome around 67 C.E. (roughly the same time that *Mark* was composed). Thus *Luke* was composed after the death of Peter and made use of the story of his fate. *John* was likewise composed after Peter's death. It is perhaps impossible to determine whether the author deliberately put false words into Peter's mouth or was simply preserving the tradition as he remembered it.

¹¹⁹ Brock, 21-22.

omission is likely the author's attempt to avoid having Peter say something that proved later to be false.¹²⁰ *Luke* seems intent on avoiding anything that might serve to undermine the character, and hence the authority, of Peter as this was perhaps being questioned in the community in which *Luke* was composed.

Luke continues to bolster Peter's character by omitting any instance of the rebuke of Peter by Jesus as is present in both *Mark* and *Matthew*. For instance, in the scene at Gethsemane in *Mark* 14:37 and *Matthew* 26:40, Jesus singles out Peter and reproaches him for having fallen asleep. This direct rebuke is absent in *Luke* 22:45-46 in which Jesus softens his words considerably and speaks to the disciples as a group and not directly to Peter.¹²¹ Contrast this with the direct singling out of Peter that was seen in the positive calling scene and it becomes apparent that the character of Peter within *Luke* is highlighted when favorable and glossed over when not.

Perhaps the most significant instance of Petrine favoritism in *Luke* comes up in the form of alteration, that is, what some scholars see as an alteration of an existing tradition. The tradition in question is that of the premier resurrection appearance to the women which in *Luke*, on the other hand, is credited to Peter. As discussed here on pages 13-15, the awkwardness of the Lukan resurrection account makes it seem that "Luke has embellished an existing tradition with unusual freedom."¹²² Giving the protophany to Peter while not actually relating this event to the reader, but rather having it merely reported by one group of disciples to another, is an odd way to communicate something of such central importance to the story. Not only does the style of this communication

¹²⁰ Brock, 26.

¹²¹ Brock, 26.

¹²² Brock, 31. Here she is paraphrasing and quoting a long excerpt from Vincent Taylor, *The Passion Narrative of St. Luke: A Critical and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 109-112.

raise eyebrows, so too does the grammar in which it is communicated (see footnote 29). Also, the priority of the appearance to Peter is stressed despite the detail of the appearance on the road to Emmaus, which happens *before* we are told of the appearance to Peter. For Brock, it seems that “the theological agenda of the author takes precedence over the narrative flow of the story.”¹²³

This may be, but difficult questions remain. For instance, why include the detailed account of the Emmaus appearance at all if it was the author’s intent to credit Peter with the first appearance? It seems that the most likely scenario in this instance is textual supplementation. This certainly explains the awkwardness of the narrative flow. But what of Cleopas? Who is this anonymous Greek who is privileged with a resurrection appearance? If this is *Luke*’s way of saying that the gentile Greeks can get an appearance, thus opening up Christianity to a wider audience, it must be stressed that the appearance to Cleopas is not a premier appearance, an honor given to Peter in this gospel. Nor is it an appearance accompanied by specific instruction from Christ, as are the other gospel appearances to the original disciples and Mary. The appearance to Cleopas may simply have been included as our author’s way of bringing his gospel to a Greek audience, and yet even in this more positive scenario one fact remains--Mary of Magdala does not receive a resurrection appearance in *Luke*. This, coupled with the awkwardness of the textual addition of the premier Petrine appearance, makes *Luke*’s intentions appear overtly favorable to Peter, even if this was a later addition to the text.

The interpretations of the closing of *Luke* are endless. But it remains a possibility that the author, or even the redactor, wanted to lend credence to the authority of Peter by awarding him the protophany--and, despite its awkward narrative effect, this fits well

¹²³ Brock, 32.

with the overall Lukan design of Petrine favoritism, a design which has the effect of downplaying the significance of Mary's role.

On the other hand, the closing chapters of *John* award the protophany to Mary alone, while diminishing Peter's character, though it must be noted that Mary is not elevated nor is Peter denigrated to the same scale as the inverse scenario in *Luke*. Nonetheless, there is an inverse relationship here, and (excluding chapter twenty-one as this is likely not original to the gospel¹²⁴) a rather unfavorable picture of Peter is present in *John*. In *John* 18:10, for example, he rashly cuts off a guard's ear and is quickly admonished by Jesus.¹²⁵ He is not seen again until the triple denial which, as pointed out above, is highlighted in *John* by the preceding denial prediction scene. Finally, in chapter twenty, Peter arrives at the empty tomb, the place where one would expect him to redeem his previous rashness. Instead, Peter is seen behind the beloved disciple, who is then pushed away by Peter who rushes headlong into the tomb only to see a few linen wrappings. The beloved disciple, "who had reached the tomb first" as *John* reminds us, then steps into the tomb in 20:8 whereupon he (singular) "sees and believes."

Immediately, the verse continues and says that "they" (plural) did not understand "that

¹²⁴ Brock, 51-52 and Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, G.R. Beasley-Murray, trans. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1971), 700-706. There are several reasons to view chapter twenty-one as a later addition. For one thing, the final verses of chapter twenty signal finality with phrases like "Jesus did many other miraculous signs...which are not recorded in this book. But these are written...that by believing you may have life in his name." This sort of phrasing indicates finality in the gospel genre and would not normally be followed by another chapter. Also, chapter twenty-one is very different in style and tone from the rest of *John*, primarily for its positive attitude toward Peter who is commissioned by Jesus to "take care of my sheep" three times, presumably in order to counteract Peter's triple denial of Jesus. Whatever the case may be, Peter is clearly portrayed positively in chapter twenty-one and even commissioned to lead the movement after Jesus' death. This simply does not fit well with the rest of *John* and even seems incongruous. For this reason, readers do not have to reconcile Peter's positive portrayal in the final chapter with the rest of Peter's rather negative portrayal throughout *John*, for this is likely not an original part of the gospel.

¹²⁵ Interestingly, this same scene is presented in all four gospels, but it is only in *John* that Peter is named as the one who cuts off the guard's ear. The Synoptic gospels do not specify who cut off the ear, but rather say "one of them" or "one of those." This is based on Miller's translation as well as the NIV.

Jesus had to rise from the dead.” It is important to note that *John* has here switched back to the plural “they.”¹²⁶ Plainly, the author wants his audience to know that Peter does *not* see and believe as does the beloved disciple, *nor* does he understand. The switching from plural to singular and then back to the plural again is perhaps indicative of a deliberate attempt to demote Peter in favor of another disciple, likely here the beloved disciple.¹²⁷ Whatever the case may be, it seems that the author of *John* placed himself in the camp opposed to Petrine authority, hence the repeated stabs at Peter’s character throughout the text.

And yet in chapter twenty-one of the same gospel one can find just as deliberate an attempt to cast Peter in a favorable light. This can perhaps be explained away rather easily by labeling this final incongruous chapter as a later addition to the gospel as many scholars believe to be the case. Because of this, chapter twenty-one will not be examined in detail as it is likely not a part of the original conception of *John* and does not fit with this gospel’s general attitude toward Peter. As such, one can assert that overall Peter’s character is significantly diminished in *John* despite the likely spurious addition of the final chapter.

Clearly, the early church struggled with its conception of the figure of Peter. As one group heightened and revered him, another downplayed and diminished him. This much at least can be posited regarding the context in which these texts were written. But this is not the reason so much time has been spent looking at Peter as he seesaws back

¹²⁶ Brock, 47-50.

¹²⁷ It should be noted here that many scholars (Rudolph Bultmann, Otto Michel, Susanne Ruschmann, and others) think this scene in 20:2-10 to be a later addition to the gospel. See Brock, 57. These verses are included in this discussion because the redactor’s attitude toward Peter meshes well with that of the author. In fact, it seems that we have in this redactor --if indeed there was a redactor --someone lending a hand to the original author of *John* in his attempt to besmirch the character of Peter. Contrast this with chapter 21 in which a later redactor redeems the character of Peter. It seems that in *John* we may have a case of dueling scribes.

and forth from *Luke* to *John*. No, he has been scrutinized in these acts because he is Mary's Other, the study of which serves to uncover further layers of the Magdalene's character by providing a distorted reflection of her the way one's Other is wont to do. When she is up, he is down. When he is up, she is down. Nowhere inside or outside of the canon do these two stand in equal prominence within a single text.

And this seems to be the case in *John*, for where the reader can witness the darkening of Peter's character, Mary can be seen at least for a moment to emerge from the canonical shadows. Though Mary is not elevated to the same degree that Peter is denigrated, Brock's notion of an inverse relationship between them stands. She points out the Johannine resurrection scene, which is perhaps the most famous of the four gospels, where Mary is given a more prominent role than any other character as she alone is the premier witness to the resurrected Jesus. In the unforgettable garden scene, she stands outside the tomb weeping. When Jesus asks her what is wrong, she does not recognize him and assumes him to be the gardener. She soon does recognize him, however, and is commissioned to tell the others of the resurrection, which she promptly does. This act garners praise from some church fathers who bestow upon her the title *Apostola Apostolorum*.¹²⁸ While Mary's role here is not extensive by any means, she is singled out in *John* to receive the protophany and commissioned by Christ to tell the others of his resurrection. This is significantly more than one can say of Peter in this same text.¹²⁹ What is important here is that John used the figure of Mary, in lieu of that of another male disciple, as the recipient of the protophany because she was believed by some facet of the proto-Christian community to have been such. This is a strong

¹²⁸ Hippolytus (c.170-c.235) is generally credited with coining this phrase in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. See Haskins, 62.

¹²⁹ Brock, 59-60.

possibility, otherwise a male disciple (the beloved disciple in *John*) would have been awarded the protophany had the persistence of the belief in Mary's role not been a determining factor. In other words, the belief in the Easter role of Mary was still a significant enough factor by the time of the composition of *John* that she was again recorded as the first to see the resurrected Christ.

Because Peter does not receive the protophany in *John*, it is not difficult to see that his role is diminished when compared to that of his Lukan counterpart. It seems obvious in many other scenes as well that the author went to great lengths to denigrate this disciple's character. The same amount of effort cannot be said to have been applied to Mary, however. While she is certainly not diminished in *John*, our author did not go to great lengths to heighten or expand her role throughout his gospel. Rather, she is given the crucial protophany at the closing of the gospel and then is never seen again as Jesus appears to the male disciples in a much more extensive visitation scene. While the significance of the protophany cannot be overlooked, Mary's is still but a brief role in a male-centered text.

Given the socio-political context in which *John* was written, it is likely that the author was hesitant to give a more expanded role to a woman and thus gave her the crucial protophany in hopes that this, coupled with the overall denigration of Peter, would be enough to garner support for Mary, or at least discontent with and even mistrust of Petrine apostolic authority and succession. Perhaps it is the case that Mary, believed to have been the first to see the risen Jesus, is simply a convenient foil used to further bring down the character of Peter.

While the reduction of Mary to a foil may sound trifling and somewhat negative, the underlying significance of this must not be overlooked. Peter is deliberately brought down in *John* in part by the elevation of Mary, and also by that of the beloved disciple. This is likely indicative of a power struggle in which one or more groups of early Christians were dissatisfied with Petrine authority. That Mary was used even as a tool to bring down the figure of Peter is significant for the sheer fact that any other character could have been employed. John chose Mary (alongside the beloved disciple) because she was notable enough in the proto-Christian community to accomplish the task due to the persistence of the belief that placed her at the empty tomb. Nonetheless, the inverse relationship pointed out by Brock is not being played out on an even scale. Where Peter is significantly diminished in John's gospel, Mary is only slightly advanced. Even so, it remains the case that Mary is indeed elevated and Peter is denigrated as *John* completes his version of Jesus' resurrection.

I will now revisit *Luke* in which the reverse is true--Mary is denigrated while Peter, as has been seen, is elevated. In general, *Luke* sidelines the roles of all the women despite the fact that there are more female characters in *Luke* than in all the other gospels, urging some to credit this gospel as pro-feminine. It must be noted, however, that although there are more female characters in *Luke*, their presence seems to have been more of a literary device as the text parallels its male-centered pericope with female-centered pericope. Also, this could have been *Luke's* way of admitting women's role in the movement while still denying them any concrete authority, for in the stories about the female, *Luke* tends to "restrict or denigrate the participation of women."¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Kraemer and D'Angelo, 181. See also Brock, 32-38.

And this is certainly the case with Mary of Magdala, whom he reduces to what the modern audience might call an “honorable mention.” She is merely one among “all those who knew him” at the crucifixion in *Luke* 23:49. Further, she does not see Jesus at the empty tomb nor does she utter the kerygmatic “he is risen” as she does in *John* 20:18. Rather, this statement comes from the two angelic figures encountered at the tomb. The women are not commissioned here to tell the disciples of the resurrection. Nonetheless, the women (and Mary of Magdala is again listed first) are still present at this crucial moment. When they tell the disciples what they have seen, however, their words are dismissed as “idle talk” or “nonsense,” at which point the women are at last introduced by name.¹³¹ Amidst the jeering of the men, the women disappear from the gospel and are not heard from again.

It seems as if our author sought to diminish the apostolic witness of the women in general and of Mary in particular by calling their proclamation “idle talk.” Some have certainly taken it this way. Others, however, may question the authority of the male disciples and perhaps even the men’s faith, as a result of this embittered scene. After all, with the possible exception of Peter whom *Luke* again presents favorably, they do not believe the women. They do not believe that the tomb is empty and as such cannot be said to believe in the resurrection of Christ. If it was the author’s intent to cast doubt upon the veracity of the women, his efforts may have backfired, for the mocking words of the men can just as easily be seen as a lack of faith on their part. A lack of faith in the risen Christ (as suggested by the men’s scorn at the women’s announcement) does not bode well for one’s apostolic authority.

¹³¹ Brock, 33-35.

Ultimately, what one is left with in *Luke* and *John* is a textual tradition in which Peter and Mary can be seen as antitheses to one another, where one is praised as the other is maligned. That these gospels reflect the context in which these texts were written seems no great stretch of the imagination. There were clearly power struggles in the early church. There was clearly a group that favored Mary and another that favored Peter, though this division was likely not so well-defined. Whether Peter and Mary or their successors were actually leading competing factions of early Christians or whether they were posthumously appropriated as symbolic representatives of one or more groups remains to be seen. At a minimum, it can be said with relative certainty that the conflicting parties employed the figures of Peter and Mary as representatives of their competing versions of faith. That Mary was used, if only symbolically, points to her significance in the proto-Christian community. If she was believed to have played but a minor role in Jesus' ministry, it is unlikely that her figure would have become the representative of a faction of proto-Christians. It is equally unlikely that she would have appeared at all in an apostolic dispute had she not been perceived as a strong enough figure to have garnered support, or for that matter, dissent. One is not an opponent in a power struggle if one is not significant enough to struggle with; after all, why bother struggling with one who poses no threat? That Mary was a significant enough figure to require weakening is indicative of the persistent proto-Christian belief in her role in the Jesus movement.

What all of this reveals of the actual "historical" person of Mary of Magdala is very little. The importance of her figure was strongly believed in, but to what extent? Did she actually lead a group of early Christians in opposition to Peter, or was her

leadership purely symbolic and perhaps only posthumous? With the evidence at hand this question cannot be answered with any certainty. This is why any search for the “historical” Mary yields little more than vague supposition and extended hypotheses. As such, it must be remembered that these texts are better used to reconstruct the historical situation in which Christianity developed, rather than to reconstruct the lives of the characters presented therein. In short, the search for the “historical” Mary is only valuable in that such an endeavor clarifies the development of early Christianity, and more significantly for my purposes, the later development of the different images of the Magdalene herself.

A Historical Mary ?

Ultimately, there is no “historical” Mary in the strictest sense of the word. All that remains of her is a figure reconstructed from texts that were not intended to be historical in the modern sense of that term. So, why attempt to reconstruct Mary’s historical role if such a task is impossible? My reason for even mentioning an “historical” Mary is simply that this can further our understanding of the later development of Mary’s image. In the end, it must be stressed that while there may be no “historical” Mary, her figure does loom large in a very real historical situation, namely the situation in which a facet of the early Christian community *believed* Mary to have been significant. All in all, speculation regarding Mary is advantageous in that such a conjectural reconstruction aids in our understanding of the texts and, as such, the formative processes within early Christianity. More importantly, this also furthers our understanding of the divergent images of the Magdalene herself.

The very name, “Mary of Magdala,” may provide clues to her possible role in these texts. Her name is usually written in the same grammatical form: proper name + definite article + geographical name, which translates into “Mary, the woman from Magdala,”¹³² shortened by posterity into Mary of Magdala, Mary the Magdalene, or simply Mary Magdalene. This name form occurs nine times (in the canonical texts) in this manner, and only twice with minor variations in *Luke*. Even in these Lukan

¹³² Thompson, 31.

variations, however, the definite article remains, though word order is switched (from the usual “*Maria ē Magdalēnē*” to “*ē Magdalēnē Maria*”). The retention of the article is significant because this is only used when a “well-known person is to be distinguished from others of the same name.”¹³³ By the time the Gospels were written, her name in this form was so well established that this is what all the authors used when referring to her. For Mary to have had so established a name may indicate that she was a well-known figure “who was known to have been a disciple of Jesus and who played a major role in the early church.”¹³⁴ Such a specific identification may also point to the importance of her as a figure who could not be omitted, even in male-centered texts that limit her role to that of Easter messenger. Clearly, a strong belief in the significance of Mary’s role is present in these texts, though this is overlaid by successive layers of gospel narrative.

Of course, the simple and practical reason for giving her such a titular designation should not be forgotten. There are several women named Mary in the gospels, most of whom are labeled as the mothers of disciples and, of course, the mother of Jesus himself. Mary *the* Magdalene may be so designated simply in order to distinguish her from the other Marys. The use of the article and place name could be as simple as that. In fact, it has been speculated that Mary was one of the two most popular female names of first century Galilee, with an estimated number of close to fifty percent bearing the name of either Mary or Salome.¹³⁵ With all these Marys, Mary the Magdalene needed something to distinguish her from the crowd, something that would make her stand out from the other women. That she was deemed important enough to be made to stand apart reflects

¹³³ Thompson, 30.

¹³⁴ Thompson, 32.

¹³⁵ Levine, 199. This is a very loose statistical estimate based on the high incidence of these names in various sources from the period including Josephus’ writings, the New Testament, Rabbinic literature, and inscriptions.

upon her perceived significance. If she'd been thought of as merely one of the crowd following Jesus, she likely would not have been singled out by a specified name.

Giving her this specific geographic name could further indicate several things. First, a geographic designation suggests that she was unmarried, at least at the time when she joined Jesus' ministry.¹³⁶ Second, she is not to be confused with any other Mary. The fact that she was important enough to be distinguished from the other followers of Christ should not be forgotten here. Third, she is consistently referred to in this unique manner because the role she was believed to have played in Jesus' ministry had quite possibly become so well-known by the time of the Gospel writings that her name had become a sort of title. Furthermore, the specific form of her name tells us that her perceived role was considered important enough to have survived countless redactions and editings. This implies that the character of Mary was "too well known in the early church for her name to have been suppressed in any way."¹³⁷ And fourth and finally, a point that may seem rather obvious--most scholars attest that she hailed from Magdala, a "village on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee."¹³⁸ This seemingly straightforward assertion, however, is as riddled with difficulties as are any of the other conjectures about Mary.

Numerous difficulties surround the term 'Magdalene,' which has evolved into a surname of sorts. Such a name would seem to point to her origins in the town of

¹³⁶ She is assumed to have been unmarried because she is referenced to a place rather than to a man, as was the usual custom. See Maisch, 5.

¹³⁷ Thompson, 111.

¹³⁸ It is interesting to note here that this village was a well known fishing town and that Mary may have been a fisherwoman. See Levine, 199. Might she have met Jesus at the shore with her nets in hand as did other disciples? It's possible that she was a woman with a job of some sort, a working girl. Interestingly, it was a stereotype of the time that most working lower class women were promiscuous. See Levine, 201. This perhaps contributed to her popular image in later centuries. Also noteworthy here is the fact that scholars are not in agreement on the issue of her class. Whether she was lower class or of the "socially secure middle class" is still debated. See Maisch, 4.

Magdala, a town purportedly on the Western shore of the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Gennesareth (the name differs depending on the source).¹³⁹ Longstanding tradition identifies Magdala with ruins located on the outskirts of modern-day Migdal, or more accurately “Migdal Numaya,” Aramaic for “fish tower,” as the town was a known center for the fishing trade in the first century. But this town had other names as well. Kathleen Corley asserts that Josephus calls Magdala by the Greek name Tarichaea, meaning “salted fish.”¹⁴⁰ This seems to be the first extra-Biblical source to record the name of the city, which *may* have been changed after the Jewish rebellion was put down by the Roman army between roughly 67-70 C.E.¹⁴¹

As both the Greek and the Aramaic name point to the same meaning (both deal with the fish-drying industry), both likely refer to the same town--but there are problems with this assumption. It seems that we only know Magdala by its Aramaic name through the gospels, which “attest the existence of the place by their use of its name as Mary’s surname.”¹⁴² To say that this is shaky ground is an understatement; for, it seems that scholars know Magdala to exist *as Magdala* because of the gospels’ use of the term as part of Mary’s name, and yet it is asserted that Mary hailed from Magdala, again, because it is used as part of her name. This seems circular at best. So, was Tarichaea also known as Magdala in the first century? It is unclear, but Mary Thompson thinks this may be the

¹³⁹ Gennesareth is asserted in Josephus’ *Wars of the Jews*, 3.10.1. Galilee is asserted by Kathleen Corley who also cites Josephus’ *Wars*, 2.21.3-4 and 3.10.1. See Levine, 199. She calls the Sea that of Galilee though Josephus clearly calls it Gennesareth. These two names refer to the same body of water. See the map on page 104 which lists both names.

¹⁴⁰ Levine, 199.

¹⁴¹ Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (New York, NY: Random House, 1996), 151.

¹⁴² Maisch, 3.

case and says, “many scholars agree, Magdala was then known by the name Tarichaea.”¹⁴³

So, the town called Magdala may also have been known by its Greek name, Tarichaea, at the time of the gospel writings in the first century. This is where Josephus was stationed and figures significantly in his *Wars of the Jews*, particularly the second and third books. Nowhere in his works is Tarichaea associated with a town called Magdala or any variation thereof. Nowhere in the gospels is Tarichaea mentioned at all, in association with Magdala or any other city. One could speculate that the use of the Aramaic name of the city was the writers’ subtle way of undercutting Roman authority, and yet this is only feasible if the name was indeed changed after the revolt, but this is unknown. Also, given that the gospel writers seem generally accepting of Roman rule, the use of the Aramaic name for this reason seems unlikely.

Also, this town only later became associated with Mary due to a longstanding tradition that identified the town of Tarichaea as Magdala. It must be noted that Tarichaea may have been called Magdala before the wars, as the maps on pages 105 and 106 show. And yet the city of Magdala is in a noticeably different location along the shores of Galilee than is Tarichaea according to these maps. Is this even the same town? It is according to other maps, which use both names when referring to the town (see page 107). The point of these geographical ramblings is to show that there is no certainty as to the location or even the name of Magdala, no certainty as to the geographical origins of Mary, and hence no absolute certainty regarding the “historical” Mary overall, though she is present even if only as a lingering belief in the role she played.

¹⁴³ Thompson, 27.

It does seem reasonable to assume, however, that she was at least believed to have been from some place called Magdala or the like. Whether or not this place is the same as Josephus' Tarichaea, modern-day Migdal, is perhaps indeterminable. This serves to highlight the fact that Mary's place of origin is not as straightforward and simple to determine as is often assumed. All one is left with is a maybe, even a probably, but never a definitely--as is the case with most everything else regarding the "historical" Magdalene. Nonetheless, wherever she may have been from, it remains the case that the particular form of her name in the texts served to distinguish her from the other Marys, a distinction that likely stems from a staunch belief in the importance of her role. This is what is important about her name.

So, what does all of this name-calling mean? It all boils down to something quite simple. Mary of Magdala was given a distinguishing name in these texts because she was believed to have done something that separated her from the other women. She was not designated as this man's mother or that man's sister. She was a different Mary, the one from Magdala. What she did to earn this distinction is impossible to determine historically. However, it can be asserted that her consistent singling-out points to her special standing among Jesus' first disciples, at least within the texts that preserve her memory. She is to be remembered as different and unique from the other female followers of Christ, distinct in some way even within the canon that sought to minimize her role.

Why she should be set apart remains a mystery, but it is clear that any search for the "historical" Mary furthers our understanding of early Christianity and its literature rather than that of the "historical" figures presented in these texts. The search also

reveals the basis for the Magdalene's subsequent images--the emerging consensus about the role she played in Jesus' ministry. By studying her textual image, it becomes possible to propose that the early Christians saw her as significant enough in Jesus' ministry that she was appropriated by competing factions of proto-Christians who preserved their persistent belief in her role as a recurring textual presence. In some texts she is portrayed as a revered and spiritually-elite leader, in others as one who had to be mentioned if only because of a well-played role stubbornly professed by those who made up the early Christian communities. In either scenario, it remains the case that behind her varied textual portrayals there stands a figure believed to have played a significant role in the Easter drama, a role so firmly rooted in tradition that it could not be erased, not even by her detractors. Ultimately, it can be said that had she not been regarded as significant by some portion of the proto-Christian community, she would not have been included in such a critical capacity in these texts. It is this belief, the belief in the Magdalene's significance, that became the foundation for Mary's subsequent medieval images.

In short, a "historical" Mary is not obtainable, but it is reasonable to propose that a genuinely historical *belief* in the role Mary played is visible in many early Christian texts. This is highly significant, for if there is no "historical" Mary, then it becomes highly problematic to separate the traditional (medieval) Mary from the Mary of the early Christian texts, a separation called for by scholars such as Jane Schaberg, Kathleen Corley, and Susan Haskins, all of whom are quick to condemn as historically inaccurate the medievals' characterization of Mary as a prostitute.¹⁴⁴ Because there is no "historical" Mary, scholarly complaint about the medievals' presentation of Mary as historically inaccurate is ultimately without foundation.

¹⁴⁴ This issue will be addressed in more detail in the following chapter, *The Medieval Magdalene*.

With this in mind, I will now turn to the medievals' Mary of Magdala, a character significant in that she became the normative figure of Mary, a figure important also for the fact that in her, text and tradition turn out to be linked in an artful, though ultimately confusing, way.

The Medieval Magdalene

Though she is prevalent in the imaginations of the faithful, the medievals' Mary of Magdala cannot be found in the gospels. Indeed, the canonical texts from which this image is largely drawn portray a Mary who followed Jesus from the early days of his ministry and witnessed the resurrection, sometimes becoming the primary Easter messenger, while at other times rushing away in fear, as in the original ending of *Mark*. This is the essence of what is said of Mary in the four gospels,¹⁴⁵ and yet over time she merges with other figures mentioned in these works to become eventually the Mary of the popular imagination--the medieval Mary, the model of a forgiven sinner held near and dear in the hearts of the faithful even today. And yet this prevalent image of the penitent whore turned forgiven saint is just that, an image. Nonetheless, it must be remembered just what this persistent image is--it is an image overlaid atop the textual Mary, thereby linking text to tradition. As such, the medieval Magdalene is not a distinct manifestation of Mary, but rather another layer added to her cumulative character.

This integrated medieval image was the result of the conflation of several characters taken from the canonical gospels, texts that staged more than one Mary. Because of the frequency of this name, it may have been easy for medieval believers, both clergy and laity alike, to overlap one biblical Mary with another. Thus, it was

¹⁴⁵ The Gnostic texts featuring Mary of Magdala do not figure largely in this section as these would not have been available to those formulating medieval orthodoxy, except through detractors such as Irenaeus and Tertullian. Because the Gnostic texts only indirectly influenced the medieval conception of Mary, they will not be discussed at length in this section.

commonly believed that Mary of Magdala and Mary of Bethany, the anointer of Christ in *John* 12:1-8, were one and the same individual, as Mary of Bethany performs the same act as the sinner of *Luke* 7, the woman from the city whom many believed to be the Magdalene due to their textual proximity. This confusion led to Mary's identification as the anointer of Christ in all of the anointing passages, primarily the sinner of *Luke* 7 and Mary of Bethany of *John* 12. Nonetheless, others, such as Ambrose, assert that the unnamed woman anointing Jesus' head in *Mark* 14 was not the same woman as the sinner of *Luke* who anointed his feet. He came to the conclusion that there were two distinct anointing women, both of whom he called Mary of Magdala.¹⁴⁶ For reasons such as this, the role of Mary was not clearly defined in the Middle Ages, at least not until Pope Gregory delivered his memorable Homily XXXIII in 591, to which I will turn below.

First, however, it must be noted that Mary of Magdala is not present in any of the passages that include Mary of Bethany, associated with the Magdalene due to the anointing scene. In fact, the two women are never placed side by side and, as such, cannot be definitively established as two distinct individuals. For this reason, we cannot say that the two Marys are not one and the same individual, one who is referred to with different names.¹⁴⁷ Also, in many other Biblical passages in which there is an anonymous woman assumed to be Mary of Magdala, modern scholarship cannot say with absolute certainty that these women are in fact *not* her. One can prove only that it is unlikely that the unnamed figures refer to Mary of Magdala or that any two Marys are in fact one. Furthermore, the Gnostic texts were literally buried when the medieval Church

¹⁴⁶ Maisch, 44. See also Ambrose's *Expositio Evang. Sec. Lucam*, from J.P. Migne's *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Patrologiae Latinae*, 15.1758 and 1934 and 1936 (Turnhout, Belgium: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1965). This text is hereafter referred to as MPL.

¹⁴⁷ Esther De Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*, John Bowden, trans. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997), 10.

was wrestling with Mary's role. It surely made sense at the time to unite the canonical Mary figures into one, especially considering that the purpose of the Church (conspiracy theories and politics aside!) was to provide life lessons and moral guidance rather than history. The conflated Magdalene was the perfect vehicle for this.

And so, the accretion of Mary's character would continue. All in all, pericopai (i.e., Biblical passages) specifically including Mary were fused to seven that do not include her. Two of these have been seen already, the sinner of *Luke* 7 and Mary of Bethany in *John* 12. The remaining five are as follows: (1) *Mark* 14 and *Matthew* 26, where Jesus is anointed on the head by an unnamed woman; (2) *Luke* 10, where Mary of Bethany sits at Jesus' feet; (3) *John* 8:1-11, where an unnamed woman is taken in adultery; (4) *John* 4, where Jesus meets an unnamed Samaritan woman; (5) *John* 2, where the gospel audience is introduced to an anonymous bride at a wedding.¹⁴⁸ Clearly, for one looking to weave a tale of accessible morality, the composite image of the medieval Magdalene was ideal.

What exactly does this conflated image of Mary look like as she emerges into the medieval religious landscape? What is her great sin? Pope Gregory the Great answers this question in several homilies, particularly Homily XXXIII, which is dated to September 14, 591, the day that Gregory delivered his memorable sermon about the composite Mary of Magdala, the papal paradigm of proper penitence. And yet the idea of the conflated Magdalene was not his own. Rather, he made solid the fluid conceptions that had surrounded her role since Christianity's early years. Indeed, the confusion surrounding the various Marys and anointing women was put to a decisive end, at least in the medieval mind, when Pope Gregory preached his public homilies about her, homilies

¹⁴⁸ Schaberg, 74-5.

that merged several different Biblical women into a compelling, though conflated, character.¹⁴⁹ In Homily XXXIII he declared that Mary of Magdala was the following person:

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to *Mark*. And what did these seven devils signify if not all the vices? ... It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet, she now planted her mouth on the redeemer's feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt.¹⁵⁰

Gregory's completion of this figure was not intended to be an accurate reflection of Biblical text. He borrowed a statement made here, a comment made there, and oriented his sermons to a particular pericope, like passages from *Luke 7* or *John 20*, eventually constructing a Mary who could be a model for whatever it was that he was discussing at the time. He had in her the penitent convert, the loving and submissive woman, and the Easter messenger. With such an elastic character, the possibilities were endless. Gregory seems to have sensed this, as he often used the figure of Mary as an example in his writings. In one instance, he wrote a letter to Gregoria, a lady-in-waiting at the Imperial court who was worried over the common issues of forgiveness and salvation. Gregory answered her concerns by citing Mary of Magdala, his tailor-made exemplar of radical forgiveness. With Mary, he was able to quiet Gregoria's concerns by

¹⁴⁹ Maisch, 44.

¹⁵⁰ Pope Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies by Gregory the Great*, David Hurst, trans. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 269.

pointing out the former's sincere repentance and subsequent redemption.¹⁵¹ Time and again in the medieval religious landscape, the common apprehensions surrounding salvation were relieved by citing Mary as the model of the penitent sinner granted forgiveness.

Gradually accumulating, it was by roughly the eleventh century that a complete and detailed biography was largely in place for Mary of Magdala. Due significantly to the earlier works of Pope Gregory the Great, she gradually merged with other biblical figures to form a Mary with a definite place of origin, that of the Galilean fishing village of Magdala. She also was given a definite place of residence, that of Bethany due to her conflation with Mary of Bethany, a merger which in turn resulted in her having two noteworthy siblings: Martha and Lazarus.

She also became the "sinful woman from the city," seen in *Luke 7*, who anointed Jesus' feet as she repented her assumed prostitution amidst a veritable river of penitent tears. She remained the woman who followed Jesus, witnessed the resurrection, and told the other disciples of the risen Christ. In addition to this, Odo, the abbot of Cluny in Burgundy and avid monastic composer of the tenth century, was the first to provide an aristocratic background for Mary, a detail which later led to the idea that her wealthy family owned property in Jerusalem, Bethany, and Magdala.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Maisch, 45.

¹⁵² Maisch, 46. Odo assumed that Mary was wealthy because of the persistence of the form of her name in the gospels--the poor were not given such specific geographic designations, nor were the names likely to have been handed down in such a definite form over several generations. Her alleged wealth is significant here because in general, wealth was viewed as corrupting, especially to the monks and friars who contributed so much to her amalgamated image. To their audience, the Magdalene's riches inevitably led to sins of the flesh, giving the preachers of the day the chance to "condemn the world and its vanities." Thus, wealth was for the medievals (as well as the original gospel audience) a direct route to moral decline. This is not surprising in a society comprised primarily of the poor on the one hand and the rich on the other with very little in between, at least until the emergence of a noticeable middle class in the latter part of the Middle Ages. See Haskins, 154.

The details of her life of sin were fleshed out further by others who added scenes in which she was engaged to John the evangelist, whereupon Jesus stopped her marriage and consequently drove the honor-wounded Magdalene into her well-known life of sin. Honorius Augustodunensis, a twelfth century theologian, portrays to his audience a Mary who had been married in Magdala but had committed adultery. Because of this, she fled to Jerusalem and became the prostitute so familiar today.¹⁵³ Honorius then contradicts himself on this point, saying that she was “betrayed *by her husband*” (rather than doing the betraying herself as he had written earlier) and then became “a filthy and common prostitute” who “regardless of her birth, and of her own free will, founded a brothel of sin, a temple of demons.”¹⁵⁴ Whether she committed adultery after her marriage or whether she was left at the altar is incidental, for the result is the same--she became a common whore. Sometimes her sins were not mentioned and at other times it was blatantly asserted that “the chastity of her body was destroyed” while still others would claim that she remained chaste, although “wild and impetuous.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Maisch, 47. See also Honorius’ *Speculum Ecclesiae* as taken from MPL 172 .979.

¹⁵⁴ Mary and John were allegedly married at the feast of Cana in *John* 2. This legend comes largely from Saint Augustine (See MPL 35.1380). Aelfric, a Benedictine monk of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, asserts that John was so impressed by the miracle of the water turning to wine that he left Mary at the altar, although he does not mention her by name. See Benjamin Thorpe, ed. and trans., *The Homilies of Aelfric* (London, UK: Early English Text Society, 1843, vol.1), 58-59. Honorius fills in the missing piece here and claims that the bride was “Mary of Magdala castle” (see MPL 172.834 and 979). A modern twist on the marriage of the Magdalene comes from Nikos Kazantzakis, who writes in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Peter Bien, trans. (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1960) that Mary was betrothed to Jesus himself. Mary was so wounded when Jesus chose the religious life rather than marriage to her that she turned to prostitution. Also, Marguerite Yourcenar, in her collection of short stories entitled *Fires*, [Dori Katz, trans. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994)], casts the Magdalene as the rejected bride of John the evangelist. In her effort to demystify Christ and thereby win back John’s love, Mary attempts to “seduce God” (recalling the scene in *Luke* 7), but instead is transformed herself, becoming a follower of Christ. And more recently, Dan Brown, in *The DaVinci Code* (New York, NY: Doubleday Books, 2003), writes the Magdalene as Jesus’ wife, and mother of the bloodline that is the Holy Grail.

¹⁵⁵ Maisch, 49.

All of these invented details, and then some,¹⁵⁶ were cemented into the popular imagination by the widely-read *Golden Legend* (1260), a colorful assortment of saints' lives by Jacques de Voraigne (*aka* Jacobus de Varagine), the Dominican archbishop of Genoa from roughly 1270-1298. Jacques weaves quite a tale around Mary of Magdala. What follows are some highlights of the role he created for her:

[She] had her surname of Magdalo, a castle, and was born of right noble lineage and parents, which were descended of the lineage of kings....She with her brother Lazarus and her sister Martha possessed the castle of Magdalo...and also a great part of Jerusalem....Mary gave herself to all delights of the body...and for so much as she shone in beauty greatly, and in riches, so much the more she submitted her body to delight...and was called customably a sinner....This Mary Magdalene is she that washed the feet of our Lord and dried them with the hair of her head...and did solemn penance...To whom Jesus Christ appeared first after his resurrection...and made of our Lord apostlesse of the apostles.¹⁵⁷

He goes on to place Mary in Marseilles where she performed many miracles and conversions, later retreating to a life of penitential solitude. Thus, in the lively image of the medieval Mary of Magdala one can witness the evolution of a paradigmatic sinner.

Clearly, this is a very different performance from that of the Mary of the gospels, for these revered pages say nothing definitive about Mary save that she was forgiven or perhaps healed by Jesus (for/of what we do not know) and subsequently followed him, thereby witnessing the crucifixion and resurrection and telling select others what she had seen. Nowhere in the canon is there an aristocratic Mary, married or otherwise, replete with a large family and a promiscuous past. The composite Mary seen above in the

¹⁵⁶ Mary of Magdala was also believed to have retreated into the wilderness to lead a life of reverent solitude in emulation of other eremitic and ascetic saints such as Mary of Egypt and Pelagia. This notion gives us the commonly seen image of Mary in the desert. She was also believed to have grown hair over her whole body so as to conceal her nudity. See Maisch, 47-8.

¹⁵⁷ Jacobus De Varagine, *The Golden Legend*, William Caxton, trans. (London, UK: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1973), 73-75.

wildly popular and influential *Golden Legend* is a medieval invention.¹⁵⁸ But how exactly did this overtly sexualized image come to be? From where did such detailed imagery arise?

For leaders like Gregory, transforming the otherwise vague textual figure of Mary of Magdala into the infamous sinner of the popular imagination did not take a lot of work, for the transformation of the spiritually outspoken woman into the whore was a common practice between opposing factions of proto-Christians in the first few centuries of Christianity. This common early practice of slandering serves to link tenuously the textual Mary to the traditional Mary, and as such, demonstrates that the medieval Magdalene is not a distinct manifestation, but is instead another layer added to preceding layers of text as well as the proto-Christian cultural milieu. Indeed, this link to the infancy of Christianity demonstrates that the conflicting images of Mary's character, that of the textual as opposed to that of the medieval, are not as sharply opposed as first appears.

An example of the proto-Christian denigration that influenced the later development of the medieval Magdalene comes from Tertullian (160-230 C.E.) who accuses the prophet Philumene of being an "enormous prostitute" due to her allegedly false teachings, with which he obviously disagreed. He asserts that her message betrayed a "penetration by evil spirits and, hence, sexual pollution." In general, a woman whose message differed from the orthodox was in danger of being labeled as sexually licentious. On the other hand, spiritually active women who supported and conformed to the emerging orthodox position were labeled virgins, chaste widows, or even faithful

¹⁵⁸ *The Golden Legend* was extremely popular in its day. As a testament to its immense popularity, we still have 700 manuscript versions and 173 early printed editions. It was translated into almost every European language. See Schaberg, 90.

wives.¹⁵⁹ Clearly, a woman's spirituality and sexuality were inextricably linked, for if her teaching was deemed impure or tainted in any way, then so was her body.

Furthermore, women who publicly ate with, openly spoke to, or especially taught men "could be nothing else but courtesans and prostitutes." This applied particularly to the women who accompanied itinerant preachers and healers, women such as Mary of Magdala. These traveling women were labeled "heretical" and sexually immoral by rival proto-Christian factions.¹⁶⁰ That such women would lead or teach in a religious context makes them, in Tertullian's eyes, "wanton." In his work *On the Prescription Against Heretics* he says, "the very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute..."¹⁶¹ Irenaeus (late second century) also labels the spiritually outspoken woman as sexually free in his attack on the followers of the Gnostic and allegedly heretical leader Mark in *Against Heresies* 1.13. Again, the woman with a contrary spiritual voice was often labeled sexually immoral in early Christian tradition.

One of the more famous (or infamous) examples of a female spiritual figure labeled as promiscuous is that of Helen, the companion of Simon Magus. Helen was widely considered to be a prostitute and is called such by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*. He also says that according to Simon's followers, Helen was viewed as a fallen divine figure, the "first conception," who was ultimately trapped in one material body after another, that of Helen at the time of his writing.¹⁶² Simon was viewed as her savior, symbolic of the male redeemer figure whose purpose was to save the fallen, represented in Simonianism (the Gnostic sect that followed Simon Magus) by Helen. In addition to

¹⁵⁹ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 180-181.

¹⁶⁰ Lisa Bellan-Boyer, *Conspicuous in Their Absence: Women in Early Christianity* (Cross Current, no. 1, Spring 2003), 53.

¹⁶¹ Kraemer and D'Angelo, 264.

¹⁶² Ayer, 79. See also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.23.2.

this, it was familiar at the time for the soul to be regarded as a fallen woman, a prostitute in particular, and for an actual woman to act as embodiment to this symbolism. The fallen soul, always in the female form, needed to be reconciled to her divine counterpart in order to be freed from the material realm. In the eyes of many, Helen was the fallen soul and prostitute, while Simon was her heavenly redeemer.¹⁶³

The itinerant preacher/healer with his female companion was a familiar pattern in the proto-Christian communities. Such traveling women more often than not were viewed as “wicked” home-wreckers. Early Roman critics make reference to their “sexual immorality, hysteria, witchcraft, incest, and cannibalism.” Later orthodox critics use these same terms when denouncing contradictory heretical factions of proto-Christians.¹⁶⁴ If Mary was believed by early polemicists to have been a member of one of these heretical groups, it takes little effort to project this concept of the polluted woman backward onto Mary, a female companion to the most famous itinerant preacher of all, and a woman who perhaps did some preaching herself--yet another possible source for the image of Mary as prostitute, an image not wholly *invented* by the medievals but rather formed out of extant culture and belief rooted in Christianity’s first few centuries.

Because the proto-Christian culture carried within it the memory of Simon and Helen as representatives of the traditional mythic pattern of the divine male as savior to the fallen female, it was easy to view other traveling preachers/healers in similar terms, particularly those traveling with female companions. In hindsight, Jesus and Mary become such a pair. In fact, they were, like Simon and Helen, seen as “prototype and

¹⁶³ Perkins, 171-174. In regards to the imagery of the fallen soul, see also Robinson’s *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* translations of *Exegesis on the Soul* and *Authoritative Teaching*, 192 and 309 respectively.

¹⁶⁴ Bellan-Boyer, 53.

symbol of the salvific union of female and male.”¹⁶⁵ It is here that the line begins to blur, that sharp line dividing the Mary of text from the Mary of tradition, a line which is often perceived when initially confronted with her seemingly incongruous images. For, if early Christian culture saw Jesus and Mary this way even superficially, a tentative link is forged between Mary’s textual image and that of her traditional role. In this particular situation, it may be the case that the texts, particularly the non-canonical works that portray Mary as Jesus’ companion and as a leader in her own right, are linked to first-century traditions surrounding the religiously-active female companions of traveling holy men. Exactly how text and tradition are linked here is perhaps impossible to determine. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that out of this milieu, those who developed the medieval image of Mary found fertile ground.

Ultimately, early tradition and text likely had a reciprocal effect on one another, an effect which in turn influenced later medieval tradition. To clarify the textual aspect of this link, one should look to the *Gospel of Philip*, which points out more clearly than other texts the symbolic relationship between Jesus and Mary with its enigmatic references to love, kissing, and hints of a figurative marriage between them, a marriage that was, for the Gnostic believer, a symbol of the reunification of the male to the separated and fallen female (the prostitute). Such relationships were tangible manifestations of the soul’s separation from the heavenly realm and its subsequent reunion with the divine. If Mary was presented in any of the texts (or even seen as such by the readers/hearers of these texts) as representative of the fallen soul, the prostitute, then such vivid imagery would have left an indelible mark on the cultural milieu out of which Christianity formed. Coupled with orthodoxy’s negative attitude toward her, the

¹⁶⁵ Kraemer and D’Angelo, 276.

equation of Mary with figures such as Helen in the early years of Christianity surely contributed in part to the development of Mary's medieval image as redeemed whore.

Irenaeus further contributes to the development of this later image by connecting Jesus and Mary to Simon and Helen. He admits that Simon was regarded by many as a god, one who had, according to his own teachings, first descended from the heavens into Judea as "the Son" in order to "save the lost sheep," i.e., the fallen soul, embodied by Helen as prostitute and symbol of the fallen masses. Simon's purpose also was "to confer salvation upon men by making himself known." For this, he had to appear as a man and suffer in Judea, though Irenaeus asserts that this never actually happened.¹⁶⁶ Because Irenaeus describes Jesus in much the same way as he does Simon (though believing, of course, in the legitimacy of the former), and because he expressly labels Helen as a prostitute, it is not difficult for his audience, both then and now, to see connections between the two couples--Mary and Helen as fallen women with Jesus and Simon as historicized male redeemer figures. Whether legitimate or not, there were strong parallels in proto-Christian thought between the figures of Jesus and Simon, which naturally led to parallels between Mary and Helen, with both women coming out of the fray as prostitutes in the popular imagination.¹⁶⁷

The gospel writers themselves unwittingly laid the foundation for the conflated figure of Mary as the penitent prostitute long before Irenaeus would draw such comparisons.¹⁶⁸ Tradition hesitantly connects to text in the following manner: As

¹⁶⁶ Ayer, 79-80. See also Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, I.23.3.

¹⁶⁷ These parallels come primarily from Irenaeus who reports in 1.23 of *Against Heresies* that many second century believers glorified Simon and Helen as divine figures.

¹⁶⁸ Irenaeus was actually following a Jewish tradition in which opponents to one's belief system were regularly labeled as adulterers or prostitutes. Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah, Hosea, and Isaiah invoke metaphors of adultery and prostitution against those they consider unfaithful. See, for example, *Jeremiah* 2:1-3:5; *Hosea* 2:1-4:19; *Isaiah* 60:1.

previously stated, Mary of Bethany anoints Christ's feet and dries them with her hair in *John*. In *Luke*, this same act is performed by an unnamed sinner. Immediately following the introduction of *Luke's* mysterious sinner we meet Mary of Magdala who is filled with seven spirits, equated in the medieval mind with great sin as regards the figure of Mary (a subject to which I will soon return). Because the passages occur in succession, it was easy to assume that the same person was being referred to in both Lukan passages. Because the unnamed sinner and Mary of Bethany perform the very same act, it was easy to assume that they, too, were one and the same person.¹⁶⁹ In a society that may already have viewed Mary as a prostitute (if only symbolically), the unnamed sinner of *Luke*, Mary of Bethany, and Mary of Magdala were easily fused into one memorable character, a sinful character that became the Magdalene of the medieval religious landscape.

At this point, it will be helpful to pause and further clarify the tenuous link between text and tradition as regards the development of the medieval character of Mary. With each perhaps mutually influencing the other, as is often the case, text and tradition can be seen to overlap, particularly in the Gnostic works, which are more descriptive than the canonical of the relationship between Jesus and Mary. When these descriptions are considered alongside the parallels drawn between Simon/Helen and Jesus/Mary, it is easier to understand the development of what many condemn as the "baseless" character of the promiscuous medieval Magdalene. While the Gnostic texts did not have a direct influence on the development of medieval religiosity, it can be presumed that these texts circulated to some extent before their suppression in roughly the third century C.E., thereby leaving their mark on a culture that already held certain perceptions regarding the male redeemer figure and his female disciple. On top of this rich milieu was placed the

¹⁶⁹ De Boer, 10-11.

medieval tradition of the penitent prostitute. Ultimately, text and tradition have each written lines for the other, resulting in the unforgettable figure of the medieval Magdalene. The confluence of text and tradition here forges a link between the Magdalene of the page and the Magdalene of the people. It is a tenuous link, but a link nonetheless--one that blurs the sharp line often perceived between Mary's traditional and textual roles. Clearly, it is not as simple as the Magdalene of the text verses the Magdalene of medieval devotion. Rather, her seemingly conflicted roles overlap from one layer to the next.

This synthesized character was not only memorable, she was valuable; for if God could forgive a sinner such as that represented by her embellished image, then clearly divine grace was not in short supply. Thus, the image of Mary as the forgiven sinner, an image drawn both from text and earlier tradition, created in the devout a hope for forgiveness that was readily embraced by both clergy and laity alike. For this reason, Gregory was simply not interested in any strictly textual Mary, what he needed from her was her service as model and example. Indeed, he "had no interest in Mary Magdalene as a person...but in her significance as a unifying element between the Biblical model and the ecclesial reality,"¹⁷⁰ and he used this composite Magdalene as example in several of his homilies. Because his collected sermons were so popular, especially during the eighth and ninth centuries, his "formulation of the composite Magdalene thus passed into homiletic literature to become stock-in-trade during the Middle Ages"¹⁷¹ to the point that the textual Mary was nearly covered over by the ornate layers added by the medievals.

¹⁷⁰ Maisch, 46.

¹⁷¹ Haskins, 94.

There are several reasons why the image of the penitent prostitute eclipsed the more simple figure of the textual Mary. First, as mentioned above, Mary's image as forgiven sinner provided a steady supply of hope to guilty believers. This is probably the most straightforward reason for the Magdalene's continued use as an example. Other reasons, however, are decidedly more complicated. For instance, it has been argued that Mary's caricature as a prostitute was a deliberate attempt to lend literary symmetry to an otherwise loosely organized Biblical text. Mary of Magdala was to be "complement and contrast to the Virgin Mother,"¹⁷² clearly indicative of the common dichotomy of woman as either whore or virgin, which looms large in this particular facet of Mary's image.

Pope Gregory further cemented the notion of feminine duality by reducing the women around Jesus to two primary characters, those of Mary the whore and Mary the virgin.¹⁷³ With only the shameful or the saintly as role model, spirituality may likely have been trying for the woman who was neither siren nor saint. Though most women fit neither extreme, it does seem likely that the majority would have identified more easily with the Magdalene as her particular brand of marred holiness was at least approachable.

Further adding to Mary's image was her identification with Eve. Thanks to the mysteriously sensual sinner of *Luke 7*, the image of the forgiven Magdalene was an image rife with femininity and eroticism. Eve's was a similar image, that of a sinner whose primary flaw was thought to be her female sexuality. Hence the two women were easily equated in medieval theology in that both were seen through the closely related terms of sexuality, sin, and death. While the first woman brought these evils into the

¹⁷² Schaberg, 68.

¹⁷³ Bellan-Boyer, 55.

world, the other repented and ushered in the Christian era, the era of salvation.¹⁷⁴

Hippolytus asserts that Mary's role in the Easter drama made up for Eve's sin, going so far as to dub Mary a new Eve while exhorting, "Oh, consolation...Eve was called Apostle."¹⁷⁵ That Mary was seen to have atoned for Eve's sin actually places them in contrast to one another, with Eve symbolic of death and Mary of life. And yet the parallel remains as most ecclesiasts declared it appropriate that a shameful woman should announce salvation to the world as a shameful woman had first brought sin into the world.¹⁷⁶ This association created an ideal literary framing of the pre-Christian era, with Eve at the beginning as the bringer of sin and death, while Mary waits at the end of the era to usher in the next by announcing the resurrection of Christ and hence salvation for mankind.

Further, because Eve was viewed by most medieval ecclesiasts as playing the part of deceitful temptress to sexual sin, sexuality came to have vastly negative connotations and women in large part were viewed as dangerous. Indeed, women's sexuality was regarded as the "object in the way of man's salvation." This is where Mary as reformed whore comes into play. She is an example "of penitence, that is of cleansing, that is what maketh the filthy clean," according to a twelfth-century English homilist. Mary becomes a sort of "Everywoman" who rejects her feminine sexuality in favor of the penitent life.¹⁷⁷ This was especially significant in a society that viewed women "primarily in terms of their sexuality not their spiritual character."¹⁷⁸ As sinner became sainted in the figure of Mary, the threat of feminine sexuality was erased. As a sexual creature no

¹⁷⁴ Haskins, 64.

¹⁷⁵ Haskins, 62.

¹⁷⁶ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 150.

¹⁷⁷ Haskins, 146.

¹⁷⁸ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 152.

more, she became a model for other women who might otherwise act as a pitfall on the road to male salvation.

There was also the emotional need of the believer to have a more complete gospel narrative, another reason contributing to Mary's embellishment. It could be that a large part of this tenacious image came simply from the desire to experience the Gospel accounts of Christ more fully. Simply put, where there was a blank, it was filled--and the life of Mary of Magdala as presented in the gospels is largely a blank. Corresponding to this desire was also the desire to know more about the mysterious woman who was so close to the medievals' Lord and Saviour. These aspects of Mary's image can be considered "benign" or even "creative"¹⁷⁹ while the next point cannot be so lightly dismissed.

Try as we might to look the other way, it is well-nigh impossible to deny the very real possibility that Mary's originally prominent character was sidelined and even tarnished for more sinister reasons. For instance, any authority Mary may have had as *Apostola Apostolorum* is downgraded by the unshakable stigma of whore. One cannot forget here that hand in hand with medieval notions of female sexuality comes evil, temptation, repentance, and ultimately male mercy--she must depend on HIS forgiveness alone for redemption. This turns the temptress into one who is manageable and controllable, "an effective weapon and instrument of propaganda against her own sex."¹⁸⁰ Also, one must remember that it was Peter's authority as the first witness to the resurrection (according to *I Corinthians* 15:3-8 and *Luke* 24:34) which gave him much of the necessary authority to succeed Christ, a result of which was a male system of

¹⁷⁹ Schaberg, 76.

¹⁸⁰ Schaberg, 81.

succession that has lasted for centuries.¹⁸¹ Clearly, Mary's contradictory role as first witness (as seen in *Matthew*, *John*, and *Mark*) had to be downgraded and pushed aside, her image tarnished to the point that her authority disappeared into the long shadow cast by her sinfulness. This in effect ensured that the only religious role left to women in the Middle Ages was not that of outright ecclesiastical leadership, but that of loyal parishioner and benefactress, or the starving female ascetic.¹⁸² Though some may have been outspoken and even influential, any feminine authority came largely from the pew and never the pulpit.

Whatever the reason(s) for Mary's status as prostitute, it must be remembered that for the medieval catholic, this penitent whore *was* Mary of Magdala. Like it or not, this renowned sinner *is* their Mary--and she was loved dearly. Her image was preserved in its inflated form for so long because it proved indispensable to the faith of the average medieval believer.

I have at last arrived at the significance of this embellished image in the hearts of the faithful. Not only did Mary give hope for forgiveness to the guilty, the sinful Mary, in a way the vague textual Mary never could, relieved the very real anxiety many medieval Catholics felt regarding salvation. Pope Gregory wrote to Gregoria, "I trust in his mercy that the mouth of eternal truth will speak over you the same judgment that was once spoken over a holy woman [Mary of Magdala]."¹⁸³ Here, as in his homilies, Gregory is interested in Mary's saved and forgiven state rather than in her allegedly

¹⁸¹ Haskins, 85.

¹⁸² The role of the starving ascetic owes a piece of its mystique to our Mary, who was a pioneer in their ranks thanks to works such as *The Golden Legend* in which she survives in the desert alone for thirty years with no sustenance (de Varagine, 83). For more on the subject of medieval fasting and holy women see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley, CA: University of CA Press, 1987), 31-47.

¹⁸³ Maisch, 45.

sinful past. For him, and many others, she was representative of the Church itself as both must rely on the same divine mercy for their salvation.¹⁸⁴

Ultimately, the thin layers making up the textual Mary simply could not perform the task required by the medievals as could the image of Mary as penitent whore. This sinful woman had a powerful role, one that enabled her to function as a significant source of moral support for sinners whose primary issue was that of salvation.¹⁸⁵ The Magdalene was the perfect example of divine forgiveness and second chances. She was a model who provided comfort and even a prescription for the “conditions” for forgiveness, namely “love for God, faith, repentance, and trust.” For centuries she provided solace to the faithful who would contemplate her transformation from sinner to saint, her model of conversion, and her advocacy before the Divine.¹⁸⁶

Because the image of Mary as penitent implied the stain of feminine sexuality, her image does not “disturb but rather confirms patriarchal ideology and structure. She is at their service.”¹⁸⁷ And serve she did, for her image as the repentant whore functioned as Christianity’s model of redeemed feminine sexuality.¹⁸⁸ In other words, the image of Mary as the forgiven sinner served as a tool for the upholding of a patriarchal society that more often than not condemned women for their very womanliness. And yet, or perhaps because of this, she proved indispensable to the less-than-perfect female believer.

¹⁸⁴ Maisch, 45-46.

¹⁸⁵ It is worth mentioning the role this Mary played in the reform efforts of prostitutes. In the Middle Ages, this was considered a dishonorable but necessary profession, one relegated to the outskirts of town. Officially, the Church allowed prostitution to the extent that it became sinful only if the woman enjoyed it, but still many regarded it as a serious moral problem. The salvation of these fallen women became for some a religious duty and the penitent whore of Magdala was the perfect spokeswoman for their campaign. See Maisch, 54.

¹⁸⁶ Maisch, 52-55.

¹⁸⁷ Schaberg, 98.

¹⁸⁸ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 149.

The preceding explanations for the medieval conception of the Magdalene beg the question that so many recent scholars have asked: Is the sexually infused image of the Magdalene at all historically or even textually accurate? To answer, at least superficially, this complicated question (to which volumes have been devoted) I will gloss over two of the main points brought up by current scholarship on the issue. First, the gospels mention Mary's "seven demons" (see footnote 17) which the medievals often equated with the seven deadly sins.¹⁸⁹ The medieval Mary was thus a woman completely overcome, possessed even, by sin. However, there is no Biblical or even historical precedent for equating possession with sinfulness. In fact, no other Biblical figure, male or female, who suffered from a possession is seen as sinful. This is unique to Mary. Scholars often write off her seven demons as merely representative of a "nervous disorder," "purely psychological," indicative of either a severe or recurring illness or even just "psychosomatic."¹⁹⁰ Whatever the case, it does seem rather presumptuous on the part of the medieval ecclesiasts to equate Mary's demons with sin when one considers the fact that they do this to *no* other allegedly possessed figure.

Second, scholars point out the lack of any concrete textual support for Mary's sexually sinful image. Mary Thompson asserts that "there is no place in the canonical gospels where that association is made" and "identifying Mary of Magdala as a sinful

¹⁸⁹ The seven deadly sins as they are now known originated as a formal list in Pope Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*. His list was based on a longer list earlier compiled by Johannes Cassianus (360-435). See Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York, NY: Hawthorne Books, 1973), 134. For a detailed discussion of both Gregory's and Cassianus' lists, see Richard Newhauser, ed., *In the Garden of Evil: The Vices and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Toronto, CA: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2005), 35-58.

¹⁹⁰ Quotes in order from the following: Haskins, 12-13; Thompson, 13; Maisch, 3. I will not enter into the contentious issue scholars inadvertently place on the table in their virtually consistent reduction of all things spiritual to some sort of physical/chemical condition to be explained away by science. For noteworthy commentary on this subject, see William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1902, 1994), 3-30.

woman is not scriptural and should be abandoned.”¹⁹¹ Karen King asserts that “there is no historic foundation whatsoever”¹⁹² for Mary’s identification as a whore, but I must disagree. There is a foundation, one that must be painstakingly excavated from centuries of religious rubble, but a foundation nonetheless. Indeed, one cannot ignore the imagery of the whore that was so prevalent in the first century, most commonly that of the soul as a fallen woman in need of salvation via a male redeemer figure. Furthermore, it was not uncommon to see itinerant preachers and their female companions (often labeled, even if only symbolically, as “prostitutes”) traveling throughout Palestine.¹⁹³ Simon Magus and Helen can be regarded as a prominent example of this, and when viewed in the light of early polemicists such as Irenaeus, can be seen as comparable to Jesus and Mary, a comparison which naturally casts Mary as the prostitute. As such, while the texts may not expressly label Mary a prostitute, it may in fact be the case that she was perceived to some extent as a symbolic prostitute, a symbol for the fallen soul that loomed large in the Gnostic texts as well as in the popular imagination, thereby contributing to the development of medieval Christianity. Nonetheless, scholars such as Kathleen Corley deny any accusation of prostitution leveled against Mary of Magdala. It must be noted that she does *not*, however, deny the subtle sexual undertones alluded to by the uncertain nature of the role of the female followers of Christ and his entourage, and given the status of female servants at the time, this is no small wonder.¹⁹⁴ Even so, Corley does not think it likely that any of Christ’s followers included actual prostitutes.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Thompson, 13.

¹⁹² King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 154.

¹⁹³ See Bellan-Boyer’s article as well as Perkins, 171-174 and Kraemer and D’Angelo, 276.

¹⁹⁴ Servants and lower class women in general were seen as promiscuous because of the harsh fact that many did have to resort to prostitution in order to survive. Female servants in the company of men would likely have been seen as prostitutes by outsiders. See Corley’s essay in Levine, 200.

¹⁹⁵ Levine, 200-201.

And she is not alone, but one must ask why none of Jesus' followers could have been prostitutes. If one looks at this through a religious lens, a prostitute is no less likely a candidate for inclusion in Jesus' ministry than is anyone else given the salvific and transformative nature of a relationship with Christ as professed by Christianity. In fact, Jesus' ministry was seen as scandalous due in part to his association with sinners. So, one could have been both a prostitute and a follower of Christ, but there is no definitive evidence to say that Mary was such.

For this reason, countless scholars today have taken it upon themselves to divest Mary of Magdala from her image as the penitent whore simply for lack of biblical evidence. And they are certainly justified in so doing. But to brush aside the possibility that she was seen by some facet of first-century culture as at least a symbolic whore, even if not labeled expressly as such in the extant literature, is to leave aside a significant segment of the cultural milieu in which early Christianity, and thence medieval orthodoxy, took shape.¹⁹⁶

In due course, modern scholarship must ask itself why so much effort has been spent on the demarcation and even denial of Mary's different images, specifically that of the medieval Magdalene, while so little has been spent on exploring the layers that ultimately culminated in the penitent whore.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, there have been many gruff denials of Mary's alleged prostitution, but little acknowledgement of the first-century symbolism associated with the symbolic whore, the fallen soul as embodied woman that is common in many of the Gnostic texts.

¹⁹⁶ See discussion of the fallen soul as a female prostitute on pages 84-87.

¹⁹⁷ Susan Haskins and Jane Schaberg are two modern scholars who are very outspoken against the Magdalene's medieval image.

All in all, any assertion that the medieval image of Mary is *historically* inaccurate is excessive as there is no clearly historical Mary against which to compare her conflated medieval image. On the other hand, to assert that the medieval Magdalene is *scripturally* baseless is reasonable, for there are no texts that explicitly tell us that Mary was indeed a prostitute. And yet it is incomplete scholarship to brush aside the imagery of the fallen woman in the Gnostic texts, texts that did exert some degree of influence on early Christian culture--the culture out of which medieval orthodoxy developed. Indeed, the imagery of the fallen woman is one of Mary's early layers, a layer upon which the medieval Magdalene is ultimately constructed. To overlook these layers while condemning the medievals for their portrayal of Mary is to overlook that which sparked their imaginations, as well as to overlook a significant portion of the Magdalene's collective identity. In short, before criticizing any particular image of Mary, it should first be determined how said image came to be. After all, one should not criticize or deny that which is not fully understood, and modern scholarship does not yet fully understand the complex layering of the Magdalene's many images.

But still, the question of accuracy will not go away--and it is a fair question. Despite intense investigation by countless scholars, this question is impossible to answer definitively, and yet most will argue against her medieval image. Likewise, most scholars refute accusations of even symbolic prostitution for fear of the stigma that these may bring. Therefore, in the eyes of the majority of modern scholarship, she must be acquitted of any reference to sexually explicit sins. It would seem, then, that sins of sexuality have still not lost their taint.

The process of freeing the Magdalene from this alleged taint was started long ago and can be traced to Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (1455-1536), who is credited in large part with having initiated the task of separating the conflated figure of Mary. In his now infamous tract entitled *De Maria Magdalena et Triduo Christi Disceptatio* he asserted that Mary of Bethany, Luke's anonymous sinner, and Mary of Magdala were three distinct individuals. The Church was not pleased and he was promptly charged with Lutheranism and excommunicated.¹⁹⁸ Clearly, they were not ready to lose their shining exemplum of God's forgiveness and their model for the dangers posed by wealth, beauty, and, of course, women and sexuality.

There were those who came to Lefèvre's defense, however, such as Willibald Pirckheimer (1470-1530), who condemned his friend's critics for having snatched Mary from her liberator and having thrown "her with most disgraceful harlots into a stinking brothel when it would rather be more becoming in such a doubtful matter to follow the opinion which approaches closer to piety."¹⁹⁹ Thus, in Lefèvre's Protestant-minded sixteenth century France, Mary's character can be seen as gaining yet another layer, that of the "much maligned Magdalene,"²⁰⁰ a woman unjustly characterized by medieval Catholicism.

¹⁹⁸ Lefèvre cited Church fathers such as Ambrose, Origen, Chrysostom, and Jerome, but this did not free him from the unshakable taint of heresy. He did not help his case when he declared the writings of Pope Gregory to be much too far removed from the Bible. For this reason, Lefèvre insisted that Gregory's writings on Mary should not be considered authoritative despite the former Pope's sainthood and the long customs instilled by his writings. See Richard Cameron, "The Attack on the Biblical Works of Lefèvre D'Étaples, 1514-1521," *Church History*, 38.1 (March 1969): 15-17.

¹⁹⁹ Haskins, 245-246.

²⁰⁰ Haskins, 360.

Conclusion

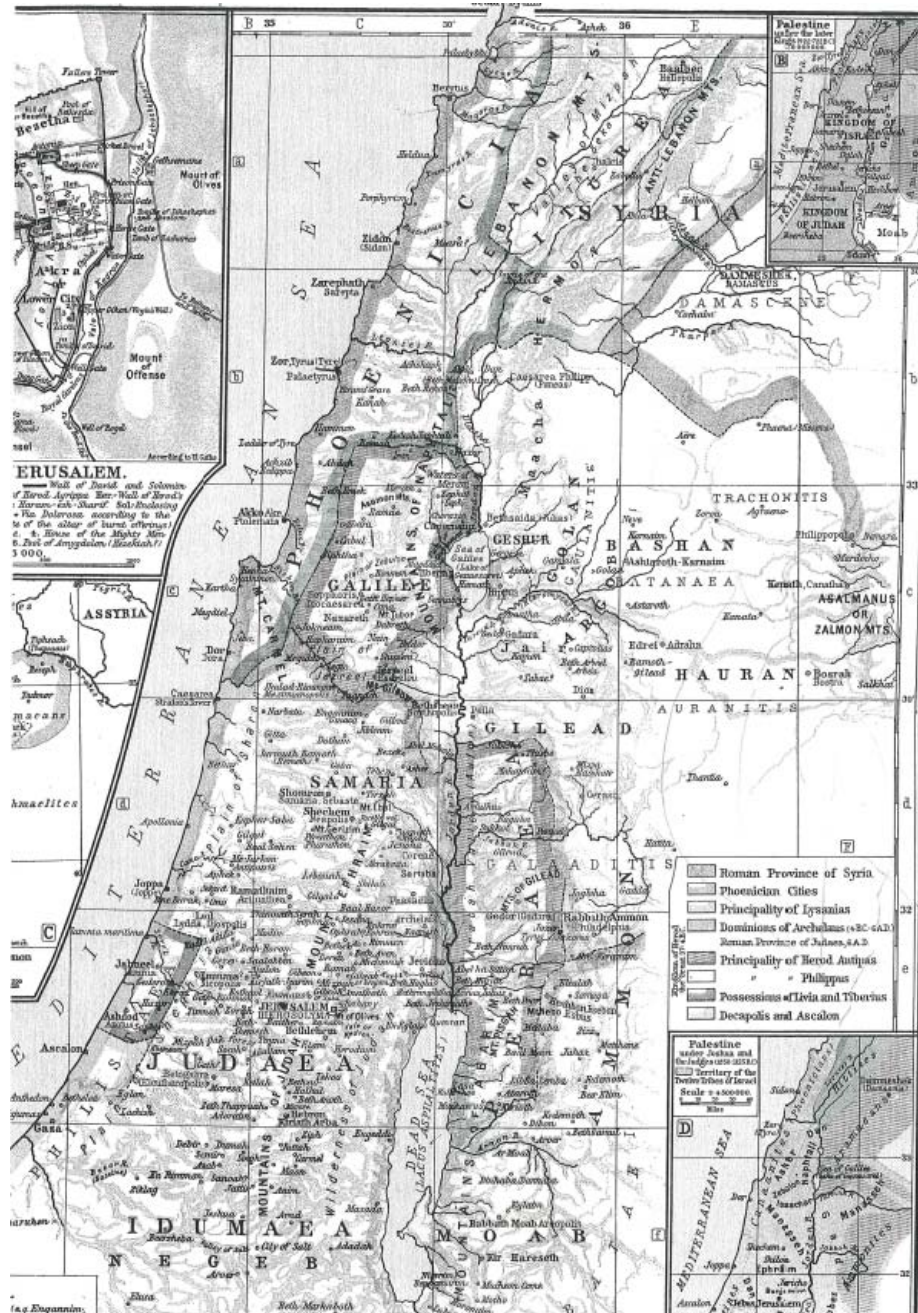
If Mary was in reality not this paragon of penitence, the contrite whore of the medieval imagination, then who was she? There are numerous possibilities, impossible to verify. If not an actual prostitute, her figure was perhaps viewed as a symbolic whore, the fallen soul and companion to her redeemer figure, an itinerant holy man named Jesus, just as Helen was companion to Simon Magus. Historically, she was perhaps a leader in her own right, “inheritor of the light,” and fellow teacher of Jesus, leading the disciples after his death. She was perhaps simply a follower of Jesus and contributor to his movement, one believed to have witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection and who may or may not have shared this news with the male disciples. She was perhaps some combination of all of these characters, or perhaps none of the above.

Ever-evolving, it is the scarcity of information on Mary of Magdala that has served to fuel the fire of both the religious and scholarly imagination alike, a fire that gives her character continued interest, resulting in the addition of further layers. Because of the uncertainties, details were invented, blanks were filled, figures were merged, and a character came onto the stage to play an evolving and ever-cumulative role that has been talked about for centuries. Today, scholars seem most interested in excavating the historical Mary from the centuries of religious invention, but we may never be able to reconcile myth and history in her figure. In fact, such a task may not be necessary, for historical accuracy and historical significance are two distinct categories. It is not

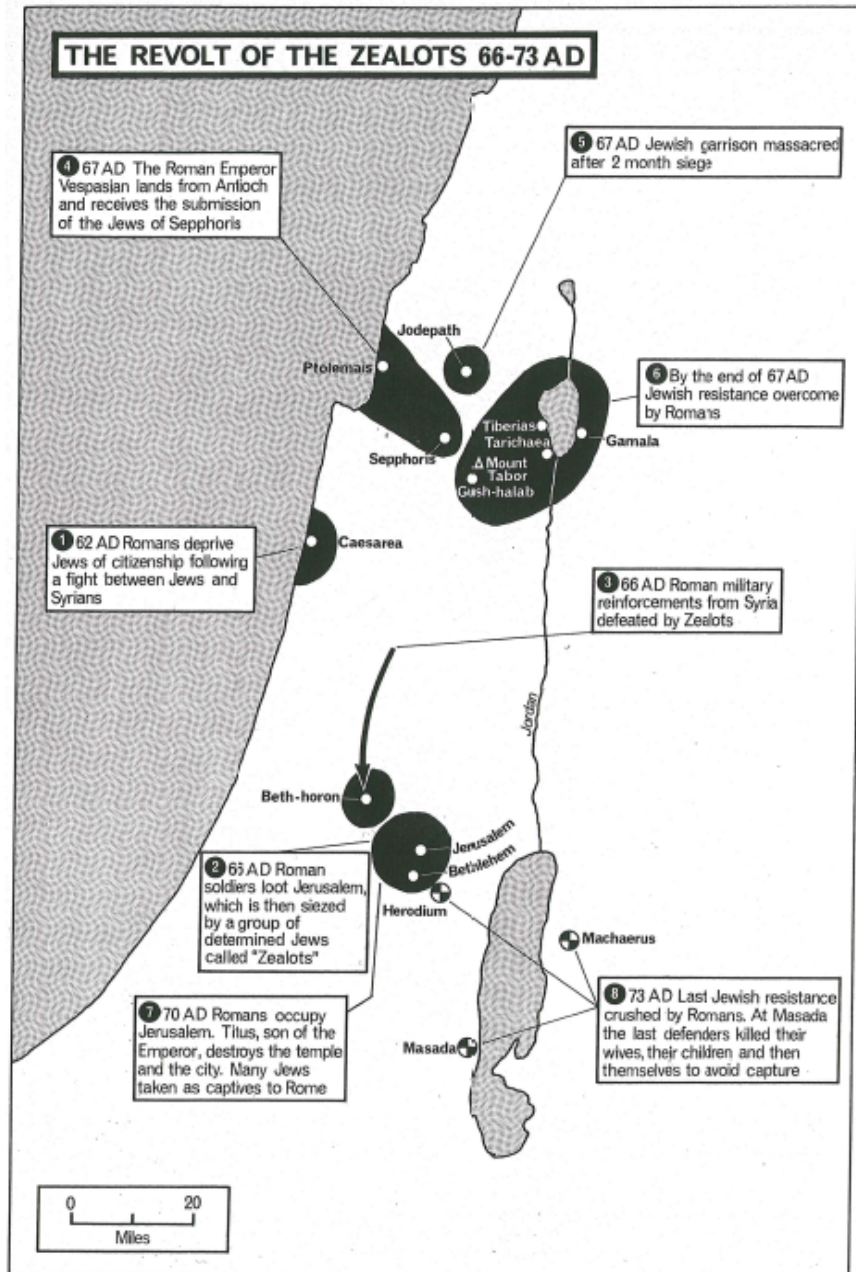
necessary to have the former in order to have the latter. The traditional Magdalene proves this as religious significance far outweighs historical veracity in her figure.

Nonetheless, we still long to know the historical role the Magdalene played, despite the numerous problems associated with attempts to construct a historical figure based on fragmentary evidence. Any such attempt is purely speculative. The medieval ecclesiasts simply chose to manufacture their own version of the play, creating the drama they wanted to see. Today, scholars hope to find the original lines and reconstruct the drama they want to see. In short, her image evolved into that of the penitent whore to serve the underlying spiritual needs of the medieval religious mindset. Her image continues to evolve today as the Magdalene fills the underlying needs of modernity, the need to pull things apart, to discover origins, to see the bare bones of the past, and perhaps even to rewrite the Christian drama. Thus, it seems that while the props and the actors have changed over the years, the story line of the Magdalene drama remains largely the same--she is still a figure used to fill a need. In this sense, the image of Mary of Magdala isn't a figure divided between text and tradition, but is instead a figure whose various layers are linked, performing encore after encore in a still-cumulative role that unflinching fills the needs of her diverse audience.

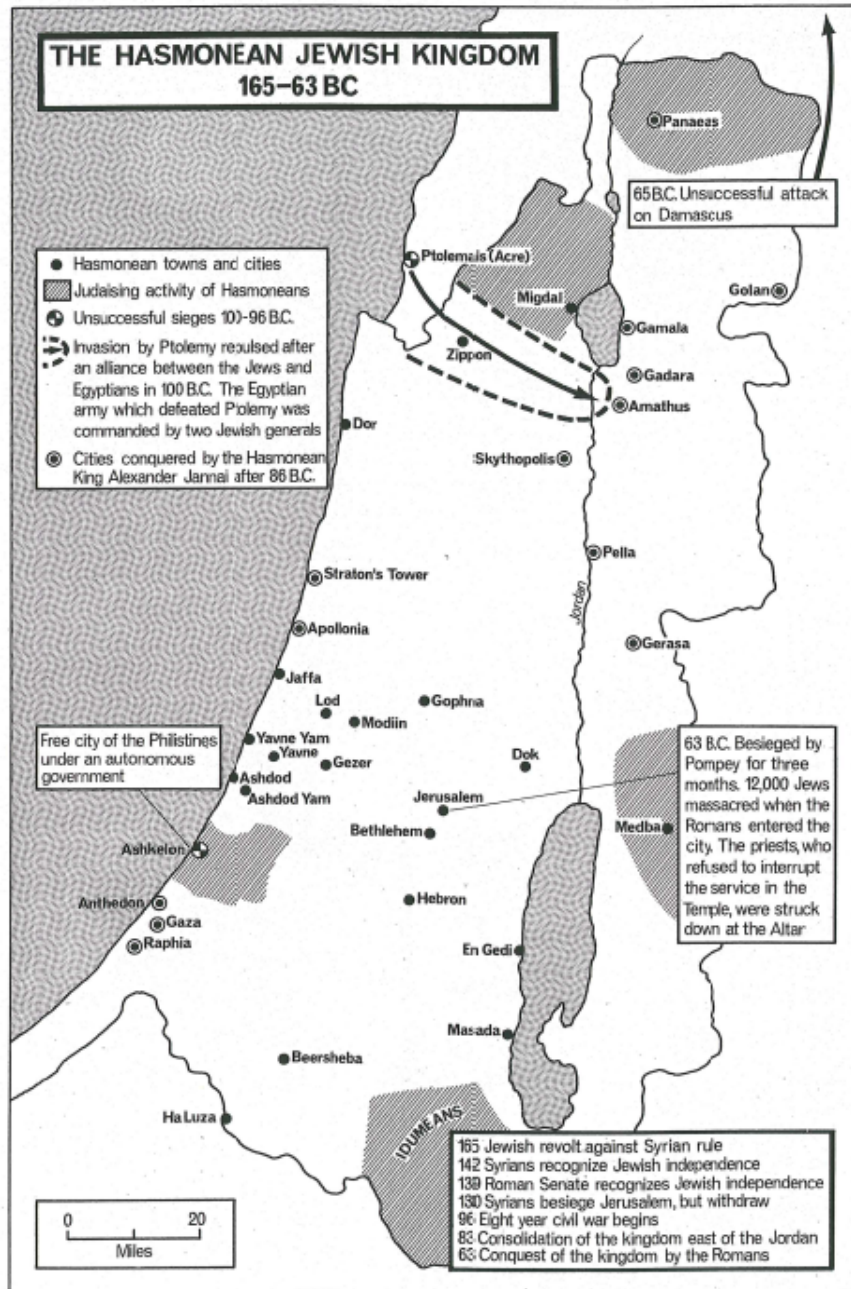
And so, an ending for this character has yet to be written. It may be fitting here to return to the enigmatic *Gospel of Thomas*, 18:2-3, a text which warns against one's concern with the ending when the beginning itself is veiled in obscurity. Such is the case with the Magdalene. As we have yet to determine her origins, we cannot possibly see where she will end, for, according to Thomas' Jesus, "the end will be where the beginning is."



First Century Palestine. Note that both names of the lake are used, the Sea of Galilee and Lake Gennesareth. Map taken from the following: William R. Shepherd, *Shepherd's Historical Atlas: Ninth Edition* (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Books, 1964), 9.



First Century Jewish Revolt. Note the name "Tarichaea" and its location at the southern tip of the lake. Map taken from the following: Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of Jewish History: Seventh Edition* (London, UK: Routledge Press, 1995), 14.



Second Century. Note the name “Migdal” and its location on the northern half of the lake. Map taken from the following: Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of Jewish History: Seventh Edition*. (London, UK: Routledge Press, 1995), 11.

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