

Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles

BLAIR TOLBERT

This paper won the Hines Award Humanities/Social Sciences Division of 2005.

Karen King introduces the legacy of Mary Magdalene by saying, “Although she is never specifically called an apostle, she fills the role and later tradition will herald her as ‘the apostle to the apostles’” (*Gospel* 142). Mary Magdalene’s authority in the canonical gospels and other noncanonical texts will illustrate her as a prominent disciple and forbearer of the resurrection of Jesus. Traditions of the New Testament gospels, early church fathers, Western European Church, and the Eastern Orthodox Church will convey a variety of opinions and illustrations of Mary Magdalene. The exploration of the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* will continue the trend of empowered of Mary’s empowerment by Jesus. The concluding understanding of Mary Magdalene will represent a strong and caring leader to the disciples who was given authority by Jesus.

The historical framework of Mary will lend its help in the understanding of her place in the gospels and other texts. As well, background information is necessary for the discernment of falsehoods and facts in early church traditions. Her hometown of Magdala is characterized as “...a prosperous and somewhat infamous fishing village on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, four miles north of Tiberias” (Fallon 285). “Fish Tower,” considered another name for the city, was largely Gentile, and the Jewish population had a “poor reputation” (Collins 579). Lucy Winkett asserts that Mary was Jewish, “...as she is named by the Jewish name for the city (the Roman name was Tarichea)” (24). The Bible presents her as an active character at Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb (King 141).

With this background information, one can start to understand the traditions of Mary Magdalene’s character. The overall tradition of the New Testament gospels believes her to be a devoted follower of Jesus. One author characterizes her behavior in the gospels as displaying “endurance and courage” (Winkett 26). Specific details of her appearances in these canonical texts will be discussed later. The early church fathers viewed her in a largely positive light. They did have some apprehension of her legacy based upon the resurrection scene in the *Gospel of John*. In particular, the church fathers questioned her testimony because she was alone at the event. They wondered if Jesus was in physical form at the resurrection because Mary was not allowed to touch him, but nonetheless she was given elevated status as a woman because Jesus told her to

Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles

teach other disciples (King, *Gospel* 150). Even if they question this account, the early church fathers viewed her as a prominent disciple and an important woman in the Christian tradition. The essay “Go Tell! Thinking about Mary Magdalene” is a reflection given by Gregory of Antioch. He apparently wrote in the sixth century that Jesus proclaimed on Easter day to the women, “Proclaim to my disciples the mysteries you have seen. Become the first teachers of the teachers. Peter, who has denied me, must learn that I can also choose women as apostles” (Winkett 23). In some church fathers’ minds, women had great responsibilities in the early Christian Church.

The Western European tradition presents alternative images and traditions concerning the legacy of Mary Magdalene. “In Western European art and literature, Mary Magdalene is most often portrayed as a repentant prostitute, the Christian model of female sexuality redeemed” (King, *Gospel* 149). This image of the forgiven prostitute is a mistaken assumption. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* remarks, “It is more difficult to understand how the repentant sinner... was identified as Mary Magdalene by Gregory the Great, since St. Luke introduces Mary by name immediately after finishing the story of the penitent woman, whose name he either does not know or wishes not to reveal” (Fallon 287). This reckless ideal formed Mary Magdalene’s character in the minds of most persons throughout history. Trying to correct the situation, “In 1969, the Roman Catholic Church officially overruled Pope Gregory’s interpretation but it dominated Western interpretation and tradition—and still does” (Winkett 21). This corrupt image of Mary helped form what Karen King labels the “three-legged base” of Christian models (*Gospel* 149). The Christian model of which she speaks has formed women’s identities. The two other persons along with Mary Magdalene who form this base are the “temptress” Eve and the virgin mother Mary. These three images have determined the characterization of women throughout history. Mary Magdalene’s penitent prostitute identity in the Western tradition is viewed as skewed and misleading.

Winkett explains, “The False equation Mary of Magdala = woman with ointment = woman at the well = ‘loose woman’ = prostitute has produced the composite figure of Mary Magdalene” (21). The orthodox tradition never fell victim to these improper and ambiguous descriptions of Mary of Magdala. Karen King believes that the Eastern Orthodox traditions never portrayed her in a harsh manner, but acknowledged her as an important “leader in the early Christian movement” (*Gospel* 149). The Orthodox gave Mary a powerful place in their practices. Winkett gives the further explanation that the Orthodox Church viewed her as bearer of the good news, and she notes their strong approval because women are given no leadership roles in that Church (23). Overall, the

Eastern Orthodox tradition is truer to the gospel tradition. Their greatest strength was in their ability to correctly identify the differences between Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany, and the “sinful” woman. “Eastern traditions are truer to the gospel narratives, recognizing Mary as the apostle to the apostles, the one who stands in the presence of the risen Jesus and goes to tell the other disciples the news of the resurrection” (Winkett 19). Reflections of the Eastern Orthodox custom are a wonderful lead in to the exploration of the gospel narratives. There are many similarities between the two traditions.

Claudia Setzer introduces the importance of Mary Magdalene when she asserts, “There is considerable shifting of characters among the Synoptics and different identifications of witnesses to the death, burial, and discovery of the empty tomb, but Mary Magdalene remains a constant” (260). Mary Magdalene is a constant figure of witness. The *Gospel of Luke* creates the most debate over Mary Magdalene’s authority as an apostle. Some believe her as well to be the woman who was possessed with seven demons. Fallon describes this situation: “Sometime after she had been freed by Jesus from demonic possession—an expression that probably describes a violent and chronic nervous disorder, rather than sinful state—she and other women gave of their own wealth and service to provide for the material needs of Jesus’ apostolic company” (287). Therefore in Luke 8, Mary is introduced as one of the women who financially supported Jesus’ ministry (King, *Gospel* 142, Winkett 23). The most controversy arises from Mary not being the first person to see the risen Lord (as she is in the other New Testament gospels). Brock emphasizes, “And only Luke fails to provide the names of the women in scene at the cross” (164). Luke gives little support to female characters in this gospel as being worthy to be witnesses, much less having any authority. As well, her proclamations to the apostles of the Easter events “fall on deaf ears” (Collins 579). King notes “Luke’s tendency to reduce the status of Mary Magdalene and indeed of women in general to subordinate roles, especially in comparison with the enhanced roles of Peter and ‘the twelve’” (*Gospel* 142). Claudia Setzer views Luke’s accounts in the same manner: “Luke outwardly denigrates the significance and effect of the women’s witness, while his narrative affirms it” (265). The *Gospel of Luke* brings the most canonical problems to the appeals of people seeking to elevate Mary to apostle status. It is the prominent nature of Peter that fosters conflict for Mary (here and in other texts).

Karen King describes Mary Magdalene as having the distinguished role of being the first person to proclaim the “good news of the resurrection to the other disciples” in the *Gospel of John* (*Gospel* 141). The *Gospel of John* affirms that Jesus was the one who gave her the commission to do so. Ann Brock views this narrative as “portraying her character in dialogue with Jesus” (165). Mary

Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles

Magdalene has an active discussion with Jesus. Raymond Collins notes that the dominant theme of the John's resurrection story is the "development of Mary's faith" (580). The *Gospel of John* gives a positive characterization of Mary Magdalene at the resurrection scene. She is able to openly talk with Jesus and receive his command to go tell other disciples of the events. Compared to Luke's negative estimation of Mary's authority as a witness, Setzer believes that "John shows no apparent discomfort with the reliability of her witness" (263).

The case of the *Gospel of Mark* has to do with the longer ending to this gospel. Setzer asserts, "In the longer ending Mark, supplied in later manuscripts, Jesus also appears first to Mary Magdalene (16:9). While not part of the original Gospel, it confirms the strength of the tradition of the appearance to Mary Magdalene" (264). There is some reason that she was added to the resurrection account. It shows that she is an important figure in the early Christian tradition. Another source notes that her presence at the crucifixion, the burial, and the empty tomb always betray her in the "first instance" (Collins 579). Though she is with two other women, in each scene she is the first to be acknowledged. The *Gospel of Mark* continues the legacy of Mary Magdalene being a prominent witness and figure in the passion narratives.

The *Gospel of Matthew* has many similarities to the *Gospel of Mark* in their accounts of identifying Mary as a part of the crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb. The *Gospel of Matthew* shows a more emotional event for the women involved in the story. Collins notes that "Matthew also significantly varies from Mark insofar as Matthew states that the women joyfully, albeit fearfully, ran from the empty tomb in order to tell the disciples the good news. Subsequently they encountered the risen Jesus who likewise entrusted to them the task of announcing the paschal proclamation (Matt 28: 9-10)" (579). Jesus thought them worthy to take the resurrection message to the other disciples. The women were excited over the news and fully willing to do as their master asked. Setzer agrees, "In Matthew that fear is joined to great joy, and the women's last appearance shows them immediately recognizing Jesus and worshipping him, poised to report his resurrection to others" (263). The *Gospel of Matthew* differs little from the other accounts, but nonetheless adds the women's excitement and joy of knowing that Jesus is the Risen Lord.

The gospel tradition has varied in its level of acceptance of Mary Magdalene. The narratives present a consistent view of Mary as an active follower and witness to the resurrection. One critic suggests, "Many proponents of a revisionist version of early Christian history suggest that the role of Mary Magdalene was diminished in canonical literature because of the patriarchalism of early Church structures" (Collins 581). What cannot be denied is her role as a

proclaimer of the good news. Mary Magdalene was instructed by Jesus to tell others of the resurrected events. Fallon summarizes that “God thus exalted her kind service for the apostolic college to the highest ministry, the proclaiming of Jesus’ victory over death to the Apostles and, through them, to the world” (287). Essentially the gospel tradition shows how Mary Magdalene first gave the declarations to the apostles, enabling them to go and share it with all the nations.

The canonical texts are not the only narratives that reference Mary Magdalene as an active follower and witness. The numerous documents include: *Gospel of Peter*, *Acts of Peter*, *Acts of Paul*, *Gospel of Philip*, *Acts of Philip*, *First Apocalypse of James*, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Pistis Sophia*, *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Gospel of the Egyptians*, *Questions of Mary*, and *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*.

The discovery of the traditions of these texts will begin with the conflict scenarios of Peter and Mary Magdalene. The continuous dilemma arises over who was the better disciple and who was the first to see the risen Jesus. The *Gospel of Peter* presents Mary Magdalene as one of the women who came upon the empty tomb and fearfully left when she saw a man in “shining robes” giving a proclamation (Collins 580). Brock notes that in this gospel Peter was the first witness to the resurrection (164). Nevertheless, Setzer reminds us that “Even in the *Gospel of Peter*, which is more concerned with matters such as Jewish witness of the resurrection and supernatural events, she plays a part” (260). Mary Magdalene is still identified as a disciple of Jesus and comes to his empty tomb.

King writes that “The confrontation of Mary and Peter, a scenario found in the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Pistis Sophia*, and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, reflects some of the tensions in second-century Christianity. Peter...represent[s] orthodox positions that deny the validity of esoteric revelation and reject the authority of women to teach” (“Gospel” 524). Collins has a similar response, “The Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* attests to a competition between Mary Magdalene and Peter and the special relationship that bound Mary to Jesus” (580). Ann Brock views these encounters as more than conflicts, but verbal confrontations concerning Peter, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus (73). The *Pistis Sophia* characterizes Mary as a “questioner” because in this dialogue between Jesus and the disciples, she asks 39 of the 64 questions. Overall, this narrative gives another example of competition between Peter and Mary. “In the *Pistis Sophia* Mary is described as blessed, she whose heart is more directed to the kingdom of heaven than all her brothers...superior to all the disciples” (Collins 580). In the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Pistis Sophia* Mary is exalted because she has a strong relationship with Jesus. The *Gospel of Mary*, which will be discussed in length later, is another example of the strained relationship, with Mary being more knowledgeable than the other disciples. With reference to all these texts, many critics believe that tension

Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles

between these two characters centers on a historical struggle between orthodox and Gnostic authority (“heterodox Christianity and apostolic orthodoxy”) (Collins 581, Setzer 260). No matter what the truth may be, this battle for supremacy has caused Mary Magdalene to be considered less throughout history.

Other documents show Mary Magdalene and other women as strong female leaders. The *Acts of Paul* alludes to strong female leadership from many women like Thecla, Eubula, and Artemilla (Brock 107). The *Gospel of Philip* asserts that Mary was the most beloved disciple and was continually with Jesus (Collins 580, King, *Gospel* 145). She is continually named as Jesus’ companion (59:9, 63:33), and thus, elaborating on their relationship, it infers in 63:34-35 that Jesus “[...loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often]” (“Gospel According to Philip” 159-169). King denotes the power of women when she says, “The second century work, *First Apocalypse of James*, suggests that James should turn to Mary and the other women for instruction” (*Gospel* 143). The *Gospel of Thomas* as well shows strong leadership qualities of Mary Magdalene. Being one of only five disciples named, she is the only female to ask Jesus a question (King, *Gospel* 143). Other texts, *Sophia of Jesus Christ* and the *Dialogue of the Savior*, follow the tradition of her being a “questioner” of Jesus. In both narratives she is mentioned by name as being given the blessing to teach and the authority to speak to Jesus (Collins 580, King, *Gospel* 143-144). Henri-Charles Puech gives one last example of the Mary Magdalene as questioner tradition in a text entitled the *Questions of Mary* (338). It is believed that this text is associated with the *Pistis Sophia*. Mary is given a revelation by Jesus that comes in the form of a dialogue of questions. In all these texts it becomes evident that Mary has a close relationship with Jesus. She has the authority to speak to Christ, teach other disciples, and is constantly acknowledged by name. She is given more power than most men are in these passages.

The *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* is the final element that reveals the true authority of Mary, consecrated by Jesus. Because of this book’s influence in understanding the historical characterization of Mary Magdalene, it is important to have background information on this second century narrative. Puech asserts that it is Gnostic in origin, though it is not certain of its particular school (344). Along with it being a Gnostic dialogue, the text shows some similarities to oral traditions of the second century. “By the early second century, the terminology, themes, characters, and narrative structure of the Jesus story were a part of the shared thought-world of early Christians, and the *Gospel of Mary’s* use of language was typical of this idiom of Christian theological reflection” (King, *Gospel* 97). The *Nag Hammadi Library* explains that there are two versions of this Gospel (King, “Gospel” 524). The original was written in Greek in the beginning of the

third century compared to the fifth century Coptic translation. Between the two versions, only eight of the eighteen pages went undamaged. Further, scholars believe there were two separate writings put together to create one long narrative. Puech affirms this notion, “There is in fact a contrast between the dominant role which she plays in the second part and the modest place which she assumes in the first, or seems to have had in the work which lies behind it” (344).

Karen King traces the lengthy publication process of the *Gospel of Mary* (*Gospel* 7-11). Dr. Carl Reinhardt bought the Coptic version in Cairo during January of 1896. Upon taking it to Berlin, he allowed Carl Schmidt to translate it into German, and it can be known as the “Berlin Codex.” By 1912, Schmidt’s translation was ready for publication, but the printer damaged the manuscript. The *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* was finally printed in 1955, under Walter Till, the supervising editor. In 1912 and 1983 Greek fragments of this gospel were found which were incorporated into the translation later. Thus studying this lengthy course to publication brings us to the point of examining the content of the *Gospel of Mary*.

The first part of the gospel describes the “dialogue between the (risen) Savior and the disciples” (King, “Gospel” 523). The conversation consists of the Lord answering questions pertaining to sin and matter. Karen King identifies this as a “post-resurrection scene” because “[t]he disciples in the Gospel of Mary must already know about the Savior’s death, since they fear that they might suffer the same fate” (*Gospel* 29). The narrative only contains four characters: Levi, Andrew, Peter, and Mary Magdalene. This first section of text can be described as a “pedagogical relationship.” “The model of this dialogue is the ancient ideal of a pedagogical relationship in which the teacher’s words and acts comprise a model to which the disciple ought to conform” (King, *Gospel* 31). The beginning of Mary’s gospel creates an understanding of the deep bond that the disciples had with their beloved Savior. The ending of this scene is when Mary steps into a leadership position. “Here Mary intervenes to comfort the disciples and draw them out of their indecision” (Puech 342). King’s introduction in the *Nag Hammadi Library* backs this image, “Mary Magdalene comforts them and turns their hearts toward the Good and a consideration of the Savior’s words” (King, “Gospel” 523). In another text, King parallels these actions to those of the Savior because she becomes the leader that gives spiritual instruction (*Gospel* 30). This parallel is given further distinction when comparing the ending of the *Gospel of John* and the *Gospel of Mary*. Both gospels have similar phrasing (“Let not your hearts be troubled” vs. “Nor let your hearts be irresolute”) in which Jesus and Mary bring comfort to the disciples (King, *Gospel* 129).

The second section pertains to Mary’s “special revelation” that comes

Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles

from Jesus. Setzer says, “In it, Peter, Andrew, Levi and Mary of Magdala discuss the path of discipleship after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. [S]he is depicted as a person with great insight and an intense spiritual relationship with Jesus” (25). The insight she offers to the other disciples has to do with the path to eternal rest. Puech summarizes the revelation to Mary as such, “In addition [Jesus] described how a soul journeying through the planetary spheres converses with five hostile powers, from which it frees itself in order to attain rest” (342). Other sources note there are four or seven powers. Once past the aggressive powers, the soul is released forever. After she reveals these new and abstract messages from Jesus, the disciples have mixed responses. King’s summary insists that “First of all, Andrew says, these teachings are strange. Secondly, Peter questions whether the Savior really have told such things to a woman and kept them from the male disciples. Levi admonishes Peter for contending with the woman as against the adversaries and acknowledges that the Savior loved her more than the other disciples” (“Gospel” 523).

The responses of the disciples lead to a two fold discussion. The first has been discussed previously, which is the conflict between Peter and Mary. Puech concludes that this continues the pattern of Peter being hostile toward women, especially Mary Magdalene, and in this case, the distrust brings her great despair (343). Peter, along with Andrew, seems to have a problem with new teachings that are based on prophecy, but even more so if it is someone of the opposite sex. Though they have a problem with Mary’s vision, what does it say about her leadership to receive this authority? The Coptic version includes the detail that Mary tells the disciples that this teaching has been “hidden” from them. King explains, “Her spiritual comprehension and maturity are demonstrated in her calm behavior and especially in her visionary experience. These at once provide evidence of her spiritual maturity and form the basis for her legitimate exercise of authority in instructing the other disciples” (*Gospel* 90). Therefore, it is Mary’s superiority in faith and love to Jesus that allows her to receive this vision. The other disciples may have a problem with its content or her gender, but Jesus willingly and respectfully gave her the revelation. It is undeniable that she has authority over the other disciples. The *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* offers a compassionate and controlled leader who offers extended teachings on Jesus’ vision for proper discipleship.

This is the trajectory of Mary Magdalene through Christian traditions, the gospel narratives, and noncanonical texts. Importance has been placed on Mary’s authoritative role in the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*. Overall, the repeated characterizations of Mary reveal a devoted follower, resurrection witness, and commissioned teacher. The fundamental question still remains, why is she not

considered an apostle?

Ann Brock's book, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle*, deals with this essential question. She begins her book by exploring the issue of apostolic authority. Brock looks at the difference in early Christian authorities in which some bishops of the third century referenced females as apostles (2). This is in contrast to the continued tradition of "the twelve" as the only apostles (though this is only mentioned twice in the New Testament). The process of determining the authority of a person as an apostle ultimately relies in his/her qualifications. "In Paul's claim to apostolicity and legitimation, two aspects emerge as essential: 1) witnessing an appearance of the risen Christ, and 2) receiving a divine call or commission to proclaim Christ's message" (Brock 6). The tradition that Mary was the first resurrection witness remains unshaken. Because of her appearance at the resurrection, Mary was commissioned by Jesus to spread the good news (especially in the *Gospel of John*). Nevertheless, other traditions present a different meaning of apostolic authority. Luke's assumptions present a narrower view to the apostolic definition. Brock explains, "These two discrepancies are related because the Pauline definition would/could include Mary, while the Lukan definition would certainly exclude her as she is 1) a woman and 2) superfluous to the 'twelve'" (162). Once again, the Lukan tradition diminishes the role of women. Though this is only one account, more churches follow the Lukan tradition. Other texts outside of the canonical texts, including the *Acts of Philip*, the Virgin Mary resurrection literature, and the *Acts of Peter*, similarly downgrade the authority of Mary Magdalene; thus, creating further opposition for her title as an apostle.

Lucy Winkett illustrates the progress and the rejection to the apostolic authority of Mary Magdalene:

The ancient tradition of Mary of Magdala as *apostola apostolorum* (apostle to the apostles) is used today by Pope John Paul II. However, her place as a Biblical saint, as an apostle, as a woman who spoke with authority about what she knew of the suffering and pain of life, is still in doubt in churches today. (26)

Mary of Magdala is a loyal follower and resurrection witness who is charged by Jesus to teach the faithful followers. She is placed above men, given superiority in many accounts. She is considered pure at heart and having spiritual maturity. Mary, as Claudia Setzer proclaims, is an "excellent woman" (259). She is an apostle. Most importantly, she is the first apostle. She is the one who had courage and devotion to announce the resurrection first. Mary Magdalene is the apostle to the apostles.

Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles

Works Cited

- Brock, Ann Graham. *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.
- Collins, Raymond F. "Mary." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Ed. David Noel Freedman. Vol. 4. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 579-81.
- Fallon, J. E. "St. Mary Magdalene." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Ed. Berard L. Marthaler. 2nd ed. Vol. 9. Washington, DC: Thomson-Gale, 2003. 285-288.
- King, Karen L. Introduction. "The Gospel of Mary." Ed. Douglas M. Parrott. Trans. George W. MacRae and R. McL. Wilson. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. Rev. ed. Eds. James M. Robinson and Richard Smith. San Francisco: Harper, 1988. 523-527.
- . *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2003.
- Puech, Henri-Charles. "Gnostic Gospels and Related Documents." *New Testament Apocrypha*. Eds. Edgar Hennecke, Wilhelm Schneemelcher, and R. McL. Wilson. Vol. 1. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963. 231-362.
- Setzer, Claudia. "Excellent Women: Female Witness to the Resurrection." *Journal of Biblical Literature*. 116. 2 (Summer 97): 259-273. EBSCOhost. William and Evelyn Banks Library, LaGrange. 20 Sept. 2004 <<http://www.galileo.usg.edu>>.
- "The Gospel According to Philip." *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7 ...* Ed. Bentley Layton. Trans. Wesley W. Isenberg. Nag Hammadi Studies XX. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989.
- Winkett, Lucy. "Go Tell! Thinking about Mary Magdalene." *The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology*. 29 (Jan 2002): 19-32. EBSCOhost. William and Evelyn Banks Library, LaGrange. 20 Sept. 2004 <<http://www.galileo.usg.edu>>.