She’s a Rebel: Exploring Mary Magdalene Through History

A thesis submitted to the Miami University
Honors Program in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for University Honors with Distinction

by
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April, 2006
Oxford, OH
Abstract

Mary Magdalene has left her mark. She has been represented in many disparate ways since ancient times, yet no one knows who she really was. The Magdalene is mentioned in the New Testament gospels, and in other, non-canonical ancient texts, but there is not nearly enough material in these sources to produce an historical account of what Mary was like.

The Magdalene has been used by many different groups of people to advocate certain stances about women and religion. When seen as a prostitute, Mary has often been used to dismiss women’s religious participation. Yet, she has also been depicted as the “apostle to the apostles,” who announces Jesus’ resurrection to his disciples. As “apostle to the apostles,” the Magdalene is once again being used to advance women’s leadership opportunities in churches.

These two main visions of Mary Magdalene, and many more, have contributed to how women are viewed in Christianity. The vacuum left by scarce historical information has been filled by all manner of content, making various points about women and religion. Thus, depictions of the Magdalene provide a good lens into the continuing question of where women stand in religion.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Bidmead, for her time, suggestions, and encouragement. My readers, Dr. Hanges and Dr. Mandell, provided further insights from their respective fields of expertise. The entire religion department at Miami has been very supportive of me, and I am grateful to them. Emily Tyner, one of my oldest friends and a soon-to-be alumnae of Smith College, generously read through my entire draft and advised me in making the thesis more accessible for readers from other academic disciplines. Megan Tonner, my roommate and close friend, provided good company as we went out for coffee each week first semester and read for our respective theses.
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Mary Magdalene has permeated Western culture. She can be seen in medieval paintings, naked but for her flowing red hair and living in a cave. In the Andrew Lloyd Weber musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*,\(^1\) she is a black woman, and the lover of a rather bewildered Jesus. According to *The Da Vinci Code*,\(^2\) Mary is the ancestor of royalty and the victim of the biggest conspiracy in history. She has been the archetypal leader, the archetypal whore, and has filled a variety of other roles, even though no one knows who she was.

**The Historical Mary Magdalene**

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who

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\(^1\) *Jesus Christ Super Star*, prod. Austin Shaw and Kevin Wallace, dir. Nick Morris and Gale Edwards, 1 hr. 52 min., Universal, 2000, DVD.

had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. -Mark 16:9-11 (NRSV)

“She was hidden there because of an open and not fully appreciated secret, and its implications, at Christianity’s core: that the male disciples fled and the women did not.”

-Jane Schaberg

There is hardly enough evidence to merit any discussion of the historical Mary Magdalene. She goes practically unmentioned in the canonical gospels until the accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection appearances. The verses above are taken from Mark, which most scholars consider to be the oldest of the gospels (C. 60-70 C.E.). Yet this passage, along with the nine verses following, constitutes the so-called longer ending of Mark, thought to have been written in the second century. Even if one takes a standard approach to the synoptic problem, holding Mark to be the oldest gospel text,

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4 Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; the term “canonical” refers to those texts included in a community’s list of books included as part of the Bible. There have been several different New Testament canons through time. This is not crucial to the topic at hand, as the same four gospels have been included in each canon, but a good essay on this subject is located in The New Oxford Annotated Bible, (NRSV) ed. Michael D. Coogan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200), 3rd ed.), 453.
5 Mary Magdalene is mentioned in: Matthew 27:56-61, Mark 15:40-16:9, Luke 8:2 and 24:10, and John 19:25 and 20:1-18. Of these references, only Luke 8:2 is not at the scene of the resurrection appearance to the women/ the empty tomb scene.
6 The synoptic problem refers to the issue of determining the interrelationships between the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. Most scholars believe that one or two of the texts were written by someone with access to the earlier text (usually thought to be Mark), and/or that the synoptics were written from the same oral or written source(s) (usually referred to as “Q”). For more on the synoptic problem, refer to: E.P. Saunders and Margaret Davies, Studying the Synoptic Gospels, (London: SCM Press, 1989).
determining the chronological order of written mentions of Mary Magdalene would still be a thorny issue.

The complicated relationships between the gospel texts are not the only delicate issue in understanding what they have to say about Mary Magdalene. The gospel texts diverge from one another regarding the resurrection appearance accounts more than they do at any other point. In addition, accounts of miraculous events such as the resurrection appearances are always difficult to tackle from an historical standpoint. The accounts cannot simply be treated as historical documents. The writing of histories involves putting events into familiar terms by using analogies, making it inherently difficult to handle records of the miraculous in critical, secular scholarship.

One rather unsatisfying way around the difficulty of writing histories is demonstrated by scholar Richard Bauckham, who has come to define “historical” as: “believable by people with a historically critical mindset today.” Bauckham’s definition is rather unfair, and he comes across as being defensive. History is not a science, but it is a discipline with guidelines, and these guidelines do not allow for theological interpretations of events. In a sense, however, Bauckham’s observation is insightful, for it grapples with the historian’s challenge of locating information that meets the modern criteria for historical fact in sources that were not written with such criteria in mind.

Treatments of the resurrection accounts have been plentiful and cover a broad spectrum of ideological ground, from rationalist approaches (the women really saw only

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a gardener) to near conspiracy theories (the disciples staged the resurrection). The strongest point scholars have made about the resurrection narratives is that, regardless of what happened, women were central to the event. Scholars speak of the women’s prominence in the resurrection accounts in terms of the “criterion of embarrassment.” Women’s religious experiences were heavily downplayed in the ancient Mediterranean world. It was believed that women were particularly gullible and easily deceived by wandering preachers, an idea thoroughly covered in writings from the period. The prominence of women in such a central event in writings from this context suggests that the women’s role was so widely known by the time the text was written that it could not have been denied. No one would base a new religion on the laughable testimony of women unless they had no choice, so the thinking goes.

This issue of women’s testimony is important to keep in mind when looking at Mary Magdalene, and it is one to which I will return. Yet it must be realized that, problems and questions aside, the gospel texts have very little to say about who Mary was. We are told that she had seven demons cast out of her, and we find that she is

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connected to the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection and is directed to tell the disciples that he is risen. There is no mention of Mary’s past, or of how she came to be involved in the circle around Jesus, or what she did after the resurrection appearances. While her former demon-possession is mentioned in passing, there is no account of her exorcism. Mary appears at the scene of the Passion with no personal history, and exits with an uncertain role.

The non-canonical and Gnostic accounts of Mary Magdalene\(^\text{11}\) are a bit more detailed, though it is even more difficult to locate historical information in gnostic accounts of visionary experiences than in the canonical gospel narratives. Taking the non-canonical and gnostic texts together, Jane Schaberg has pieced together a representation of Mary that includes: her importance among Jesus’ followers, the continuation of her memory in an androcentric\(^\text{12}\) culture, her bold speech, her leadership role, her status as a visionary, the memory of her being praised for her special understanding, her particular closeness with Jesus, and that she is defended in a conflict with his male followers.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^\text{11}\) Mary is mentioned in the non-canonical *The Apostolic Church Order* and *The Acts of Phillip*. Gnostic texts with mentions of Mary include: *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Gospel of Phillip*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Pistis Sophia*, *The Second Apocalypse of James*, and *The Manichaean Psalms*. The term “Gnostic” is used to refer to early Christian groups who believed that spiritual knowledge was the key to salvation. The surviving Gnostic texts were produced in various communities, with differing founder-figures and ideas. The idea of knowledge (gnosis) being essential to salvation links these belief systems.

\(^\text{12}\) The term “androcentric” describes male-dominated situations in general, as opposed to the more specific term “patriarchal,” which indicates the official leadership of fathers.

We do not have access to the historical Mary Magdalene. There is simply not enough evidence to reconstruct her, and the textual references to Mary that are available are brief, and indelibly marked by theological ideas. A historical reconstruction of the Magdalene would require much more early evidence than we have. Efforts in this direction, therefore, are best abandoned to writers of historical fiction.

Once the small, sketchy nature of historical information about Mary Magdalene is realized, the later accounts of her life must be reexamined. Early Christian polemics\(^\text{14}\) and medieval legends\(^\text{15}\) cannot tell us who Mary was, but they can reveal the questions that were under debate in the communities in which they were written. The roles available for women in the faith have been under dispute since the beginning of Christianity, a fact that is clearly reflected in Paul’s letters.\(^\text{16}\) This debate was also part of a larger discussion of women and religion taking place in the wider culture where Christianity developed.\(^\text{17}\) In a strange turn of events, the vacuum left in the absence of the historical Mary Magdalene has been filled with propaganda in support of every side of the debate over women’s religious participation. In the guise of redeemed whore, Mary Magdalene has been used as justification for women’s limited (or nonexistent) role,

\(^{14}\) Such as the 4th C. writings of Jerome, Ambrose, Cappadocias and Augustine.
\(^{15}\) Commonly split into two groups, the *Vita Eremiticia* (Lives conflating the Magdalene with the desert hermit Mary of Egypt) and the *Vita Apostolica* (Lives in which Mary becomes a missionary in Gaul), see Katherine Ludwig Jansen, “Maria Magdalena” in *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Maybe Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 65–67.
\(^{16}\) Considered the earliest Christian documents, and now included in the New Testament canon.
while as the so-called “apostle to the apostles” she has been used to champion women’s leadership abilities.

There can be no “Historical Mary Magdalene” project to parallel existing historical Jesus scholarship. Even if more evidence were available, the question of who Mary really was only becomes important to us for its relevance to the present. If it could be proven that Mary was a whore, women’s leadership could be downplayed; if she had clearly been a leader, more support for women’s ordination might follow. In the absence of such evidence, both of these arguments, and many more, are being made, using some portrayal of Mary Magdalene to say something to or about women. And that is where things become interesting.

A Few Remarks on Method

“To discuss the relationship between biblical-historical interpretation and feminist reconstruction is to enter an intellectual and emotional minefield.”

- Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza”

Theological interpretation of texts moves in a circle. First, the text is read. When its application to a present circumstance is unclear, or when the information presented is incomplete or contradictory, interpretive decisions are made. These

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19 The ideas in this paragraph were formulated when working on a paper for a class, and were developed from my reading of the introduction to: Gregory Allen Robbins, ed. Genesis 1-3 in the History of Exegesis, (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988).
interpretations quickly take on a life of their own, and are developed further both along with and apart from their initial textual inspiration. Finally, practitioners who have accepted the developed form of the interpretive theological idea read the text through the lens that this idea provides. While this process provides a mechanism for a community to share an understanding of its sacred text, it also makes it incredibly challenging to view the text apart from the interpretive ideas that have clung to it for generations. Thus, ideas of what the text “says” are intricately bound up in what other people have said about it. This pattern makes it excruciatingly difficult to trace the development of ideas, even ideas that we ourselves hold.

A good part of the scholar’s task is tracing the path of a particular idea, reconstructing its travels around the circle of interpretation. Critical scholarship does not take the interpretations for granted, but attempts to view a text or phenomenon apart from how it is understood within a believing community. Even as they seek out the traces of how an interpretation has developed, and attempt to access how a text would have been understood in the community it was written in or for, scholars also make their own interpretative decisions. Most scholars try to remain objective, but they are, at the very least, interested enough in a topic to study it—they must have some opinions, some stake in the implications of their work.

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20 When “objectivity” is discussed in the humanities, it is often understood as entailing fairness and accuracy. No one would really argue that humanities scholarship is objective in a scientific sense, and therefore a good portion of the debate over scholarly objectivity might be a problem of semantics.
One great reason for all the fuss about Mary Magdalene is that a variety of women feel a kind of connection to her.\textsuperscript{21} This perceived affinity has encouraged Christian women seeking leadership opportunities for women in their churches, and it has also made the Magdalene a great case study for the work of female and feminist religion scholars.

Modern religion scholarship began\textsuperscript{22} with the work of Christian theologians who explored the questions raised by exposure to different religious systems (both ancient and modern) as well as those raised by rationalism.\textsuperscript{23} Because of these origins, the discipline has spent much of its history grappling with the issue of “Protestant bias.” Since most founding scholars came from Protestant Christian backgrounds, they tended to see Protestantism as normative as they worked to define religion in general. Since the Bible is taken to be central to Christianity in Protestantism, any other religion’s sacred text (if it had one) was seen in these terms. As a result, scholars would often view a religion’s text as the guideline for its practices, even if the practitioners did not use it this way. For

\footnote{21 The connection some women feel with the Magdalene is understandable. God is presented in (primarily, there are a few exceptions) masculine terms in the Bible, and most of the major biblical characters are men. Identification with the Virgin Mary, the other main female in the New Testament, would be discouraged, especially in a Catholic context.}

\footnote{22 Many ideas in this paragraph and the next are taken from Dr. Hanges’s lecture “A Brief History of the Modern Study of Religion” given to REL 600 in August 2005.}

\footnote{23 In general, the “discovery” of different people groups (in the Americas, for example) and the “discovery” of Eastern texts older than the Bible led to doubt over Christian/biblical accounts of human history, while Enlightenment rationalism led to questioning of biblical accounts of miracles.}
similar reasons, a religious group’s belief system (~myth) was taken to be more important than its actions (~rituals).  

The discipline was impacted by other ideas of its formative time as well. Religion scholarship was beginning at the same historical moment when academic disciplines were making an effort to be scientific. It was, for example, en vogue to (mis)apply Darwinian evolution to everything, and as a result scholars attempted to locate an evolutionary development of world religions. Along with most other academic work done at the time, early religion scholarship contained racist and sexist assumptions.

Feminist scholarship emerged as a reaction to some of these shortcomings in scholarship, and has introduced new ideas and methods into the field. It is not enough, feminist scholarship maintains, to start paying attention to the women in the biblical texts. Not only have these women’s stories been interpreted by men in male-based cultures, but their stories were also (probably) written by men in (unquestionably) male-centered communities. Rather than contributing to a marginal project concerned solely with the experiences of women, feminist scholarship aims to engage with issues that

24 At times, the Protestant preference for belief over practice was superimposed onto other belief systems as a way of belittling Catholicism, or Judaism, which were taken to have too much emphasis on ritual.

25 The term “feminism” has many meanings, which can be broken, roughly, into three groups. Radical feminism prioritizes the perspectives of women, and often comes out in political settings. In its most basic usage, however, the term “feminism” simply indicates the egalitarian position that men and women are equal (a great many people who would not call themselves “feminists” are in fact feminists by this definition). When it comes to scholarship, the term “feminism” incorporates this basic egalitarian position, but also takes on additional meanings. Feminist scholarship is multi-faceted, but it tends to have certain qualities, including an interest in recovering the experiences of marginalized people (including, but not limited to, women), a willingness to ask hard questions of previous scholarship, and a commitment to activism (which may or may not be political in nature).
affect everyone, providing new insights into how the texts were written and how they have been interpreted.

Postmodern\textsuperscript{26} and feminist scholarship both have questioned earlier notions of what history entails. Their critique of traditional histories is not the same as Richard Bauckham’s, but their observations have a scrap of common ground in the realization that history is not an objective reality. There are historical facts, certainly. While historical events, unlike scientific facts, cannot be proven through repetition in experiments, they can be documented, and they can be proven likely through analogy. This criterion for determining historical probability is one reason why descriptions of events deemed miraculous are so difficult for historians to work with. Yet historical facts, in themselves, are of little value. It is historical narrative that resonates with us. This is what we are taught as children, and what captures our attention from then on. Our traditions are carried in and conveyed through narratives, not mere facts. These narratives are histories if they are written in a certain way: if they include accurate historical facts, and do not include fictional materiel, and follow other conventions of scholarship. Yet the narratives are not objective, for they are always constructed (or reconstructed, perhaps, if they are done well) by human beings, who made decisions as to which facts to include and how to frame them. Most histories have been written by men, deal with the interests of men as such, and therefore are unavoidably unreliable sources when one hopes to learn something about women.

\textsuperscript{26} By “postmodern scholarship,” I mean work that questions the Enlightenment belief in scholarly objectivity (as a practical possibility or even an appropriate goal) and acknowledges and seeks to understand the scholar’s personal involvement in his or her work. Postmodern scholarship and feminist scholarship are two different approaches, but they often overlap and reference one another.
The biblical, non-canonical, and Gnostic texts, and the writings of the early church fathers were written in situations where official male dominance was taken for granted. For this reason, feminist scholars warn, we must not take the information these texts give us about women at face value. Feminist scholars are quite wary of survey projects describing the women of the Bible as an undifferentiated unit. They are quick to point out that specific female characters appear in the text precisely because they are in some way abnormal: their stories cannot be taken as representative of the lives of ordinary women in their day. 27 There are many problems with taking the biblical texts as demonstrative of the reality of their time, for they are at least as concerned with telling how things should be done as depicting how they are done. The problems inherent in trying to extrapolate the lives of ordinary women from ancient texts will not be a great issue in examining the interpretive history of Mary Magdalene, as whatever else she has been in all of her portrayals, she has never been typical.

Partly due to this interest in conveying how things should be done, the biblical texts were not written as histories in our modern sense of the term. They contain historical information, to be sure, and some of the texts have similar concerns to those of histories written today. The conventions of what makes a history a history, however, were unformed in the ancient world. Conceptions of authorship (with students writing in the name of their teacher), causality (divine intervention allowed as a possible explanation of events), and an acceptance of multiple versions of events 28 present a few

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27 Fiorenza, 45-50.
28 While there were probably compelling reasons for including four different gospels in the canon (an oft-speculated reason being that each text was already held sacred in certain communities and could not be discarded), it is sometimes amazing to reflect that the early church allowed four different voices to impart its core message.
of the differences between source texts and modern histories. It is important, when dealing with the Bible, to remember that it was never written to fit into one of our present-day genres.

Feminist and postmodern scholarship both draw our attention to the reality that scholars are humans, and as such always have an objective, and so cannot be entirely objective. Yet feminist work departs from postmodern methodology in its insistence on action. Everyone is interested in the past for a reason, and for feminists, that reason must be explicitly linked to improving the present. It is not enough, feminist scholars maintain, to unearth ancient women’s experiences or to add women’s voices to the cacophony of present-day academic noise. Feminist scholars do not want to gain entrance into the ivory tower of the academy, or tear it down; they want to send the academics out of the tower and into the rest of the world, where they can make an active contribution.

Mary as Whore

_He met another Mary, who for a reasonable fee,_
_Less than reputable was known to be_

_-Dave Matthews Band (Christmas Song)_

The phrase “criterion of embarrassment” could be used in a different sense to describe the portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a whore. There is probably no more effective way to diminish a woman that to suggest she is sexually promiscuous, a double
standard between the genders that endures even today. The image of woman-as-whore is contrasted to that of woman-as-mother, or else woman-as-saint. In each case, women are defined by their sexuality and/or their relationships with men. The “appropriate” feminine roles of wife and mother, or devout virgin, are contrasted against the ultimate corruption of these lifestyles - the prostitute. Often, only these two or three stereotypical categories are available as options for a woman to be grouped into.

Of all the representations of Mary Magdalene, none has been so pervasive as the image of Mary as whore. It is immediately tempting to see this presentation of Mary as a most effective way of dismissing a powerful female figure. And so it is -- as difficult as it is for a woman today to recover from being called sexually promiscuous, it was a worse issue in the Middle Ages. Mary still has not recovered from this label, even hundreds of years later. The effectiveness of this misidentification in stifling Mary, however, does not indicate some sort of Church conspiracy to keep women down, a la The Da Vinci Code. Nothing is quite that simple.

Mary got her bad name through a process of confusion and conflation. The concept of individuality appears to have made enough of an appearance during the Medieval period for hagiographies, accounts of the lives of saints, to become immensely popular. There was a great desire to fill in the gaps and flesh out the accounts of the figures who had helped to begin and shape the Church. As unlikely as it might seem, the “harlotization” of Mary resulted not from a campaign to discredit female leadership, but from a devotion to and fascination with her person.

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29 This term is Schaberg’s.
There are enough Marys mentioned in the New Testament to merit confusion. Furthermore, the gospel writers do not always go out of their way to explain which Mary they are referring to, resorting to unclear designations such as “the other Mary.” As it stands, scholars cannot even agree on how many Marys appear in the gospels, asserting that there are anywhere from three to six.

This understandable confusion allowed for a process of deliberate conflation. This conflation was primarily a sense-making activity, allowing for a detailed account of Mary Magdalene’s life to be composed, and providing an identity for some of the unnamed women in the texts. Along the way, as many as six different female characters were rolled into one, including (1) the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus’ head (Mark 14:3-9, Matthew 26:6-13), (2) Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 12:1-8, Luke 10:38-42), (3) the unnamed “woman of the city” who wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair (Luke 7:36-50), (4) the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11), (5) the Samaritan woman (John 4:4-42), and (6) the bride at the Canaan feast (John 2:1-11).

Jane Schaberg makes several interesting observations about the conflation. First, she thinks that the three accounts of Jesus being anointed by a woman (numbers 1-3 in the above paragraph) are separate versions of one story. Schaberg claims that the original story is (1), in which an unnamed woman anoints Jesus’ head. This gesture is prophetic, and has parallels in the Hebrew Bible. According to Schaberg, this story was projected onto the character of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (2), and the prophetic gesture was changed to a sign of submission. In the last stage, (3) an unnamed “woman

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30 Matthew 28:1.
31 List modified from that in Schaberg, The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene, 74-75.
32 See, for example, Judges 9:8, 1 Samuel 9:16, Daniel 9:24, and 2 Kings 9:3.
of the city” wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair. This progression downplays the prophetic nature of the woman’s action, and also, eventually, turns her into a whore. Women 1-3 could be combined with Mary Magdalene through the common motif of anointing, as the Magdalene had intended to anoint Jesus’ body after his death. On a related note, Schaberg points out that women (5) and (6) are often mistakenly regarded as prostitutes in various interpretations. These thematic commonalities of anointing and prostitution point to an interest in harmonizing the disparate texts.33

Whatever its original motive, the conflation became official in the 6th Century, when Pope Gregory the Great announced that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the so-called sinner of Luke chapter seven were all in fact the same person.34 In any case, the idea that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute has been cemented into Christian interpretations of all stripes.35

Even with the 1969 Catholic Church decision to separate out the various Marys, confusion and conflation have only grown more complex over the course of Christian history. Mary Magdalene has been exhaustively compared to both Eve and the Virgin Mary, serving nearly opposite roles as a foil for each. Opposed to Eve, Mary the repentant whore proved women’s sins could be redeemed. Contrasted against the Virgin,

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33 Schaberg, The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene, 74-5.
34 Jansen, 60. Pope Gregory’s decision to consider the three female characters as one person was finally reversed in 1969 as part of Vatican II. Not all Catholics, however, have adopted Vatican II reforms.
35 Catholic treatments of Mary Magdalene have deeply impacted Protestant views of her. This is in large part because there were centuries of biblical interpretation prior to the Reformation, and some of these interpretations were never reexamined by Protestants. The most disparate views of Mary from those of the Catholic Church are found in Eastern Orthodoxy. The schism between Orthodoxy and Catholicism took place centuries before the Protestant reformation, so the differences in not only theology but in basic reading of the texts is to be expected. For more on Mary Magdalene in the Eastern Church, See Jansen, 59-61, Schaberg 88-93.
the Magdalene was the bad girl.\textsuperscript{36} The trouble taken by early church fathers to put the women of the Bible into clear types was not simply a result of narrow thinking about women: it helped with their expositions of scripture. For all the concern in recent times with taking the Bible literally, early commentators seemed rather opposed to the idea. Stories were mined for symbolic significance, and harmonious theological positions were sought at the expense of choosing a clear reading of any one passage. Many of these interpretations raised more complications than they solved. These convoluted theological interpretations in their turn added to the overall sense of confusion: “The elaborate literary conceit employed by these \{early Church\} commentators sometimes identified the Virgin as the Church, sometimes the Magdalene as the Church, and all three as brides of Christ.”\textsuperscript{37}

Several other factors may have contributed to Mary’s bad name. It has been suggested that Magdala, her hometown, had a reputation for wickedness and was associated with hairdressing and, therefore, with prostitution. In this theory, “Mary

\textsuperscript{36} In nearly all Christian interpretation, Eve is identified with original sin (a concept absent from the text of Genesis and from Jewish interpretations of it). Eve is often placed in contrast to the Virgin Mary, whose role in bringing Jesus into the world helped overturn the curse God placed on humankind (interpretations often view humankind as cursed, though in the text God only explicitly curses the ground and the serpent) as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin. Both women are defined in sexual terms. Many interpretations imagine Eve’s sin as somehow linked to sex, and her name means “the mother of all the living.” The Virgin, in contrast, has a child without having sex, and Catholic doctrine maintains that she remained a virgin all her life. Christian theology sometimes views the Virgin’s obedience as the antidote to Eve’s sin, allowing women to be pardoned for their particular culpability in the garden. Mary Magdalene, unlike these two women, is never placed in the role of mother. She too, however, is used to explain the relationship between women, sexuality, sin and redemption– but her place in this framework is less certain. Seen as a whore, Mary can be used to argue that women are particularly sinful, but even in this view of the Magdalene, her eventual redemption somewhat counters this idea. See Genesis 2:7-3:24, Luke 1: 26-80.

\textsuperscript{37} Jansen, 59.
Magdalene” would be translated as “Mary the Harlot,” but because of the whorish nature of the town, rather than of the woman. This misreading is almost surely not a source of the idea that Mary was a prostitute, and is instead likely to be an indication of how pervasive that idea became later.

The conception of Mary as a whore is also probably related to the mention of her demon possession. A person said to have a demon was widely believed to be a sinner of some sort, and the idea of possession itself can be put into sexual terms.

Mary the Prostitute was an especially useful biblical character. For one thing, she provided a face for Jesus’ exclamation about “the sinners and prostitutes.” Sexual sin has often been taken particularly seriously in the church. Through the history of Christianity, both celibacy and marriage have been defended as the ideal lifestyle with great passion and much scripture-quoting. Sexual sin compromises either stance. Furthermore, in male-dominated cultures, sexual sin could always be blamed on the woman, be she seductress or victim. Finally, if Mary could rise from the world’s oldest profession to be one of Christ’s closest companions, who remained without hope?

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38 Schaberg, The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene, 55.
40 Matthew 21:31-32.
41 One reason for this is that sexual sin was directly identified with the worship practices of Greek and Roman religions at the time. Many of the New Testament’s comments on sexual practices are best understood in this context. See Roy Bowen Ward, “PORNEIA and Paul,” Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society and Midwestern Society of Biblical Literature 6 (1986): 219-228.
42 Bible verses used to champion marriage include: Genesis 1:27-28, Genesis 2:23-25, and Hebrews 13:4. Those used to advocate celibacy include: Matthew 19:10-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:8.
In some legends, Mary was wealthy before embarking on her life of sin. This addition to the storyline enabled her to do double duty, showing the dangers of riches as well as those of promiscuity. If wealth encouraged such misbehavior, then Christianity’s call to give away one’s possessions could be seen as a needed protection from sin, rather than or in addition to a call to sacrifice.

The portrayal of the Magdalene as a whore also came to serve a political purpose. Gnostic communities appear to have presented Mary as an important leader, and so the orthodox church leaders likely emphasized Mary’s sexual reputation in order to combat what they saw as heretical views. In one unusual reference, the Magdalene’s laughing or smiling is given as the reason women cannot partake of the Eucharist. When women were permitted to lead in the early orthodox church, this authority was typically connected to their purity and/or fulfillment of traditional gender roles. Strangely, depictions of the Magdalene as a whore and as a leader were both strengthened through their opposition against one another. Sermons on Mary the preacher would be given in churches where women were forbidden to preach. Mary’s invented past could be used to paint her as a unique exception: the exception that ultimately proves the rule.

Few people today are terribly preoccupied with the power struggle between early orthodoxy and Gnosticism, and many of the early church fathers’ writings survive more as historical curiosities than as enduring sources of precedent. Mary’s labels have outlasted those who provided them. The repentant whore portrayal has endured, in large part because the image of the worst sort of sinner becoming close to Jesus demonstrates so clearly a key message of Christianity. Yet other motives have contributed to the

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43 In the non-canonical *The Apostolic Church Order*. 
endurance of Mary’s bad reputation. Mary the whore was always a popular subject for religious art, particularly during periods where half-clad women were not generally deemed to be appropriate subject matter. For a while in the 19th century, the stylish thing for a man to do was commission a painting or sculpture of his wife or mistress as the Magdalene.  

More recently still, the Magdalene can be seen in the Mel Gibson film The Passion of the Christ sporting long, loose hair and dangly earrings, and conflated with the woman caught in adultery. This depiction of Mary in traditional “easy woman” garb is used to heighten her emotion as she watches the crucifixion and to provide a background for her relationship with Jesus. Many aspects of Gibson’s film were discussed at great length, with the amount of violence shown and the possibility of anti-Semitic viewer responses receiving the bulk of the attention. Little was said about his treatment of Mary Magdalene, which closely followed traditional depictions and could not have been less radical in that sense. In some ways, it is not fair to criticize The Passion of the Christ for its use of the biblical texts (the film does not follow one particular gospel account, and also includes elements taken from Catholic tradition, rather than any of the texts), as the movie stands in a long tradition of Passion narratives. Furthermore, Gibson does not follow Vatican II reforms, so his continuation of the conflated image should not be unexpected, frustrating as it may be. What is more surprising is that this portrayal of the Magdalene received so little attention. Everyone assumed he got that part right.

44 Schaberg, 107.
45 The Passion of the Christ, prod. and dir. Mel Gibson, 2 hr. 7 min., 20th Century Fox, 2004. DVD.
Apostle to the Apostles

“Sophie looked at him. ‘You’re saying the Christian Church was to be carried on by a 
woman?’

‘That was the plan. Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of His 
Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene.’” -The Da Vinci Code.46

The notion that Jesus was feminist surfaces from time to time. The argument that 
Jesus was particularly egalitarian is problematic. For one, it reduces some of the 
achievements of Judaism at the time, which provided more opportunities for women than 
is often recognized. Also, the idea of Jesus as feminist freezes women’s opportunities in 
time- Christian women can do what Jesus (or maybe Paul) allowed the women he knew 
to do, and that is all. Such thinking supposes that Jesus valued women, but 
simultaneously assumes that if Jesus did not oppose the limitations placed on women in 
his time, neither should Christians today. This is not to mention the overall danger of 
projecting our modern ideologies back onto historical situations that predated their 
development. Yet Jesus the feminist is an image that has a certain charm for many 
Christian women (and at least some Christian men),47 and a certain utility for feminist 
scholars. While, on the one hand, the use of scripture as an (or the) authority often limits 
the roles women can have now to those women had in the Early Church, the fact that

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46 Brown, 259.
47 The portrayal of Jesus as an egalitarian can be appreciated by Christians of either 
gender for its relevance to our politically correct culture. On the other hand, the idea of 
Jesus as an egalitarian is viewed in some contexts as a dangerous, subversive threat to 
traditional gender roles.
origins are so significant for Christians can be used conversely if one can argue that Jesus was Egalitarian. Christians who hope to advance feminism within the church can find no technique more effective than demonstrating Jesus himself would have approved of their views.

As we have seen, the propagation of the idea Mary was a whore was popularized by its effectiveness in undermining her authority. This tells us that she was in fact perceived to have some authority to undermine. So much effort would never have been poured into diminishing Mary’s role unless it was worthwhile to begin with.

There are many different understandings of the Magdalene’s role in Jesus’ movement, before and after the crucifixion. Some interpretations place Mary in a particularly feminine leadership role, while others have gone so far as to make her the founder of a breed of nascent Christianity at odds with that of Peter or Paul.

While there has been no conspiracy to cover up the alleged feminism of Jesus, women’s contributions to the early Church were intentionally erased. One of the most telling examples of this cover-up is found in Paul’s list of greetings in Romans chapter 16:

“Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.”

Most translations continue to give the masculine(ized) name “Junias”, although there is no outside record of “Junias” existing as a first name. “Junia,” however, we have

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48 NIV
plenty of evidence for. Also, some ancient sources read “Julia” instead of “Junias,” providing more support for a feminine reading of the name. Yet “Junias” remains the most popular translation choice. It is simply taken for granted that Paul could not have considered a woman to be an apostle- a great deal of gender theology would need to be reconsidered to allow for such a “radical reading”. The circle of interpretive ideas ensures that readings of the text will be guided by pre-existing understandings of what the text can and cannot say.

This mention of Junia is not to suggest that Paul unequivocally championed female authority and has been done a disservice by those who followed. Scholars have noted that Mary Magdalene is surprisingly absent from Paul’s list of those who saw Jesus’ resurrection appearances. Strange, for a woman whose sole mention in the gospels places her in front of the empty tomb. The omission is somewhat difficult to account for. Paul’s letters predate the resurrection accounts (in their present written form, at least), but a later creation of the Magdalene accounts would not make any sense, due to the problematic nature of women’s credibility at the time. Perhaps Paul had personal reasons to omit Mary’s resurrection visit. After all, seeing the risen Lord was

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50 The list, in 1 Corinthians 15, consists of: Peter, the twelve [disciples], more than 500 brothers, James, the apostles, and Paul himself. See Schaberg, 67.
Paul’s stated basis for his own authority, and it is unlikely he would be interested in reminding his churches that it was an experience he had in common with the Magdalene. Not only did both Paul and Mary see their risen Lord, but also, claims were staked that each received special revelation from him. In addition, some Gnostic groups revered Mary as a prophet, whose visions were authoritative. Paul’s attempts to define prophecy in 1 Corinthians are often seen as a response to the claims of female prophets in the Corinthian context, but the phenomenon of female prophecy appears to have been more widespread in early Christianity.

Gnostic texts describe Mary as one given unique spiritual knowledge by Jesus. In several of these texts, she is identified as the personification of wisdom, Sophia. In one mysterious passage in the Gospel of Phillip, a great deal of which is illegible, Jesus kisses the Magdalene, perhaps demonstrating that she is the giver of wisdom.

The Gnostics dismissed the dominant notion of the physical realm being the sole determinant of reality and of the self, focusing instead on the mind. This shift away from the physical was accompanied by a skepticism towards traditional gender roles, allowing women to be defined by qualities other than their relationships with men as wives or mothers. Gender was not a limitation on leadership, because gendered reality was taken to be a transitory illusion.

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51 See Galatians 1:11-12.
53 The Gospel of Phillip, the Manachean Psalm Book.
54 One thing Dan Brown did pick up on!
55 King, 31-2.
Feminist scholars have cautioned that this absence of traditional gender roles may not bode well for women, appealing as it may initially appear:

The *Gospel of Mary* supports women’s leadership, but at the cost of women’s bodies, insofar as women’s power was achieved through the transcendence of gender and bodily sexual differentiation altogether. If women exercised legitimate authority only at the price of their identity as women and the valuing of their own bodies, there would seem to be little here of value for contemporary women except yet another narrative of loss.\(^5^6\)

Perhaps erasing gender distinctions would not present an ideal situation for women. The above comment also sheds light on the relationship between feminist scholars’ exploration of the ancient, and their concerns for their own time.

Although some Gnostic writings describe gender as a surface appearance with no corresponding reality, gender is not an entirely straightforward concept within the body of Gnostic texts. Prophecy is described as a gendered activity that affects women and men differently, and it is sometimes put into explicitly sexual terms. What is more, in some texts Mary’s special status is explained by Jesus as a result of her having been “made male.”\(^5^7\) Thus, while Mary’s sexual wiles were being invented by her critics and would-be biographers, Gnostic communities had more or less turned her into a man. The explanation of a female’s prominence as resulting from her masculine qualities has come up time and again wherever women succeed in traditionally masculine areas. If she

\(^5^6\) King, 32.

\(^5^7\) In the non-canonical *Pistis Sophia.*
excels, she must be “one of the guys,” who has somehow escaped the limitations that tend to hinder her sex.

In the 12th Century, the Magdalene began to be recognized as “the apostle to the apostles.”\textsuperscript{58} This title referred to Mary’s role as the one who preached the gospel to the (recognized) apostles, who would later be commissioned to go out into the world to do the same.\textsuperscript{59} The use of the title came at the same point in time when interest in creating the Magdalene’s biography was at its height. It was also made possible by the acceptance of Pope Gregory’s portrayal of Mary the repentant whore: the emphasis on Mary’s sin had curiously enabled discussion of her leadership role.

Jane Schaberg, who has used the non-canonical and Gnostic sources to come up with her profile of Mary Magdalene, has also used them to hypothesize what she calls “Magdalene Christianity,”\textsuperscript{60} a movement in tension with Pauline and Petrine Christianity. The early Christian community was far from monolithic, a fact clearly indicated by the biblical texts, as well as those writings excluded from the canon(s).

\textsuperscript{58} Jansen, 57.
\textsuperscript{59} Matthew 28:16-20.
\textsuperscript{60} Schaberg, \textit{The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene}, 202-211.
Magdalene Christianity, as reconstructed by Schaberg, would certainly be at odds with the strands of the faith that developed into orthodoxy. Schaberg explains that the egalitarian elements of Christianity were a casualty of Paul’s attempts to unify the believers (and perhaps related to Paul’s apocalyptic expectations). Magdalene Christianity had a low or corporate Christology, meaning that Jesus was not regarded as being on a higher level than other human beings. Related to this Christology was the belief in the divine potential of each person, and the corresponding communal focus of the movement.

This different emphasis is expressed by Schaberg through the use of distinct terminology. She explains that the term “Son of Man,” which places unique emphasis on Jesus and is particularly masculine, could instead be rendered “Human One,” which is corporate rather than individual and is not gendered. Schaberg theorizes that the term, “Human One,” was later changed to “Son of Man.” Unfortunately, Schaberg does not clarify how her more inclusive version of the title relates to its earlier use in the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible.

61 Schaberg’s work on Mary Magdalene is fascinating, largely due to her willingness to go out on a limb. This readiness to push the envelope, however, leads to some problematic elements in her work. Schaberg never quite explains her use of the term “Magdalene Christianity,” but my best understanding is that she is describing a community that looked to Mary as a founder figure, just as other early Christian communities looked to Peter or Paul. It is important to understand that the ideas she presents as “Magdalene Christianity” would have been projected onto Mary by her followers, and may never have been taught, or even held by, Mary. Furthermore, there is not much in the way of evidence to support Schaberg’s picture of “Magdalene Christianity.” It is also important to keep in mind that Schaberg’s work is theological, rather than historical, in nature. Finally, Schaberg’s commitment to advancing women’s leadership in the present cannot be ignored: “Magdalene Christianity” is exactly the precedent that present-day feminist Christian would like to be able to locate in early Christian communities. Schaberg refers to “Magdalene Christianity” as a “religion of outsiders” (11) parallel to Virginia Woolf’s “Society of outsiders.” Schaberg sees herself as being one such outsider.
Schaberg uses the words *Pistis* and *Enumah*\(^{62}\) to contrast Magdalene Christianity against the beliefs of those who looked to Peter or Paul as a founder. *Pistis*, or truth, faith emphasizes the individual believer, the moment of conversion, and the crucifixion, was championed by Peter and Paul and their followers, and has become dominant. Magdalene Christianity, in contrast, emphasized *Enumah*, or trust. *Enumah* faith is communal, focuses on the endurance of faith rather than its genesis, and looks to the resurrection, rather than the crucifixion, as its defining moment. In stressing the crucifixion, *Pistis* faith has themes of suffering, repentance, and guilt, and corresponds to the religion scholarship category “religion of the sick-souled.”\(^{63}\) This combination of themes would eventually lead into the concept of born-again Christians. *Enumah* faith, in contrast, stresses the process that can lead human beings beyond the hold of death, and is a “religion of the healthy-minded.”

Schaberg writes that Magdalene Christianity was always looked down upon, and was eventually completely dominated and overtaken by the emerging orthodoxy. The evidence for this early Christian movement is rather thin. Some of the ideas Schaberg presents very likely were held by the communities that regarded Mary as an important leader, and perhaps founder figure. Yet the profile Schaberg presents of Magdalene Christianity requires quite a bit more evidence to be supported. There are also such parallels between the Magdalene Christianity Schaberg describes and the ideas she herself holds that certain questions must be raised. Feminist scholarship’s greatest

\(^{62}\) *Pistis* is a Greek word, while *Enumah* is Hebrew. The words and their translations are taken from Schaberg’s work.

\(^{63}\) This terminology is taken from: William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Random House, 1994.) Based on lectures given in 1901-1902.
contribution—the possibility of action for change in the present—is also its most significant problem, for it may well lead the scholar to see what she wants to see.

**The Issue of Women’s Credibility**

“It is odd, when the Holy Spirit says: your daughters shall prophesy, that we say: they shall not prophesy.”

-Zinzendorf

The testimony of women was not given much weight in the ancient Mediterranean world. As mentioned above, the “criterion of embarrassment” ensures that the presence of women at the scene is the most clear-cut aspect of the resurrection narratives:

If even the evangelists who record these stories were not entirely comfortable with them and sought to reduce their implications, then it is all the more striking that they record them at all. The role of the women must have already been so well established in the tradition that no Gospel writer could simply suppress it.

Bauckham provides a nice summary of the standard scholarly position. Not everyone, however, has bought into this view.

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64 Zinzendorf quoted in the afterward to *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*, by Karen King, 337-8.
65 Bauckham, 259.
Some scholars instead regard the stories of the empty tomb in the gospels as a later legend, largely because this resurrection appearance is not mentioned in Paul’s letters. This is not a terribly compelling argument, for several reasons. First, Paul barely ever references material that was included in the gospels: when he does quote a statement also present in the gospels, this comes as a bit of a surprise to the observant reader. Furthermore, the story of the women at the tomb would make much less sense as a later legend. Why would it be included, given the low regard for women’s testimony? Even if it were to be included, why would such different accounts be given in each gospel, on such a critical point? Finally, this interpretation makes the ending of Mark even harder to account for, as even the short ending includes part of this scene.

In most scholarship, the critical point to grasp in the empty tomb stories is that the women’s testimony would be discredited in its original context and has yet been included. The majority of scholars point out how devalued women’s testimony was in the whole surrounding culture. Richard Bauckham, however, sees the issue of the women’s witness a bit differently:

In this light we can see that, if there is a problem in their Jewish context about the role of women in the resurrection narratives, it may be not so much their supposed unreliability as witnesses or their susceptibility to delusion in religious matters, but something even dearer to patriarchal religious assumptions: the priority of men in God’s dealings with the world.  

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66 See J.E. Alsup in Bauckham, 260.
67 Bauckham, 275.
This is an interesting idea, which shifts from the pervading view that women’s testimony was not respected in an androcentric setting to a more specific claim about the patriarchal aspects of Jewish religion. Bauckham points out that the women were the only witnesses (other than the Roman guards) who would have seen both Jesus’ death and the evidence that he had risen. For this reason, every man who would believe that Jesus had in fact risen would be relying on the testimony of these women (with the exceptions of the disciples, and Paul, who experience their own resurrection appearances), and as a result, their relationships with God would be mediated by these women. Bauckham locates this role reversal in the mediation of God’s revelation as evidence of an eschatological reversal of order brought about by Jesus’ death.

While it is interesting, Bauckham’s presentation of the issues taken with the women’s testimony is flawed. Bauckham appears to be taking the concept of patriarchy in Judaism incredibly seriously. Oftentimes, a scholar or other reader will infer from the Biblical text that patriarchy was an unquestioned, ever-present reality in Judaism and the early church. Feminist work reminds us, however, that the men who wrote the texts were being prescriptive as well as descriptive. Even if the texts do reflect an expectation that women’s relationship with God was to be mediated by men, and not the other way around, this would indicate, at best, the writer’s ideal. What is more, biblical texts going back as far as the ancestral tradition in Genesis depict women interacting directly with God, in ways unmediated by men. Bauckham is not wrong in regarding ancient

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68 Bauckham, 277.
69 Bauckham, 275-6.
70 One interesting example of this is Rebekah’s barrenness and ensuing pregnancy (Genesis 21-23). At first, Isaac, Rebekah’s husband, prays on her behalf, and she becomes pregnant. This follows Bauckham’s expected pattern of a man mediating
Judaism as patriarchal, but his analysis of this patriarchy takes too much for granted, and, in doing so, misses all the tell-tale subtleties.

**Jesus’ Lover**

> And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [...] loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples [...]. They said to him "Why do you love her more than all of us?"

> -The Gospel of Phillip

> And I’ve had so many men before

> *In many different ways*

> *He’s just one more*

> -Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “Jesus Christ Superstar”

Nothing in the canonical gospels provides reason for supposing a romantic relationship between the Magdalene and Jesus. The only early source remotely related to the idea is the ambiguous, illegible passage in the *Gospel of Phillip* where Jesus kisses Mary (quoted above). Despite this basic lack of evidence, the picture of Mary as Jesus’ secret wife or lover has endured.

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71 Translation by Wesley W. Isenberg.
There are several reasons for the survival of this idea. For one, there is the appeal of a good conspiracy theory, especially when the church is implicated. This angle of the imagined Jesus/Mary relationship has been pushed by fictional writing such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*\textsuperscript{72} and *The Da Vinci Code*.

Another reason for the popularity of the idea that Jesus was involved with Mary is its ability to normalize both figures. If the Magdalene is a wife, she has been fully redeemed and tamed into a traditional gender role. A Jesus who has a girlfriend or is married is more human, and therefore easier to relate to.\textsuperscript{73} Marriage was an important and expected component of Jewish life at the time, and is still regarded as normative in the modern Western world. Besides, everyone enjoys a good love story, and star-crossed love is better still.

The domestication of Mary as Jesus’ supposed wife is paralleled in another depiction of the Magdalene. In Syriac literature, the figure of Mary Magdalene, the leader, was gradually woven into and then replaced with the more submissive figure Mary of Nazareth.\textsuperscript{74} This process of rolling the Magdalene into Mary of Nazareth is instructive, showing us that turning Mary into a wife can provide nearly as effective a check on her leadership as turning her into a harlot.

Imagining a relationship between Mary and Jesus is paradoxically subversive and traditionalistic at the same time: the existence of such a relationship would fly in the face of church doctrine, yet it would also place Mary and Jesus into traditional gender roles. It


\textsuperscript{73} Schaberg, 102.

\textsuperscript{74} Schaberg, 127. Mary of Nazareth is another title for the Virgin Mary.
is sometimes argued that Jesus could not possibly have remained single as a Jewish man in his time and place, but the possibility he could have had a secret wife is slimmer still.

**Other Interpretations**

"*Per feminam mors, per feminam vita*"

- *Augustine*

When it comes to the symbolic use of biblical women, Mary Magdalene is a bit of an anomaly. She has been called a “whore,” but she cannot be used, as Eve has been, to place the burden of the world’s sin on the shoulders of women. The Magdalene may have preached, and may have led, but she is not regarded as the Queen of Heaven like the Virgin. Like the Virgin Mary, she has been identified with the church, but calling her “the bride of Christ” is just asking for a misunderstanding. In some ways, however, the Magdalene has been an ideal symbol of the church in her guise as the wretched sinner who finds redemption in Christ. Since the Magdalene’s sinfulness is emphasized, the Christian believer is encouraged to relate to her in a way she could not relate to the Virgin.

Several other aspects of Mary have been emphasized from time to time. In some Gnostic literature, she is identified with Sophia, the personification of wisdom. Unlike

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75 Jesus’ attitude towards traditional family roles could be debated: see Mark 3: 31-35.
76 Augustine quoted in *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity* by Katherine Jansen, 58.
77 In Catholic doctrine.
every other view of Mary, this one is not particularly concerned with her status as a woman- unless one reads Sophia as the feminine element of, or compliment to Christ.\(^78\)

The Gospel of John’s account of Jesus’ appearance to Mary has added another dimension to how interpreters have viewed her. In John, Jesus tells Mary, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.”\(^79\) These words are rather ambiguous, and have been interpreted in a variety of ways. One view taken by early church fathers is that the Magdalene is not to touch Jesus because she is somehow unfit as a woman.\(^80\) This view is especially damning when taken together with Jesus’ interaction with Thomas in the following verses, for, having told Mary not to cling to him, Jesus orders Thomas to touch the wounds in his hands and side.\(^81\) This interpretation undermines the significance of Jesus appearing to Mary first, and therefore undercuts the interpretive idea that Mary’s actions could somehow redeem women.

Yet some readers have found a completely different perception of Mary in the book of John. The writer of John refers to an unidentified figure, “the disciple Jesus loved” in several passages. Most Christian interpreters have taken the writer to be John, and John to be a direct witness to the action he describes, hence, the beloved disciple is John himself. Yet, some have made the claim that the disciple Jesus loved is the Magdalene, and that the pronouns were simply masculinized to cover this up. As we have seen, there are instances when female names were replaced with male ones to convey certain theological points. The argument that the beloved disciple was Mary,

\(^{78}\) Schaberg, 133-136.
\(^{79}\) John 20:17, NRSV.
\(^{80}\) This was the interpretation taken by St. Ambrose (4\(^{th}\) C.), Peter Comestor and Peter the Chanter (both 12\(^{th}\) C.), among others. In fact, these church leaders believed that the passage indicated that Christ forbade women to preach. See Jansen, 67.
\(^{81}\) John 20:26-27.
however, does not hold much weight. John’s description of the empty tomb scene is rather awkward:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

He writes that Mary found the stone had been rolled away, then ran to tell the (male) disciples, who returned to the scene with her and were the first to find that the tomb was empty. After making this discovery, the beloved disciple “believed,” however, the disciples leave. Mary alone remains at the tomb, and Jesus appears first to her alone. The action in John chapter 20 is rather confusing, but it gives evidence against reading Mary as the beloved disciple. In verse 2, we are told that the Magdalene ran up to Simon Peter and the other disciple. It would be difficult to imagine that John would describe Mary running up to herself. It is simply not possible to change the pronouns and imagine that Mary is the beloved disciple—she is clearly a separate character in a scene involving that disciple. At any rate, John’s treatment of the empty tomb scene shows an attempt to relate the relative prominence of Mary, Peter, and the other disciple.

Non-canonical texts go further, describing the jealousy Jesus’ disciples, especially Peter, feel towards Mary. The conflicts described between Mary and Peter probably is a reflection of the tensions between the Gnostic communities who produced these texts and the emerging orthodoxy. In passages where the Magdalene is the target of jealousy, Jesus comes to her defense. Jesus sometimes defends her by promising to make the Magdalene male. In the *Pistis Sophia*, the Magdalene is masculinized, and Jesus has both masculine and feminine qualities.

At first, turning Mary into a man might seem to be the near opposite of turning her into a whore. Yet, upon further inspection, this transformation works to a very similar purpose. Both depictions of the Magdalene seek to address the same problem: a

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83 In the *Gospel of Phillip*.
84 Schaberg, 140.
powerful woman. The harlotization of Mary works to discredit her by focusing all attention on her female sexuality, while the masculinization of Mary removes the “problem” of her sex entirely. In either case, the precedent for suggesting that ordinary women can lead has been dealt a severe blow.

Mary in Popular Culture

“…her radical absence is a void or an abyss into which a tide of meanings can pour…she has become an empty receptacle, an arena of discourse, and we can invent her in our own image…” - Salman Rushdie

Perhaps the best explanation for Mary Magdalene’s continuing popularity is that the debate over women’s participation in religion is not over yet, and neither is its need for a great symbol. Women make great symbolic representations, serving as the personifications of nations, ships, and lofty ideas (Justice and Liberty were quasi-divine female forms in great Western art long before their flesh-and-blood counterparts could vote). Mary has a great track record as a symbol. She has represented so many angles of what women can be that one can use her to nearly any purpose without doing any original work at all. Besides, how can you create a musical, or a major motion picture, without a female lead?

The recent slew of interest in the Magdalene comes in the wake of Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code. Mary does not directly appear in the novel, but the concept that she

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was Jesus’ secret lover is central to its plot. The book has apparently created substantial confusion, even anger, for the Catholic Church felt obligated to release a statement responding to it. Other than surface-level descriptions of famous art works, there is very little factual information of any sort to be found in The Da Vinci Code, but that has apparently not stopped many readers from believing the conspiracy theories it presents. Neither has the phrase “a novel.” None of the ideas about the Magdalene presented in the book are new, but the book has inspired interest in the “real” Mary Magdalene, as evidenced by the newsmagazines Mary has graced in the last several years. (These are news magazines, not bad for a woman who has been dead for 2,000 years!)

The fairly recent movement to allow women to be ordained as Catholic priests also uses Mary as a symbol. As one would expect, the Magdalene’s leadership, rather than her alleged prostitution, is used to advance this cause. Jane Schaberg herself comes from a Catholic background.

Even as Mary is once again used to advance women’s religious leadership, nearly every popular reference to her depicts her as a whore. As discussed above, for all the controversy around The Passion of the Christ, Mel Gibson did not venture one step beyond the pre-Vatican II view of Mary. The Andrew Lloyd Weber musical Jesus Christ Superstar also depicts the Magdalene as a whore, though in a rather unique way. The actress playing Mary in the film version of the musical is black, which is an interesting decision. Mary is already marginalized as the only important female character in the film, and casting a woman from a minority racial group only heightens the Magdalene’s otherness. What is more, she is shown as one of Jesus’ main confidants, as well as his

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86 See, for example, the December 8, 2003 issue of Newsweek and the 2005 U.S. News & World Report special issue, “Women of the Bible.”
lover, which causes tension between the Magdalene and the disciples. Weber’s Mary is, as she sings, torn over her love of a man who appears to be more than just a man. She also provides counsel to Jesus as his crucifixion approaches. Mary’s message at this time is that “everything is all right,” which is arguably neither accurate nor comforting under the circumstances. It is difficult to decipher how this “let it be” mentality is meant to relate to the story of Jesus’ death, or to what extent it matters that the sentiment is expressed by a woman.\footnote{87}

Perhaps Weber’s Magdalene was meant to convey a strong sense of women’s abilities. After all, Jesus appears to listen to her, and the disciples regard her as a serious threat to influence with Him. Yet, this “everything’s all right now” message is somewhat troubling. In a sense, it is a distortion of a feminist acceptance of grey areas and contradictions. The problem is, of course, that everything is certainly not all right for Jesus as his arrest approaches. Mary’s words become almost mocking because they are so far from being true. The woman has lulled Jesus into complacency in the face of great danger. The more this image of Mary is explored, the more difficult it is to find anything redeeming in it.

Mary Magdalene is also referenced in C.S. Lewis’s children’s book \textit{The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe},\footnote{88} and the recent film based upon it. In this story, the two main female characters, Lucy and Susan, accompany the lion Aslan, the story’s Christ figure, to his execution. These two girls are the only supporters at Aslan’s death, echoing the presence of the women at the scene of the Passion. Lucy and Susan intend to bury Aslan,\footnote{87 The Magdalene character’s assertion that everything is all right is juxtaposed to the frantic activities of Jesus’ disciples, especially Simon the Zealot, who expect him to take action.\footnote{88 C.S. Lewis, \textit{The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe}, (London: Harper Collins, 1950).}
but cannot move him, and are reduced to covering him with their coats. When Aslan has
been killed, Lucy brings out a vial he had given her, which contains an elixir that can
mend any injury, in a gesture that parallels the anointing the women at the tomb meant to
perform. The girls are also present when Aslan returns to life, paralleling the resurrection
appearances to the women in the gospels.

Conclusion

If nothing more, I hope that this paper has clearly demonstrated the lack of
support for the prevalent notion that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. That being said,
the various treatments of Mary raise several important issues for religion and for religion
scholarship.

The way in which interpretations of texts are superimposed back on to those texts
is, I think, underappreciated in text-based religions. The concept of Mary Magdalene as a
whore is one clear example of this process at work, but there is no shortage of examples.
Textual interpretation is, arguably, as much a part of text-based religion as the text(s)
itself (themselves). This is not necessarily a problem, but it should not be ignored. It will
never be possible to gather the historical elements from a text until interpretations have
been separated out from the words on the page.

The many identities of Mary Magdalene also shed light on the way gender is
handled in Christian interpretation. The simple fact that so many versions of the
Magdalene have persisted over time suggests that neither the Bible nor its interpreters
provide a single, clear-cut presentation of what women are to be. Although she has lost
her own identity in the process, Mary Magdalene has aided other women in their
exploration of what it means to be both a Christian and a woman.

The different depictions of the Magdalene often tell us more about those who
created the representations than they tell us about Mary herself. As a result, what people
have said about Mary informs us of their beliefs regarding women and religion, and can
help us track the strands of interpretive ideas. This tendency of images of Mary to
function as mirrors also serves as a caution to scholars, who must be wary of studying
themselves instead of their subject. It is one thing to use depictions of the Magdalene to
convey a point, and quite another to create a depiction of her in our image. Perhaps it
would be possible to construct a new and improved Mary, one who would reflect the
most appropriate message about women and religion that we can come up with. Yet this
construction would be dishonest, and, like all constructions, open to critique from future
generations freed from the pervasive ideas of our own moment in time. For all we know,
in several hundred years, our ideas will be as offensive as the ones we now seek to
replace.

As a result of my interest in feminist and postmodern scholarship, I have
approached this project aware of my own stake in it. Even while I examine all of the
ways in which other people have used Mary to push their own agenda, I too have used
her to explore many of the things that interest and impact me most. I like to think that
being a Christian, female religion student who is also a bit of a feminist has enabled me
to view all of the symbolic uses of Mary with a certain amount of sympathy. Yet, I must
acknowledge that all of these same qualities have given me a personal stake in the
project. Even so, I have been struck by how emotionally detached I have been from this
work. Even as I state the impossibility of scholarly objectivity, I have seen the project be shielded from my more unfounded personal views by the research I have done. In the end, I like to believe, along with the feminists, that “both/and” is often a perfectly viable answer. My hope is that this project is fair and accurate in its recounting of all the uses to which Mary has been put, and that it is also engaging.

Mary Magdalene is unlikely to recover from her unearned bad name. No matter how many times scholars untangle the ideas that have led to her misrepresentations, these versions of Mary will continue to stick. The redeemed whore, the erased leader, and Jesus’ secret lover are powerful images that will not be discarded simply for being inaccurate. Over time, perhaps, the realization that there is no textual support for these depictions of Mary may become common knowledge, although this has not happened yet. Even then, however, the Magdalene is likely to continue to grace literature and art in her various disguises.
Appendix

Non-Canonical Books in which Mary Magdalene is Mentioned:

The Acts of Phillip
The Apostolic Church Order
The Dialogue of the Savior
The Gospel of Mary
The Gospel of Phillip
The Gospel of Thomas
The Manichaean Psalms
The Pistis Sophia
The Sacred Apocalypse of James
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*Jesus Christ Super Star*. Produced by Austin Shaw and Kevin Wallace, Directed by Nick Morris and Gale Edwards. 1 hr. 52 min. Universal, 2000. DVD.


*The Passion of the Christ*. Produced and directed by Mel Gibson. 2 hr. 7 min. 20th Century Fox, 2004. DVD


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