



August 2009

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Recommended Citation

Miller, William S. (2009) "Subordinate Woman or Favored Leader: Portrayals of Mary Magdalene in Christian Canonical & Non-Canonical Gospels," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol10/iss1/9>

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Subordinate Woman or Favored Leader: Portrayals of Mary Magdalene in Christian Canonical & Non-Canonical Gospels

Abstract

By comparing these Christian texts, both canonical and non-canonical, I will examine similarities and differences between the texts with regard to Mary Magdalene and interpret her textual representations. While comparing these criteria, I will simultaneously show that the two general representations symbolize a disagreement between two major sects in early Christianity on the roles of women in religion.

**Subordinate Woman or Favored Leader: Portrayals of Mary Magdalene
in Christian Canonical & Non-Canonical Gospels**

William S. Miller

Across the scope of ancient Christian literature, few women are as enigmatic as Mary Magdalene. Mentioned in a handful of instances in the New Testament Gospels, Mary Magdalene plays a prominent role in many extra-canonical texts. However, these ancient texts portray her in drastically different manners. In the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, Mary Magdalene is a key figure at the crucifixion, burial, and ascension of Jesus Christ. In addition to her portrayal as an important figure at the Passion of the Christ in all of the texts, she is also depicted as merely a female, and therefore, a subordinate figure in the hierarchy of society. Alternatively, many extra-canonical texts have Mary Magdalene filling significantly greater roles. Specifically, the Gospels of Thomas, Philip, and Mary expand her character into an understanding spiritual pupil, teacher, and a leading disciple. By comparing these Christian texts, both canonical and non-canonical, I will examine similarities and differences between the texts with regard to Mary Magdalene and interpret her textual representations. While comparing these criteria, I will simultaneously show that the two general representations symbolize a disagreement between two major sects in early Christianity on the roles of women in religion.

New Testament Gospels

In the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, the repeated mention and identification of Mary Magdalene by name validates her presence and prominence among Biblical women. Furthermore, when amongst a group of women, her name is frequently the first listed (though not always). Moreover, Jesus appears to Mary first after his resurrection in several of the books too. Despite these distinctions above nearly all other women, she is specifically named only eleven times in eight chapters of the Gospels (two chapters each). This juxtaposition between the clear eminence of Mary Magdalene and the rarity of her mention seems a curious peculiarity, one that hints at hidden motives and meanings. In the words of Jane Schaberg, she “was clearly more important . . . than the Gospel writers tell us. Someone who is crucial to the ending of a story cannot . . . come out of nowhere. . . .”¹ This leaves scholars with several burning questions. First, what impression does Mary Magdalene’s minimal representation in the canonical Gospels leave? Second, why do the Gospel writers diminish her role in this way? Third, what does this inadequate representation and the consequent impressions tell us about Christianity and women in antiquity? To address these questions, it seems best to me to discuss the Gospels individually.

Believed by many scholars to be an influence for the books of Matthew and Luke, the Gospel of Mark is arguably the earliest in origin of the Gospels

¹ Jane Schaberg and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, *Mary Magdalene Understood* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 41.

(65-70 CE).² In the book's 16 chapters, Mary Magdalene is named four times, first in Mark 15:40. In this passage, she is with a group of women, watching the crucifixion of Jesus who are "looking on from afar...."³ No explanation is given as to why they are watching from a distance, but it can be presumed that either women were not allowed at such proceedings or that the women did not wish to draw persecution on themselves for associating with Jesus. Regardless, we are given three important insights. The text tells us that the women were disciples of Jesus who "followed him, and ministered to him...."⁴ Additionally, Mary Magdalene is listed first within this group of women disciples (she is always named first among women in the New Testament, except in the Gospel of John 20:1), which emphasizes her favor, not just when among women, but when among disciples as well. Last and perhaps intentionally obvious, the passage asserts Mary as a direct witness to the crucifixion, which will become more important shortly.

Next mentioned in a single sentence passage, Mary Magdalene's presence is emphasized by the simplicity of the observation. Mark 15:47 flatly states that Mary Magdalene, named first in the company of Mary the mother of Joses, "saw where he was laid."⁵ The austere nature of this passage emphasizes two details regarding the text's construction of Mary Magdalene: her eminence over her companions and her witnessing of the burial.

Later, in Mark 16:1, Mary Magdalene is with several other women heading to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body with spices. Again identified first, she is the only figure in Mark specified to be at the crucifixion, burial, and the resurrection. Upon their arrival, the women found the tomb empty except for a youth in white clothing who told them that Jesus had risen. In Mark 16:8, despite the youth's orders to tell the followers of Jesus, the women departed in fear and astonishment, and did not tell anyone of the resurrection. However, in 16:9, Mary Magdalene receives a vision of Jesus post-resurrection after which she reveals the resurrection to the Apostles. Upon her explanation, she is met with disbelief until Jesus appears to the men.

The portrayal of Mary Magdalene in Mark 16 is intriguing for several reasons. Her importance is emphasized again in several ways. In addition to the pattern of first mention, she is the first figure to see (and probably speak to) Jesus after the resurrection, rather than any of the male disciples. Additionally, she is the messenger to the men of his resurrection; this means that he chose *her* above all others to deliver this message. Moreover, Mary is the only person present at all three of the major Passion scenes. Lastly, the passage describes the women as "trembling" and "afraid" and Mary as the one "from whom he [Jesus] had cast out seven demons."⁶ These descriptions depict the entire group of women—including Mary—as frightened, and consequently weak.

² Schaberg, *Mary Magdalene Understood*, 39.

³ Mark 15:40 (All Biblical references taken from the Revised Standard Version).

⁴ Mark 15:41.

⁵ Mark 15:47.

⁶ Mark 16:8-9.

Furthermore, the specific mention of Jesus (a man) driving demons out of Mary Magdalene (a woman) reveals that she was once susceptible to evil spirits, a sure sign of former impiety and evidence of feminine weakness. These revelations undermine her potential strength and leadership, support an image of women's inferiority, and emphasize their reliance upon men for salvation and spiritual guidance.

Moving on, the Gospel of Matthew is not only longer than Mark (28 vs. 16 chapters), but is one of two Gospels believed to be based on Mark. This belief is partly dependent on similarities seen in both books; fittingly, these similarities are readily visible in the discussion of Mary Magdalene. As in Mark, Mary Magdalene's character is not present until the final two chapters, which deals with Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection in both Gospels. Specifically, beginning in Matthew 27:55-56, a group of women is described to be "looking on from afar" during the crucifixion.⁷ These exact words can be found in Mark 15:41 in the nearly the same context. Again, no explanation is provided for why the women are at a distance, and the same assumptions can be made as with the passage in Mark. As usual, Mary is listed first in the group of women.

Another similarity appears in the description of Jesus' burial. Matthew 27:61, like Mark 15:47, consists of a single line describing the presence of Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary to witness the burial of Jesus. In fact, the statement sustains a parallel tone to the Markan passage: sterile observation. Of course, the statement carries a similar emphasis and implication regarding Mary's presence when the tomb is sealed. The final, and by now expected, similarity is that the Magdalene is named before her associate, who is named Mary (perhaps the same Mary named in Mark).

The last chapter of Matthew begins much like the last chapter of Mark, describing the approach of Mary Magdalene and another Mary to Jesus' tomb. Her name appearing first, Magdalene and the second Mary are again greeted by an empty tomb and a figure in white, this time an angel. After discovering the empty tomb and learning of the resurrection, the women are filled "with fear and joy" and, unlike in Mark, run immediately to tell the Apostles of the resurrection.⁸ On their way, the women are met by Jesus, who speaks to them while they hold his feet and worship him.

Now, this telling of the resurrection has both differences and similarities to Mark. First, Mary Magdalene is not overcome by her fear (feminine weakness) as she and Mary literally run to tell the disciples. This image of Mary Magdalene differs because she is a braver version than in Mark; however, she is still depicted as a weak woman because her fear is clearly defined. Another difference from Mark occurs when Mary actually touches Jesus as he speaks to her in their meeting after the resurrection (she is for the second time the recipient of his first reappearance). While this contact in

⁷ Matt. 27:55.

⁸ Matt. 28:7.

Matthew might indicate a different attitude toward women than the other Gospels, I believe that the portrayal of Mary's fear as a weakness earlier in the text negates this possibility. Instead, I suspect that the touch is a clue to Mary's familiarity with Jesus that is omitted from the earlier portions of the Gospels. This contact seems to evidence Mary Magdalene's importance and that she is one of the close, permanent disciples of Jesus. Not found in Mark, this physical contact supports logic that could explain Mary Magdalene's sudden prominent appearance in the later chapters of the Gospels without previous mention.

Like Matthew, the Gospel of Luke is believed to have been written by an author using the Gospel of Mark as a source. However, Luke and Matthew do not necessarily tell the same story, nor do they necessarily represent Mary Magdalene in the same way either. In fact, Luke has several differences from the other books. Most notably, Luke, unlike Mark, Matthew, and John, introduces Mary Magdalene in a setting prior to the crucifixion. Despite this, in Luke 8:2 several of the common trends are still present. The passage identifies her by name from the group of women "who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: ... [Mary Magdalene] from whom seven demons had gone out...."⁹ This statement is another example of Mary Magdalene as a symbol of the inferiority—and the susceptibility to sin—of women, despite their piety or prominence, to men while simultaneously showing favor for her. This quick introduction is the only mention of her until the last chapter of Luke.

Luke 24 opens with the group of women arriving at the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body on the third day after the crucifixion. The women, none of whom are mentioned during the depictions of the crucifixion or burial, find two men in dazzling clothes at the empty tomb. Luke 24:5 states that they "were frightened and bowed..." while the men spoke to them, and then they returned to tell the disciples, who did not believe the women.¹⁰ Mary Magdalene is not specifically named until Luke 24:10, but is still the first woman to be identified. Additionally, the depiction of the frightened women matches both Matthew and Mark and their subsequent flight to the men matches Matthew. In other words, the depiction of Mary Magdalene in Luke follows the major themes (prominence among women, dependence—for all women—upon males) established by the other books.

The most important difference between Luke and the other Gospels is that Mary Magdalene does not receive a vision of the risen Lord, diminishing her importance considerably when combined with her absence from the crucifixion and burial. It may be surmised that she did not have a vision of Jesus because she was not identified as present at the earlier two events. In fact, these omissions were probably an intentional attempt to detract from Magdalene's impact in the text, likely because she was a woman. Luke is the only one of the four canonical Gospels to leave her out in these ways. In Esther de Boer's words from Mary Magdalene: Beyond the myth, "... Luke makes it

⁹ Luke 8:2.

¹⁰ Luke 24:5.

clear that while she and the other women are disciples, they have not been called to apostleship like the twelve male disciples¹¹ Conclusively, Luke portrays Mary Magdalene as a less vital component than other books. Nevertheless, she is still depicted as dependent upon and subordinate to men, despite her favor and piety, because she is a woman. This seems to be the commanding theme of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke in their depictions of Mary Magdalene.

The fourth Gospel of the New Testament is John, and it is also the most unique of the group regarding Mary Magdalene's representation. From her first appearance, a major pattern is broken: Mary is named *last* among a group of women, which is the only time this happens in the Gospels and certainly minimizes her prominence. In John 19:25, she is preceded by Jesus' mother, Mary, and his aunt, also Mary, in the list of names. This same passage also explains that the three women were "standing by the cross of Jesus...."¹² Of course, this is vastly different from the other crucifixion accounts that place Mary Magdalene and the group at a distance. In John, the women are not just close to the proceedings, but the group is smaller. Furthermore, this passage makes Mary Magdalene the only common figure to witness the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection in all of the Gospels (though John does not say she witnessed the burial and Luke does not mention her until the resurrection, as discussed).

Even more strange, John 20:1 describes Mary Magdalene visiting the tomb of Jesus alone when it was still dark. Although these details may have been a mere case of "Johannine dramatization," they are nonetheless different than the other books.¹³ In the passage, Mary is not said to be afraid, indeed her emotions are not specified until later, and she runs to tell Simon Peter after only seeing the open tomb. Summarily, she is not illustrated as a weak woman because her emotions are not addressed, she arrives alone, and she is not greeted by a heavenly figure at the tomb initially. Additionally, rather than cowering in fear, she runs to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple—not the entire group of eleven as in the other books—who believed her claims. While the lack of fear, her arrival alone, and the lack of an admonishment from the men all point to her favor and reputation, one detail does not: her explanation of the empty tomb.

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."¹⁴ These are the words ascribed to Mary Magdalene after she found the beloved disciple and Simon Peter. Clearly, she believed that the Romans had taken the body of Jesus from the tomb, not that he had been resurrected. This statement implies one of two things, either Mary Magdalene

¹¹ Esther de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth* (Harrisburg, PN: Trinity Press, 1997), 57.

¹² John 19:25.

¹³ David Noel Freedman et al., eds., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 4: 579-581, s.v. "Mary."

¹⁴ John 20:2.

did not believe in the resurrection or she is being portrayed as too daft to realize the resurrection had occurred. Given the indications of her piety and respect for her throughout John, it is my opinion that the author of John chose to depict Mary Magdalene as a pious simpleton, not a non-believer. Additionally, later passages support this position as well.

For instance, in John 20:11, after Simon Peter and the beloved disciple have investigated and left, Mary Magdalene is left crying outside the tomb. Upon looking into the tomb, she notices two white-clad angels who speak to her. Then, she turns and sees Jesus, whom she mistakes for the gardener, standing behind her. Choosing to appear to Mary before all others yet again, Jesus speaks to her, and after several questions, calls her by name. Only then, despite answering his earlier questions, does Mary recognize Jesus. Apparently, she reached to embrace him because Jesus says “[d]o not hold me, for I have not yet ascended...” before instructing her to tell the disciples of her experience.¹⁵ Mary leaves and speaks with the Apostles; the passage does not discuss the reaction of the eleven.

This last mention of Mary Magdalene in John clearly highlights the text’s unique qualities regarding her, especially her apparent stupidity. Although she weeps outside the tomb, Mary is not faulted for this; instead, the passage portrays her lack of understanding plainly. Even after seeing two angels and speaking to Jesus, she is too dense to realize that Jesus’ body has not been taken, but has been resurrected. She only comprehends that Jesus has arisen after he addresses her by name. Then, while He is appearing to her, Mary is told not to touch Him.¹⁶ This conveys one of two messages. First, as de Boer expresses, she recognizes the resurrection and “she wants to cling to Jesus as she has known him, in his earthly form ...” and Jesus’ rebuke forces her to relinquish her attachment.¹⁷ On the flip side, the message expressed could be that she is unworthy, as a result of her womanhood or her lack of understanding. Because the attacks on Mary’s intellect establish a precedent in earlier passages, I disagree with de Boer’s interpretation. I believe that Mary’s physical contact is another sign of her faith and love of Jesus, and the author is continuing to attack her intelligence, rather than her womanhood or faith, as earlier.

Using this, the author is also asserting that Mary Magdalene (or women in general), though a pious believer, can only obtain understanding through men. For instance, Mary’s immediate reaction to seek Simon Peter and the beloved disciple is a key sub-text that women should turn to men for answers. This point is accentuated by Mary’s revelation of understanding after Jesus appears to her, which implies that men can provide clarity to women. This implication, coupled with Mary’s overt misunderstanding and stupidity, echoes the image of female inferiority which Mary Magdalene represents in the other three Gospels. Therefore, the Gospel of John unites the New Testament Gospels in two key ways. First, John unites with the other Gospels that Mary Magdalene is “one of

¹⁵ John 20:17.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, 54.

the most consistent, stable elements in the ... resurrection narratives as a whole....”¹⁸ Second, it perpetuates the figure of Mary Magdalene, while prominent and favored, as a symbol that women are subordinate to and dependent upon men for enlightenment. Lastly, it is important to recognize that the authors’ recurrent use of this message demonstrates a common belief that men are better suited as religious leaders than women. Conclusively, this consensus represents the opinion of an entire early Christian sect, an opinion that starkly contrasts that of the non-canonical Gospels.

Non-Canonical Gospels

While the depiction of Mary Magdalene in the New Testament clearly originated in the attitudes of antiquity, many non-canonical texts describe Mary Magdalene (and women) very differently. The Magdalene in books such as the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Mary is still depicted as a favored and pious disciple. However, her status is not restricted to groups of women; that is, Mary Magdalene is a prominent figure amongst both men and women in these texts. Clearly, as Susan Haskins explains, the non-canonical figure of “...Mary Magdalen[e] contrasts strongly ... with the figure that emerges from conventional interpretations of the New Testament.”¹⁹ This contrasting figure appears variously in these texts as a comforting companion, an insightful teacher, and a central early religious leader.

In 1945, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts gave scholars new insight into early Christianity through non-canonical viewpoints. One of the most closely examined of these texts, the Coptic Gospel of Thomas is a compilation of teachings that the author attributes to Jesus Christ. Sometimes the teachings are told with other figures involved, either in dialogue or reference, including Peter or the other disciples. Also, some of the passages echo passages in the New Testament Gospels (e.g. Gos. Thom. 9, 20, 34), which is one of few similarities between the texts. Two of the 114 passages deal with Mary Magdalene and reveal a significant amount of information about her, while differing greatly from the New Testament versions. Mary is first present in Thomas 21, in which she asks “[w]hom are your disciples like?”²⁰ Jesus replies in a lengthy parable—this is one of the longest passages in Thomas—which does not reveal much about Mary Magdalene specifically. However, this passage contains some pertinent information.

Mary Magdalene’s question directed to Christ indicates several things about her importance within some early Christian circles, specifically in what we now call “Gnosticism.” Most notably, her question is one which only a respected equal and leader would be willing to pose. Throughout the entire Gospel, she is one of only five disciples and the only woman to speak.

¹⁸ Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 70.

¹⁹ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Metaphor Books, 1993), 31.

²⁰ Gos. Thom. 21 (Translation of Thomas Lambdin in James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 126-38.

Additionally, it can be assumed that Mary asked this question in the presence of other disciples as this does not seem a question relevant to ask unless as a part of a group. Therefore, this means that she is acting as the voice of the group to Jesus, seeking further understanding of his attitudes toward his disciples. If she conversed with Jesus on the behalf of multiple disciples, presumably men, then she clearly held their respect and felt comfortable as an active participant and leader. Her role as a leader is hinted at because she felt responsible to ask a question concerning all of the disciples. Logically, this means that Mary Magdalene was not persecuted as a woman in the group of disciples; in fact, Thomas 21 makes no attempt to belittle Mary as a female or as stupid, unlike the New Testament Gospels.

More enlightening is the last passage in Thomas. According to Thomas 114, Simon Peter and Jesus engage in a dialogue, with the disciples present, in which Simon Peter attacks Mary as follows:

Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”²¹

This passage is Peter’s “attempt to discredit any authority Mary possesses among the disciples...” which further supports that Mary was a vital leader of the disciples and within the early religious community.²² This attempt by Peter to undermine Mary is a recurring theme in several non-canonical texts.

Certainly, the use of the ambiguous term ‘women,’ rather than a term specifically referring to Mary Magdalene (such as ‘she’ or her name), is a key detail of this passage. Peter’s word selection reveals that his attack is not personally against Mary’s leadership abilities and worthiness; he is attacking these qualities in all women. As a result, many scholars and I believe that the text suggests a prolonged ideological debate between early Christian sects with regard to women’s roles. Apparently, Peter represents the views of the New Testament Gospel authors, in which Mary’s role is “subordinated or obscured.”²³ Contrarily, Mary signifies beliefs that religious leaders should be selected based on spiritual comprehension and not gender. Essentially, Jesus’ intent to “make her male” seems to propose an elimination of gender differences, thereby handing religious leadership to the most pious and understanding of people. Considering that this is the Gospel’s closing passage (and therefore has the last and strongest impression), I find it difficult to construct a different explanation to the intent of this passage. The author adeptly manipulates the figure of Mary Magdalene—a symbol of female weakness in the New Testament—to refute gender divides. So, the author

²¹ Gos. Thom. 114.

²² Lindsay Jones et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomas Gale, 2005), vol. 9: 5756-5758, s.v. “Mary Magdalene.”

²³ Schaberg, *Mary Magdalene Understood*, 125.

paradoxically reinforced gender hierarchy by suggesting Mary become male. It is this deconstruction of female inferiority and potential improvement symbolized by Mary that is most dominant.

The Gospel of Philip, another Gnostic Nag Hammadi text, chiefly discusses Mary Magdalene as a close “companion” of Jesus, more so than as a leader of the disciples. She is presented with Jesus’ mother and her sister in a passage as Mary “... Magdalene, the one who was called his [Jesus’] companion”²⁴ The description of Mary as the “companion” of Jesus is suggestive, and this text has created speculation about her for years.

With one exception later in Philip, Mary Magdalene is not called the “companion” of Jesus again in any Gnostic texts, nor is the term used to describe anyone else.²⁵ However, to summarize Antti Marjanen’s position on the matter, it is more likely that the use of the term refers to a “spiritual consort” because Philip uses a different Greek word for “wife” than is shown in this passage.²⁶ Therefore, it seems unlikely that the author would choose such an ambiguous term instead of the term which refers strictly to a marriage partner. Thus, it is logical to conclude that the author of Philip deliberately chose the term “companion” in order to maintain the passage’s vagueness. For what purpose did the author intentionally select that term? We may never know, but the description of Mary as Jesus’ “companion” is not the only information in the passage.

This text has several parallels to the Gospel of John in the portrayal of Mary Magdalene. Similar to John 19:25, Mary Magdalene is grouped with Mary, Jesus’ mother, and her sister, Mary. Also as in John, Mary Magdalene is named last of the three women. So, despite the obvious prominence indicated by inclusion with such company, the author either paid less homage to Mary Magdalene than to Jesus’ relatives or wanted to stress the depiction of her as his “companion.” Considering the purposeful use of the term, I believe that Philip’s author consciously placed Mary last of the three so that she would be the last figure considered and, hence, be most readily remembered.

If the first instance of Mary Magdalene’s presence in the Gospel of Philip has fostered speculation, then the second instance has fueled conjecture ranging from the realm of realistic possibility to plain outlandish. With obvious translation and interpretation difficulties, the following passage has provoked wild debate since its discovery:

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 Savior answered and said to them, “Why do I not love you like her?” When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the

²⁴ Gos. Phil. 59:6-11 (Gnostic Society Library Version).

²⁵ Schaberg, *Mary Magdalene Understood*, 79.

²⁶ Antti Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), 153-4.

light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness.²⁷

The passage has several intriguing points. First, it clearly implies that Mary Magdalene was not an ordinary pupil and friend. Second, it must be noted that the disciples are incredulous that Jesus could love her more than them. Also, even though several missing pieces are found at key points in the passage, most have been filled in by sentences later in the passage. Specifically, it is revealed that “[t]he Savior” is the figure who “loved her more than all the disciples...” Additionally, the translated term “mouth” has been questioned for accuracy (it is actually missing), but according to Schaberg, evidence in “...Philip itself suggests that mouth is the best choice.”²⁸ Then, what does this passage, and its parable, mean?

Having surmised earlier that Philip 59: 6-11 implies a spiritual relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, it is highly unlikely that the author of Philip chose to contradict the previous passage by suggesting a sexual relationship or marriage now. Furthermore, the parable answer explains that, when compared “to her [Mary Magdalene], others are blind disciples who do not perceive the luminous character of Jesus but remain...” in the darkness of misunderstanding.²⁹ Thus, she is elevated above other disciples for her ability to grasp spiritual teachings. However, it should also be recognized that Mary’s comprehension and favor does not necessarily give her authority over the disciples, as it does in the text discussed in the next section. This is a complete reversal of the foolish figure in the Gospel of John, who could not even understand Jesus’ resurrection. Considering this further, the author is implying through Jesus that a *woman* can comprehend better than *men*, which represents a dramatic break from contemporary tradition in antiquity. This representation of Mary Magdalene’s understanding strongly contrasts the subordinate and dimwitted Mary found in the New Testament Gospels. Remembering the disciples’ astonishment at her favor, the Gospel of Philip, like Thomas, suggests a conflict between early Christian sects toward the roles of women. As a result, this text supports the hypothesis that Mary represents the Gnostic beliefs against more traditional Christian opinions of women.

While Mary Magdalene is a sparsely mentioned figure in Thomas and Philip, this is not true of all Gnostic texts. In fact, she is a central figure in one text, fittingly attributed to her name: the Gospel of Mary. This writing provides the most detailed picture into the role of women in early Gnostic belief. Unfortunately, like many ancient texts, the Gospel of Mary is missing huge portions of text, specifically pages 1-6 and 11-14 are absent. In a 19 page text, this leaves us ignorant to more than half of the text. In spite of this, the three fragmented copies that have been discovered portray a Mary Magdalene who did far more than simply understand: she led.

²⁷ Gos. Phil. 63:30-64:9.

²⁸ Schaberg, *Mary Magdalene Understood*, 80.

²⁹ Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 165.

Without the first six pages, we are left with no information regarding the opening of the Gospel of Mary. The sections in existence open with a post-resurrection meeting between Jesus and the disciples, including Mary Magdalene. Jesus relates teachings about the nature of sin, explaining that all things—material or spiritual—are interwoven and they will separate to their natural, “proper root” in due time.³⁰ At Peter’s prompting, He continues that sin is caused when a person ignores his/her true nature; instead, the sinner chooses a lower, pleasurable nature. Thus, the nature of sin can be overcome by finding the true humanity within oneself. At this point, Jesus urges the disciples to seek their true nature and to preach his teachings. However, the Apostles have not understood the complex lesson, and turn to an unexpected source for clarification.

In Mary 5, the apostles are afraid to preach for fear of their lives and ignorance, but Mary Magdalene calms them and encourages them to be brave, saying “we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us true Human beings.”³¹ Recognizing Mary’s comprehension of the lesson, Peter implores his “Sister,” whom “the Savior loved ...” above other women, to reveal to them “the words ... that you remember, the things which you know that we don’t”³² Mary replies that she “will teach you [disciples] about what is hidden from you.”³³ Her teachings are broken by the missing pages 11-14, but they begin, and later resume, as an explanation of the nature of prophecy, the rise of the soul, and about the evil which tries to trap the soul, keeping it ignorant of its true nature. These teachings are shocking and strange to the Apostles, some of whom are quick to rebuke her.

The portrayal of Mary Magdalene in these two major sections juxtaposes the figure in the New Testament Gospels. She stepped in after Jesus departed to comfort the disciples. Then, she utilized her perfect grasp of Jesus’ lesson to continue teaching the disciples. These actions make it seem as if Mary is moving into Jesus’ place of leadership, especially in her extension of his teaching. Her ability to do so, and with great prowess, exudes spiritual advancement; in fact, her role as a teacher shows that she was more advanced than the Apostles i.e. men. She was not afraid of her vision or her ability to teach and she “thereby models true discipleship: the appropriation and preaching of the Savior’s teaching.”³⁴ In light of this considerable evidence, the Gospel of Mary clearly advocates selection of leadership based on spiritual achievement, regardless of gender. Lastly, the importance, privilege, and leadership of Mary Magdalene in this text unmistakably surpass her figure in the other non-canonical Gospels.

³⁰ Gos. Mary 2:2-3 (Papyrus Berolinensis 8502,1).

³¹ Gos. Mary 5:7-8.

³² Gos. Mary 6:1-2.

³³ Gos. Mary 6:3.

³⁴ Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003), 56.

As soon as Mary is finished speaking, the disciple Andrew quickly challenges her teachings, doubting that “the S[a]vior said these things, f[or] indeed these teachings are strange ideas.”³⁵ Peter then asks, in disbelief that Jesus would privately speak to a woman without their knowledge, “Did he choose her over us?”³⁶ Following these accusations, Mary cries and asks how they could charge her with lying about the teachings of Jesus. Before Andrew or Peter could reply, Levi enters the discussion, calling Peter a “wrathful person.” Then, Levi asserts that since “the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her? Assuredly, the Savior’s knowledge of her is completely reliable.”³⁷ Levi proceeds to chastise them as a group, himself included, for not immediately following Jesus’ commands. Promptly, the disciples depart to preach their newest lesson, ending the Gospel of Mary.

This altercation is the strongest evidence of a struggle within early Christian sects regarding the roles of women and leadership. Andrew’s accusations seem to be founded in his inability to comprehend the teachings; thus, it seems unlikely that his attacks are intended to convey a message. Contrarily, when Peter attacks Mary, the passage asks, “Did he really speak with a woman...?” This use of the term ‘woman’ is unquestionably intentional because the author could just as easily have used Mary’s name or the pronoun ‘her.’ In other words, “the consistent way in which ... Peter refers to women or to Mary’s gender ...” in the confrontations found in the Gospels of Mary and Thomas “strongly suggests that the issue at stake involves leadership roles for women.”³⁸ Certainly, Peter’s incredulity that Mary could receive special teaching and be exalted over the male disciples represents the faction of Christianity that supported gender determined leadership. Mary is without doubt the most definitive non-canonical evidence of a dispute in early Christian movements, as well as of Mary’s favored status among disciples of both genders.

Conclusion

Mary Magdalene has been a major character in Christian texts and traditions for thousands of years. However, in the age of antiquity, her literary figure was represented in a slew of ways. In the New Testament Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, she is depicted as a favored woman disciple of the Lord, but her role is overshadowed by that of the male disciples. In the few passages in which she is mentioned, she plays key roles in the events of the Passion of the Christ; however, her image is often diminished in one way or another by each respective text’s author(s). These diminishment clearly represent the early views of the future Orthodoxy that women are not as suitable to lead religiously as men. In stark contrast of this suppressed female figure is the Mary Magdalene portrayed by the non-canonical Gospels of Thomas, Philip, and Mary. In these texts, Mary shines as a caring leader, spiritual savant, and

³⁵ Mary 10: 2 BG 8502 (p. 17).

³⁶ Mary 10:4 BG 8502 (p. 17).

³⁷ Mary 10:9-10.

³⁸ Brock, *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle*, 84.

encouraging teacher. Furthermore, she is pitted against male disciples, repeatedly Peter, who question her right to lead and teach. Each time, the male opposition is rebuked and shown that she is their equal, despite tradition. In the words of Karen King, Mary Magdalene's persona in these three Gospels is molded to effectively argue for the Gnostic "vision of Christian community in which authority is based ... upon understanding and appropriating the gospel."³⁹

³⁹ King, *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 189.