

# Mary Magdalene: Watchtower of the Flock

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*Blessed Mary, you whom I shall complete with  
all the mysteries on high, speak openly,  
for you are one whose heart is set on heaven's kingdom  
more than all your brothers.*

Pistis Sophia I, 17

*Peter stepped forward and said to Jesus,  
'My master, we cannot endure this woman who gets in our way  
and does not let any of us speak, though she talks all the time.'*

Pistis Sophia I, 36<sup>1</sup>

*A pearl thrown into the mud does not lose its value.*

Gospel of Philip 48<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

**A**postle to the apostles or whore? The “Woman who knew the All” or one who “perfumed her flesh in forbidden acts”?

In a world looking for female voices from the past, where are the female voices in the Christian story? And why has the voice of Mary Magdalene been silenced? Slandered yet never quite suppressed, what does Mary Magdalene's resurgence into consciousness signal for us today? As a female disciple and a leader central to the Jesus movement, her rehabilitation at the very least opens up new pathways for women beyond unattainable ideal (the Virgin Mary) and carrier of sexual guilt (all other women). One of the questions to be addressed in the course of this article is what does “the Magdalene” mean? Did she really come from a town called Magdala as the longstanding official version has it? Or, the tantalizing alternative, was it a title given to her by Jesus to cement her status in the early Christian movement? Much of the traditional interpretation of Mary Magdalene stems from readings of the four gospels and the 33<sup>rd</sup> Homily of Gregory the Great. Whilst important to many, these are not the only texts that discuss her role. Many others have become more widely available in

recent years. By looking at these, we gain a fuller picture of the importance of Mary Magdalene and of her role in the Christian tradition. This article sets out to explore this role and her changing face through historical texts and poetry, and open a space for reflection and encounter with the one whom Jesus named the “Watchtower of the Flock.”

## Introduction: Who was Mary Magdalene and why does it matter?

**W**ho was Mary Magdalene? Everything about her seems controversial. The closest companion of Jesus, a foremost disciple

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## About the Author

**Irina Kuzminsky** gained her doctorate from Oxford University where she travelled on a Commonwealth Scholarship, subsequently being elected Junior Research Fellow in Humanities at Wolfson College. Irina's work encompasses poetry and writing, music and dance, focusing on women's spirituality and the inner traditions of the world's religions. She has been published in the UK, Australia and the US, and her performances and music have been acclaimed in the UK, Germany, NY and Australia.

and leader of the community, or the “woman who perfumed her flesh in forbidden acts” (from Pope Gregory’s 33rd Homily written in 591 AD),<sup>3</sup> to put it bluntly, a whore? The “woman who knew the All” (from *Dialogue of the Saviour*), or a reformed prostitute? Apostle to the apostles (*apostola apostolorum*), or a woman who talked too much and never let the men get a word in (this from *Pistis Sophia*)?<sup>4</sup> And we can even add wife or lover to this list and founder of a dynasty (*Holy Blood Holy Grail*, source of much of Dan Brown’s spectacularly successful *The Da Vinci Code*).<sup>5</sup> In fact, there are not many figures in history who have been more misused and misinterpreted than she was. Yet she refuses to go away. So many strands come together in her: women’s spiritual authority and right to teach and be equal members of their communities; the Semitic Wisdom tradition and the Hellenistic<sup>6</sup> one at the basis of Western Christianity; East versus West; church hierarchy, apostolic succession and mediation versus individual enlightenment and direct vision. We would do well to remember that the roots of Christianity are Hebrew, hence Oriental, although that is something which has tended to be marginalized by the churches, as have the Christian Wisdom teachings in all their paradox, poetic imagery and use of symbols and metaphor. But Mary Magdalene, by virtue of her own marginalization and her prominence in the Wisdom texts, could play a role as the link between the Semitic and Hellenistic strands of Christianity—the church of Peter and Paul on the one hand, and the church of James, Thomas and Philip on the other. She could become the open gate between West and East.

But this should not become a question of either/or. There is room for one tradition to complement the other. Western civilization was built on the Hellenistic strand of Christianity and the good that has come of that should not be jettisoned. But now there is a crisis—in our institutions, in our religions, in our faith. It is time for Jesus’ full message and energy to come through—the message of the Wisdom Jesus who was grounded in the Eastern Oriental traditions of Wisdom teaching. And these

Wisdom texts are precisely the ones in which Mary Magdalene figures prominently.

## The Penitent Sinner

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? ... It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguents to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner... She had displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears...<sup>7</sup>

Pope Gregory the Great’s Thirty-Third Homily, which he delivered in 591 AD, did much to consolidate Mary Magdalene’s image as a penitent prostitute. The Homily continues in a similar vein to the above extract, setting the stage for, amongst other things, the great Baroque paintings of the penitent and lasciviously semi-clothed Mary Magdalene. Gregory’s Homilies were very popular, even becoming incorporated into the liturgies for Holy Week and Easter, thus further fixing Mary Magdalene’s reputation as the repentant sinner in the public imagination.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, however, this Homily, which proclaimed Mary Magdalene a whore, was not officially accepted. Mary Magdalene was revered as one of the myrrh-bearing women (*myrrhophores*) and as “*ravnoapostolnaya*,” which translates as “equal to the apostles,” because she was first to proclaim the Resurrection, and first messenger sent to the apostles themselves and therefore to the world. The following Orthodox hymn to her offers a contrast to Pope Gregory’s Homily:

### *Kontakion I*

When God, who is transcendent in essence,  
Came with flesh into the world, O  
Myrrhbearer,

He received you as a true disciple, for you  
turned all your love toward Him;

Henceforth you would yourself work many healings.

Now that you have passed into heaven, never cease to intercede for the world!<sup>8</sup>

Another point of difference between Eastern and Western churches is that the Eastern tradition states that Mary Magdalene went to Ephesus with John the Evangelist and worked together with him there, dying and being buried in Ephesus. This then results in two Mary's living — and dying — in Ephesus. The House where Mary the mother of Jesus is said to have lived out her days is now a hilltop shrine just outside Ephesus with a sacred healing spring attached to it and a steady flow of pilgrims drawn by a strong sacred presence at the House. Mary Magdalene is supposedly buried near the Cave of the Seven Sleepers, also just outside of Ephesus, although the place is currently quite overgrown and has more of the feel of a tourist destination. Whether there was confusion between the two Marys, or whether both lived in Ephesus or only one, is now impossible to tell. In either case, the strong tradition of Mary Magdalene going to Provence in France does not exist in the Eastern Church. In fact, nobody really knows where she ended up so all is speculation. Was it Ephesus, or perhaps Egypt where she figures prominently in non-canonical texts, or Provence after all, in a cave (giving rise to the fight to claim possession of her very lucrative relics)? However, and quite appropriately, a pilgrimage to the supposed cave of Mary Magdalene at Sainte-Baume inspired Petrarch (1304-1374), to a new vision of woman and of Platonic love in the Sonnets to Laura (*Il Canzoniere*). Petrarch went back to Sainte-Baume several times between the 1330s and 1353, spreading its fame and writing of Mary Magdalene as “*Dulcis amica dei*” – the “sweet friend of God,” an inscription which he is said to have left in her grotto.<sup>9</sup> The Magdalene becomes Petrarch's mediatrix, a role in which she was prominent during the Middle Ages in Europe.

Orthodoxy has its own stories about her. One that is not widely known in the West is that she went to Rome and confronted Tiberius, then Caesar, at a banquet, to tell him about the Resurrection. Tiberius scoffed at her, saying it was

no more possible for the egg she was holding to turn red than for a man to rise from the dead, upon which the egg of course promptly turned red. Hence the icons of Mary Magdalene holding a red egg, and the tradition of painting — and cracking — eggs at Easter, the red color symbolizing the blood of Christ, and the cracking of the egg symbolizing the splitting open of the Tomb at the Resurrection.

However, for many Western Christians it was Pope Gregory's Homily XXXIII that held sway, and the image of Mary Magdalene as a reformed prostitute was the predominant one. Even so she became one of the best-loved saints of the Middle Ages, not only as the penitent but also as the one who illuminates and who, after her conversion of course, became both the intercessor and the beloved disciple of Christ. Intimacy and closeness between Mary Magdalene and Jesus was assumed and celebrated in texts such as St Anselm's (1033-1109) long prayer to her,<sup>10</sup> which speaks of her ecstatic love for Christ whom she comes seeking like the Bride in the *Song of Songs*, and *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, who writes that Christ “embraced her in all his life.”<sup>11</sup> Such expressions of the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene are not that far from the Gnostic writings with the difference that in the latter she is not a repentant prostitute.

In 1517, the French theologian Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (1455-1536) wrote a tract *De Maria Magdalena et triduo Christi disceptatio* followed by *De tribus et unica Magdalena disceptatio secunda* in 1519, which held that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and Luke's sinner were different people, not a composite figure, which was also the position of the Eastern church.<sup>12</sup> Lefèvre based his work on the authority of the Gospels and the writings of early Christian theologians such as Origen, John Chrysostom, Jerome and Ambrose, essentially rejecting Pope Gregory's Homily and asserting the Gospels' authority ahead of it. That same year Luther published his grievances against the Roman church. Lefèvre's work sparked enormous controversy and persecution, culminating in a charge of heresy and excommunication in 1521, forcing

him to go into exile. The Catholic Church was not prepared to admit that it had been wrong on such a crucial figure as Mary Magdalene at such a delicate time when it was being challenged by the Protestants, so the second half of the sixteenth century saw renewed emphasis on Mary Magdalene in the image of a voluptuously sensual yet repentant and weeping sinner, hair loose and clothes in seductive disarray, as many great paintings of the Baroque attest.

### ***The Magdalens***

Magdalen penitent

Upon her knees

Red hair cascading to reveal a curve of breasts

Should it not rather be the painters

Penitent

For using her for their great sanctioned pleasure?

Yet even in such guise

Her image burned with brightness

And she lived on in furtive fantasies of pleasure

Thus unforgotten though maligned

She waited patiently

Until her time would come.<sup>13</sup>

The question remains though, why was there such a concerted effort made to silence Mary Magdalene and blacken her reputation? Clearly preeminent in her own time, she was later marginalized and suppressed, going from a figure who challenged the status quo to one who confirmed it. She was not completely suppressed of course, as the power of her image continued to shine through, as it does even now, challenging us to uncover the full scope of her archetypal dimension. Even in her invented role she became one of the best-loved saints of the Middle Ages and beyond. But the role she was allotted for so long fed all too well into the whole impossible virgin mother/whore dichotomy that does not leave real flesh and blood women with too many options. There is an unattainable ideal on the one hand (Mary the Virgin),<sup>14</sup> and the “sinner you are responsible for all the ills of the world” — Eve

or Pandora — on the other, used to justify the submission of women and the silencing of their voices throughout long periods of Western history.

It actually took from 591, the date of Gregory the Great's homily, until 1969 for the Catholic Church to make the admission they had got it wrong about Mary Magdalene. In 1969, the text for her feast day, July 22, was altered under Pope Paul VI from Luke 7 (the sinner anointing Jesus) to John 20 (the poignantly beautiful meeting between Mary and the resurrected Christ in the garden). However, she was also at the time demoted to a saint from “apostle to the apostles,” so it was only a partial vindication. Also, this 1969 admission did not seem to have much impact on the popular perception of Mary Magdalene if Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1970 musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* or Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* are anything to go by. But times are changing. In 1978, the epithets describing her as *magna peccatrix* (great sinner) and *Maria poenitas* (penitent Mary) were finally removed from the Breviary. And on June 16, 2017, Pope Francis reinstated Mary Magdalene to her full apostolic status as “apostle to the apostles,” also raising her feast day to the rank of a liturgical feast.

Is it possible that the current resurgence of Mary Magdalene into consciousness, and the other hidden tradition of Christian origins that she represents are finally having an impact and may also be offering Christianity a way forward? There certainly has been a huge resurgence of Mary Magdalene into mass consciousness with popular books and movies such as the *Da Vinci Code* and *Mary Magdalene* (the recent film directed by Garth Davis), playing a role in this. In addition, many formerly obscure texts, such as the Gospels of Mary, Philip and Thomas, have become available in new and more accessible translations, while scholars such as Cynthia Bourgeault, Marvin Meyer, Margaret Starbird, Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King have also played a big part through their contributions to biblical scholarship. Some of the information being made more widely available concerns things long known to scholars though not the general

public, while some of the new stories attached to Mary Magdalene are no less suspect in their own way than some of the old ones. She is everything from a priestess of Isis, initiator into sacred hidden mysteries, wife of Jesus and founder of a bloodline, and much more besides. Yet all such interpretations, recent and not so recent, remain shallow. Their result is to limit her true spiritual stature and contain her as a woman in what ultimately becomes a limiting and limited role.

So—what if Mary Magdalene was indeed the favorite disciple of Jesus, an important leader in the apostolic community engaging in apostolic work, and Jesus' close, if not closest companion? As Marvin Meyer states in the opening sentence to his Introduction to the *Gospels of Mary* —“Of all the disciples of Jesus, none seems to have been as independent, strong, and close to Jesus as Mary Magdalene.”<sup>15</sup> And what if Jesus did name her “the Magdalene” because she was to be in a sense his successor and the Watchtower of the Flock? This question is significant not just in historical terms but also in terms of current roles and opportunities for women in our own religious and spiritual communities. And because of the kind of Christianity Mary Magdalene represents it also has broader significance for our times in the context of the transition of Christianity from an institutionalized faith to a more individualized one, mirroring the similar transition of our society.

### “Of Magdala” or “the Magdalene”

The whole question of Magdala and why Mary is called “the Magdalene” remains a vexing one. For most, the answer is simple — she came from the town of Magdala, hence Magdalene. End of story. Except it isn't.

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The repentant prostitute story came about thanks to Pope Gregory the Great's Thirty-Third Homily. The Magdala connection happened in a somewhat similar manner.

In actual fact the town of Magdala was not around at the time of Jesus and Mary. Reliable early Greek sources such as the Codex Vaticanus (one of the earliest MSS of the Greek Bible, dating to c.300-325 AD), the Codex Sinaiticus (c.330-360 AD), Eusebius (c. 260/265-339/340 AD), and Jerome (347-420 AD), all mention a place called Magadan (cf Matt 15:39) (deriving from the Aramaic “precious ware” “magad”), not Magdala (which derives from the Aramaic “magdal” or Hebrew “migdal” meaning “tower”). Orthodox and Catholic bibles actually say Magadan not Magdala, unlike for instance the King James Bible. (New scholarly revisions have reverted to Magadan.) Only in the fifth century did a Byzantine copyist alter Magadan to Magdala, which opened up other opportunities, especially since the site was on the pilgrim route to Nazareth and Tiberias. Somewhat conveniently, Magadan itself, along with many other places, had been destroyed in 363 AD by a powerful earthquake in the Galilee region.<sup>16</sup>

Pilgrimage had become popular since Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the state religion and Helena's discovery (or, technically, “Invention”) of the True Cross. Many pilgrims went to the historical places of the Holy Land, writing the equivalent of postcards home. And of course everybody wanted the enhanced status that came from visiting places where Biblical characters had lived. So, when in the early sixth century (c.530 AD) a pilgrim named Theodosius came upon what had been Magadan, he naturally wanted it to be an important place and declared he had come to Magdala (which sounded like Magdalene)

“where the lady Mary was born”—“Magdala, ubi domna Maria nata est.”<sup>17</sup> Then, in the eighth century, Hugeburc, an Anglo-Saxon nun from the Abbey of Heidenheim in Germany, wrote the biography of Willibald (*Vita S. Willibaldi*) who had been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in 723-727 AD. In this manuscript she mentioned a pilgrim church in Magdala Willibald had visited where Mary had allegedly been freed of her demons.<sup>18</sup> By the ninth century the house of Mary Magdalene had been “discovered” enclosed by a church built by the Empress Helena. Helena certainly had been to Jerusalem and had founded a lot of churches in the fourth century, but, just as certainly, had not been to Galilee nor founded any churches there. However, by then the story was deeply entrenched and the legend stuck, even though Magdala had not been around at the time of Mary Magdalene, while Magadan had.

Even Jerome, not known for his particularly enlightened attitudes towards women, especially in regards to female sexuality, makes no mention in a letter to Principia in 412 AD of Magdala as a place or, for that matter, of Mary Magdalene as a sinner. He does though make an interesting reference to Mary Magdalene. To quote, he writes “how Mary Magdalen — called the tower from the earnestness and glow of her faith — was privileged to see the rising Christ first of all before the very apostles.”<sup>19</sup>

Jesus often gave titles or epithets to his followers that would define their essence (see Mark 3:16-17). Thus Simon became Cephas or Peter, the “Rock,” the Zebedees were Boanerges, the “sons of Thunder,” Thomas was Didymos the “Twin” — and Mary, in line with the preceding examples, was “the Magdalene,” the Tower, as derived from “migdal” or Migdal-eder, the Watchtower of the Flock. In the Greek texts of the gospels her name even sounds like a title: she is “Mary called Magdalene” (as in Luke 8:1-3), or “the Magdalene Mary,” or in Matthew, Mark and John, “Mary the Magdalene.” Migdal in the Bible always appeared paired with another word, such as Migdal-eder (see Gen 35:21, Micah 4:8), which means the Tower of the Flock. So Mary the Magdalene is simply Mary the Tower, or Mary the Watchtower of the Flock. By extension, she was the

Beacon, the Lighthouse, the Guide. It makes sense — Jesus spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd, and shepherds of large flocks had wooden watchtowers built from which to look out over and protect their flock. In *Micah*, the Lord comes as a shepherd Messiah from Bethlehem and is then made a King who brings salvation. For anyone steeped in Biblical study and lore the Watchtower was an easy association to make, as obvious as Peter the Rock. Mary the Watchtower, lighthouse or beacon helps the Good Shepherd to protect his flock and illuminates the people as a visionary.<sup>20</sup>

### *Micah 4:8-9, 11*

And to you, o Migdal-eder,  
Watchtower of the Flock,  
stronghold of the daughter of Zion,  
unto you shall the former dominion be restored,

the kingdom of daughter Jerusalem.

Now why do you cry? Have you no king?

...

Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, “Let her be profaned...”

These last proved to be prophetic words in relation to Mary.

## Seven Demons

Despite Pope Gregory’s inferences in his Homily, the expulsion of demons in the gospels usually referred to the healing of physical and mental illnesses and infirmities, such as deafness, epilepsy, paralysis, palsy, blindness, dumbness and the like. John the Baptist was accused of having a devil because he did not drink wine or eat bread. The number seven usually referred in the Bible (also in Egypt and Babylon) to completion or wholeness (the seven days of Creation and the numerous references to 7 in *Revelation* being obvious examples), so the implication of the “seven” here is that Mary’s physical and mental healing would have been complete, making her the most aware disciple and the most open and receptive to Jesus’ message of the Kingdom. In this context it is interesting to link the seven demons to the seven chakras or psychic/spiritual centers of the body which, it could be said, Jesus chose

to purify in Mary Magdalene, making her a pure vessel for the hearing and the preaching of his Word. We could also, in our current terminology, perhaps speak here of “purifying the subconscious.”

### ***Encountering the Mansions of my Soul***

... after Teresa of Avila

Seven demons He cast out of you –

– They called you sinner –

Seven mansions form the crystal castle of my soul

Seven times the Law said that a man should be forgiven

Seven times seventy You told us to forgive them when they fall

Seven centres spin within us subject to defilement

Seven sins of avarice and gluttony and lust

Sloth, anger, jealousy, and pride

Seven centres which He chose in you to purify.

Seven demons He cast out when you first met Him –

– They had their pleasure in imagining how you sinned –

Seven centres glowed so bright within you

That you could learn the inner paths from Him

Dwelling within you He could lead you

Into the insubstantial realms

Drinking in wisdom no longer distorted

You did not fear to question Him.

Seven are the mansions of my soul’s palace

Yours were pure crystal and dazzlingly clean

And at the centre of those seven mansions

In you was pure space

And God dwelt within.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Anointing**

**M**ary the Magdalene, Mary as Watchtower, Lighthouse, Beacon, Lightbearer and Lightbringer. What else can be inferred about her with some measure of confidence? She had considerable independent means — women were not allowed to inherit according to Jewish law but people, especially in the Jewish Hellenized elite, found a way around that by giv-

ing their sisters, daughters and other relatives “gifts,” in addition to which they could access dowries or a bride-price, so her wealth, while unusual, was not wholly exceptional. In consequence, it is most likely that she belonged to the Jewish elite, and, incidentally, Jesus himself was a rabbi who moved in elite circles. His close followers, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were members of the ruling council or Sanhedrin. She was a close follower of Jesus who travelled through the countryside with him supporting his mission and his followers, alongside other women. She had had seven demons expelled from her. She was there throughout the week of the Passion, from the entry into Jerusalem to the Crucifixion where she was one of the few who stood firm while others fled. She went to anoint Jesus’ body on the third day (incidentally, usually it was a close female relative who did that, most often a wife, as it was such an intimate thing to do).<sup>22</sup> She was (in three accounts) first witness of the empty tomb and of the Resurrection, apostle to the apostles, charged to tell the others the good news. The picture that emerges even from these details is that she was clearly not a minor character. She is there in all the critical defining moments of Jesus’ life and ministry, at the heart of the Christian mystery. In fact, at the death, burial and resurrection, there are always two people—Jesus and Mary. (See Luke 8:1-3, Matt 27:56, Mark 15:40, John 20:1, Matt 27:61, Mark 15:47)

Interestingly, in the earliest redactions of Mark (such as the early fourth century Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus), which do not have verses 16:9-20, the empty tomb itself is witness enough for Mary Magdalene, while the Resurrection itself was portrayed in very early Christian art as the arrival of the myrrhophores at the empty tomb, with no attempt to portray the risen Jesus. The tomb is seen to be empty like the Holy of Holies of the temple — empty but filled with the presence of God.

That Mary Magdalene was most probably from the Hellenized elite is also indirectly attested to by the lists of women in the gospels where she is often placed first, even ahead of Johanna, who was the wife of Chuza, the steward of Herod Antipas, and hence of high status her-

self. Additional proof of her status is the link to Nicodemus who provides the oils for Mary Magdalene to use at the tomb, while her personal wealth is attested to by the oils she herself provides and uses in the anointing of Jesus, oils which would have cost the equivalent of a year's wages for a laborer at the time. Mary Magdalene is not only apostle to the apostles, first witness of the empty tomb and of the Resurrection, but also the anointer of the "anointed one" (Messiah), playing a leading role in this crucial episode which stands at the beginning of the whole Passion narrative in three Gospel accounts. As Jesus says:

**Mark 14:8-9**

... she has anointed my body beforehand for burying, and truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.

The four gospels provide four accounts of what reads essentially as the same event — the anointing of Jesus. It is clearly extremely important: priests and kings were anointed and Messiah means, "anointed one." So the anointing is important and the anointer is too. It would not be incorrect to say that the anointer imparts the Holy Spirit through her act, thereby conferring kingship or priesthood on the "anointed one" or Messiah. It is rather ironic that such an important act in the whole Christian drama, which Jesus himself said would be forever remembered and recounted in memory of her who did the anointing, should have been written up in such a confusing manner. However, in two versions, despite Jesus' clearly recorded words that this will be told "in memory of her," *she* is nameless. In John she is said to be Mary of Bethany, a dear friend and sister of Lazarus and Martha (and quite possibly the same person as Mary Magdalene), and in Luke she is the nameless sinner who only anoints Jesus' feet, not his head, and who gave rise to the prostitute story. Therefore instead of being remembered forever and honored for her act, her story is sunk in a confusing mire, with in every case the identity of the woman written out of the story—she is nameless, or there under a different name, or there

in the guise of a prostitute. Yet Mary Magdalene is the obvious choice — her presence is all over the story. It is she who comes to anoint Jesus in his tomb, so who else would be anointing him, as Jesus says, in preparation for his burial?

It is interesting that it is Luke who tries to blacken Mary Magdalene's name: his is the only account of an anointing by a prostitute (Luke 7) which he follows up by introducing Mary Magdalene in Luke 8 as the woman with seven demons having gone out of her, almost inviting the reader to draw their own associations. In the other three gospel accounts the anointing begins the Passion narrative, with only Luke placing the episode much earlier in Jesus' ministry and effectively dissociating it from the Passion story. Clearly, it was too important and well known to leave out, but Luke did manage to distort it in his account and to discredit the reputation of the woman doing the anointing. At the crucifixion all the evangelists name Mary Magdalene as a witness, apart from Luke. Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles which brings Paul into the story as a major player — the major player actually as two thirds of Acts is really about him, although Paul never met Jesus in his lifetime. Mary Magdalene, who did and who was there all the time, is entirely absent in Acts. For whatever reason, Luke does not want her there, and he does want to diminish or eliminate her role. One has to wonder why she was so much of a threat. Paul likewise excludes her from the list of those who saw the risen Christ in 1 Cor 15:3-8. Maybe, to anticipate, it was not just that she was a woman (though that was clearly a problem), but that there were two opposing camps in the early Christian movement: on the one side, the aspiration to direct inspiration and experience of the Divine; on the other, apostolic succession, hierarchy and priestly mediation. Mary Magdalene's direct experience subtly undermines the need for a church hierarchy and for mediation of the experience of the living Christ through the priesthood. For her the empty tomb was already enough, that and an absolute faith in the Kingdom of God. Or maybe she was just too independent and outspoken for a woman: a visionary, a seer,



and a leader in her own right and thus unacceptable to the proto-Orthodox movement.

### The Garden

The last time Mary Magdalene appears in canonical texts is in the garden scene of the Resurrection (John 20:1-18) uttering her ecstatic cry, Rabbouni!

#### *John 20:16, 17-18*

Jesus said to her, "Mary."  
She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" [My beloved master!]

"... but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples,

"I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

One of the Manichaean Psalms of Heracleides (187) is really an extension of this famous Resurrection scene in the garden with Mary being entrusted to find the disciples and tell them the good news:

#### *A Song from the Manichaean Psalms of Heracleides (extracts)*

Mary, Mary, know me,  
but do not touch me.  
Dry the tears of your eyes,  
and know that I am your master,  
only do not touch me,  
for I have not yet seen my father's face.

...

Cast this sadness away  
and perform this service.  
Be my messenger to these lost orphans.  
Hurry, with joy, go to the eleven ...  
Use all your skill and knowledge  
until you bring the sheep to the shepherd.

...

Rabbi, my master, I shall carry out your instructions  
with joy in my whole heart.

I shall not let my heart rest,  
I shall not let my eyes sleep,  
I shall not let my feet relax  
until I bring the sheep to the fold.

Glory and triumph to the soul of blessed Mary.  
<sup>23</sup>

As in the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary Magdalene is portrayed here as the chief disciple who holds the group together once Jesus is gone. Another one of these psalms (194.19) proclaims her to be "the spirit of wisdom [Sophia]," while 192.21-22 states: "Mary is one who casts a net in an effort to catch the other eleven who were lost."<sup>24</sup> As a "net-caster" Mary takes on the traditional role here of the male disciples who are told to be "fishers of men." Salome and Arsinoe are also mentioned in the psalms as disciples, as is Martha, who is called Mary's sister.

Hippolytus (c.170-c.235 AD), Bishop of Rome, is another early Christian writer who celebrates Mary Magdalene as a myrrhophore, coming to the garden to anoint the body of Jesus, and goes on to equate her with the Bride, the Shulamite, from the *Song of Songs*, who also comes out to seek her Bridegroom, thus implicitly acknowledging a special relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus.<sup>25</sup>

### Mary Magdalene in the Non-Canonical Texts

In addition to the canonical gospels there are the non-canonical texts which mention Mary Magdalene, all very varied but agreeing on one thing, her remarkable prominence amongst the disciples and her intimate closeness to Jesus.

Some have interpreted this closeness as a sexual or marital relationship. In fact, that is not as far fetched as it may seem, as many Jewish scholars say that Jesus would have had to have been married to be a rabbi and to be allowed to preach in a synagogue. However, Jesus defied convention and rules in many ways, so why not in this as well? But also this kind of limiting of the role of Mary Magdalene remains speculation, and still misses the point. A close companionship and relationship does not have to be sexual to be important, whereas what

remains important is to accord Mary Magdalene the fullness of her spiritual stature and her role in the early Christian movement. That, and also to rediscover the vision that she shared with Jesus. The fact that Jesus was able to have that kind of real relationship with a woman attests to his perfect humanity in which male and female, masculine and feminine, are not at war, do not fear each other, but are perfectly balanced. Surely that is the “perfect humanity,” and the wholeness he calls us to still — a vision of the Kingdom of God here on earth. And out of that wholeness a true relationship can arise like the one modeled by Mary Magdalene and Jesus — a relationship that can encompass emotional, intellectual and spiritual planes. There is a wedding, a marriage of masculine and feminine here, and a reconciliation with the feminine, which we are all called to emulate if we are to become Anthropos—truly human.

The following passages illustrate something of the flavor of such a “humanness” and of the relationship which can arise from it, with Thomas speaking of the transcendence of gender and the re/creation of the perfected human being (we have here also the subtle mystical foundation of the “born again” theology), and Philip giving an intimation of what might be meant by true companionship, a “sacred embrace.”

***Gospel of Thomas 22***

Jesus said to them,  
“When you make the two into one,  
and when you make the inner like the outer  
and the outer like the inner, and the upper like  
the lower,  
and when you make male and female into a  
single one,  
so that the male will not be male, nor the fe-  
male be female,  
when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand  
in place of a hand,  
a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of  
an image,  
then you will enter the kingdom.”<sup>26</sup>

***Gospel of Philip 77***

All will be clothed in light when they enter  
into the mystery of the sacred embrace.<sup>27</sup>

The non-canonical texts help to recreate something of the depth and flavor of the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, as well as testifying to her position within the movement. The most important among them in this context are: *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Mary*, *Gospel of Philip*, *Dialogue of the Saviour*, *Pistis Sophia*, *First Apocalypse of James*, and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. These texts also demonstrate the diversity of early Christianity and its firm grounding in the Eastern Wisdom traditions. Summing up her 1995 study of these texts Mary Thompson concludes that Mary Magdalene “appears repeatedly with the chosen disciples; she is given the leading role in the dialogs; she is singled out as a primary disciple; she is, more than once, in direct conflict with Peter from which conflict she emerges as the stronger.”<sup>28</sup>

Apart from *Pistis Sophia* and the *Gospel of Mary*, all these texts are part of the Nag Hammadi Library discovered in Egypt in 1945, with the *Gospel of Mary* also having been found in Egypt earlier, in 1896. *Pistis Sophia* first came to light in 1773, when the codex was acquired by Anthony Askew, and its survival till then remains a mystery. Most of the texts prominently feature Mary Magdalene, pointing to her possible presence in Egypt. Christianity was traditionally brought to Egypt by Mark and thrived in an inclusive eclectic environment. 1 Peter 5:13 mentions a church in “Babylon” which was apparently located in what is now southern Cairo. Mention is made of a woman who is so well known she does not get named “She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, salutes you, and so does Mark my son.” (There is no mention of a church replacing the gendered “she” in the original Greek as has crept into later editions of 1 Peter.)

In these texts Mary Magdalene appears as one of Jesus’ most intimate disciples and is often identified with Sophia as Wisdom or Light-bringer. She is the recipient of visions and revelations, praised as the “woman who knew (or understood) the all” (*Dialogue of the Saviour*), and as “inheritor of the Light” (*Pistis Sophia I*, 61). She does not always have the leading cen-

tral role but is often one of an important group of disciples (*Sophia of Jesus Christ, Dialogue of the Saviour, Pistis Sophia IV, First Apocalypse of James*). In the *Gospel of Mary* and *Pistis Sophia I-III*, she is central. Most of these texts are dialogues — revelation dialogues taking place after Jesus' death — though Thomas is a collection of Jesus' sayings and parables. The *Gospel of Philip* differs from them because here Mary Magdalene is placed in a historical role as the favorite disciple and companion of the living Jesus and is said to be the only one who truly understands his teaching and his nature while he is alive. It is she who "always walks with the Lord." Her level of spiritual maturity is reached by the other disciples only later.

It is actually not accurate to group all the so-called Gnostic texts together indiscriminately as they were quite varied. Some had a strictly dualist view rejecting the world as an evil creation, which needs to be overcome by the soul in order to escape from the clutches of matter and the world. This was actually a Hellenistic philosophy that prized celibacy and childlessness as a way of escaping from matter and ending the separation from God, and it had a big influence on Christianity. Other texts depicted gnosis as the apprehension of the kingdom of God here and now: the Kingdom is at hand, in the words of Jesus, all of us carry the divine spark within us and are sons and daughters of God. There were other groupings as well. For instance spiritual journeys were an important genre in Egypt, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* being such a journey of the soul after death into rebirth in the afterlife. Thus, there are guides for the soul on reaching the light and avoiding temptations, dangers and darkness. Gnosis itself is a Greek word for knowledge, direct knowledge, which also came to be associated with hidden wisdom or "mysterion," and, in the end, the ultimate aim of gnosis was — and this will sound familiar in our own time — the quest for individual enlightenment. And Mary Magdalene, in her role as seer and visionary, was associated with that quest.

As intimated previously, perhaps the real problem with Mary Magdalene was that she represented vision, inspiration, and a direct path to

the divine, the very opposite of the hierarchy, dogma and rules of formal religion headed by Peter as the Rock of the Church. Implicitly, she stood against church hierarchy, the apostolic succession, and the need for priests to be mediators between Christ, God, and the people. In addition, not only was she a visionary but she also had the authority of one who had actually walked with Jesus. It seems, in view of all this, that there was a need for the established church to control Mary Magdalene who simply knew too much owing to her closeness to Jesus. Could this have been the real reason behind the push to silence and demean her? Celsus had already denounced Mary Magdalene in the 170s AD as a "hysterical female" (that old chestnut) for preaching the Resurrection,<sup>29</sup> besides which a woman's witness was not worth anything legally anyway. Her authority was inevitably shaky given the social order of the time, and her demotion was not too difficult to achieve.

In the Gnostic texts however, it is she who is shown to truly understand Jesus' message, is his foremost disciple, and, this is the controversial part, is described in the *Gospel of Philip* as his "koinonos," the Greek word for companion, which can also mean partner, one who shares, spouse, consort or wife.

### ***Gospel of Philip***

The *Gospel of Philip*, probably dating to the early 2nd century, contains the following lines, which could be interpreted that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife, though that is only a possibility. What she is unambiguously in the text though is the favorite disciple, the companion who walks beside him throughout his ministry, and the only one who fully understands his message and his teachings.

There were three who always walked with the Lord.

Mary, his mother and her sister;

And the Magdalene, the one who was called his companion.

For Mary is his sister and his mother and his companion.<sup>30</sup>

The companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. The Saviour loved her more

than all the disciples, and he kissed her often on her mouth.

The other disciples ... said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?"

The Saviour answered and said to them, "Why don't I love you like her?"<sup>31</sup>

Both of these are quite remarkable passages that clearly illustrate a special and close relationship. And of course the kiss has given rise to a lot of speculation and commentary. However, once again it does not necessarily imply a sexual relationship. The kiss was considered a holy act, an exchange of breath and energy (as in the "holy kiss" in Romans 16:16), conveying spiritual power and nourishment. So the kiss could be seen as an initiation or a transmission of spiritual knowledge and empowerment. In the passage immediately preceding the first mention of Mary Magdalene as the companion of Jesus, Philip writes:

The realized human is fertilized by a kiss, and is born through a kiss.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the *Gospel of Thomas* contains the lines:

Jesus said: "He who drinks from my mouth will become like I am, and I will become he. And the hidden things will be revealed to him."<sup>33</sup>

Philip goes on to explain why the Savior loves Mary Magdalene more—it is because she is not blind to the Light.

Why do I not love you like her? If a blind person and one who can see are both in darkness, they are the same. When the light comes, one who can see will see the light, and the blind person will stay in darkness.<sup>34</sup>

Yes, Mary Magdalene is the beloved disciple but her status comes from her own spiritual level of understanding of Jesus' message, her visionary qualities, her strength and composure in adversity, her steadfastness and courage, and faith in the goodness of God and in the Kingdom to come. The wording of Philip 59 is also interesting here: Mary was his mother, his sister, his companion.<sup>35</sup> This could just be wordplay, but could also imply that what we are seeing here is something well beyond the

role of wife as it was then understood — this is an all encompassing relationship, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

### *Gospel of Mary*

This important gospel, the only one attributed to a woman, might well have been written in Mary Magdalene's name by a community which recognized her authority. This "honorary" authorship, however, was by no means exceptional at the time and in this it would have been similar to the other evangelists. In all likelihood, Mary Magdalene preached her own version of the "gospel" or "good news," maybe one more in line with the more mystical and esoteric teachings in the *Gospels of Mary* and of *John*. (It is of interest to note that in the latter text she is featured more prominently than in the synoptic gospels.)<sup>36</sup> If the tradition of her going to Ephesus to preach with John has any validity, it would reinforce this view. In the *Acts of Philip* too, the complete text of which was discovered as recently as 1974 in the Xenophontos monastery on Mount Athos by François Bovon,<sup>37</sup> Mariamne (who has all the characteristics of Mary Magdalene) is a leading figure, baptizing women, preaching, teaching and healing together with Philip and Bartholomew, being attacked by Roman officials, and travelling as far afield as Syria and Asia Minor.

Of all the texts the *Gospel of Mary* is one of the most interesting, and not just because it is the only gospel attributed to a woman. It is dated to between the late first century and some time in the 2nd, 180 AD at the latest. Unfortunately, over half of it is missing.

The manuscript starts midstream with Jesus speaking of the nature of matter or creation, the destiny of which is to be dissolved back into its root, and then of the nature of sin. Next he gives the disciples the greeting of peace, telling them "*Be careful that no one leads you astray by saying, 'Look here' or 'Look there.' The child of humanity is within you. Follow that.*"<sup>38</sup> He tells them to go out and preach the good news, adding, tellingly, not to create new rules or laws apart from those that he gave lest they be bound by their own rules.

When he departs the disciples become fearful and doubting, afraid they will suffer the same fate as he did, whereupon Mary takes charge in no uncertain manner, comforting them and giving them heart, effectively taking over Jesus' role as the Teacher.

Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brothers,

“Do not weep or grieve or be in doubt, for his grace will be with you all and will protect you. Rather, let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us truly human.”

When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the good and they began to discuss the words of the Saviour.

Peter said to Mary, “Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than any other woman. Tell us the words of the Saviour that you remember, which you know but we do not, because we have not heard them.”

Mary responded,

“What is hidden from you I shall reveal to you.”<sup>39</sup>

Mary is presented here as the spiritually strong leader who can impart calmness and composure to the others, the comforter and instructor who has greater understanding and who, as the text says, “turns their hearts towards the good.” Her superior status is simply a result of Jesus' trust and confidence in her and of her own spiritual maturity — and her ongoing visionary relationship with Jesus.

***Apostola – Bearing Testimony***

They come to me with all their needs  
To drink your Wisdom from my lips  
Your Living Word flows through me

And I teach.

I testify to Truth  
For I have seen its human Face  
I testify to Love  
For I have felt its divine Trace  
Which traced my outline  
Through your gaze

Which saw me, knew me,  
Healed my depths,  
Unlocked my heart  
Unlocked my sight  
Unlocked my hearing –

So now I testify to You  
The revelation of Your life  
The splendour of Your risen state  
Thus

When they come with all their needs,  
Your Living Word flows through me

And I teach.<sup>40</sup>

Significantly, Peter confirms Mary Magdalene's unique closeness to Jesus in his request. Mary agrees and begins to recount her vision, which begins with Jesus praising her for not wavering when she saw him. There are two interesting points here: one concerns the mechanics of seeing visions, the other the reception of the vision. Visions seem to have been quite an acceptable way of communicating with other realms of reality. Accordingly, there are many visions in the Bible — Ezekiel, Elijah, Jacob's Ladder, Daniel, Isaiah — the list goes on. Mary questions Jesus as to how one actually sees a vision and he begins to explain to her that it is not with the soul or the spirit that one sees, but with the mind or the “eye of the heart” (the Hebrew version of “*nous*”), which is the intermediary between the two. This term is quite reminiscent of the Eastern religions in which the open third eye is an organ of deeper perception. And the text breaks off there.

The second point is Peter and Andrew's reaction at the end — we cannot believe this, she is talking nonsense, “strange ideas.” In fact the *Gospel of Mary* is one of several texts that record a clash between Mary and Peter. It is interesting to recall in this context that Paul never saw Jesus at all except in a vision, which begs the question, why is one vision acceptable and another — which happens to be a woman's — not acceptable and to be doubted? To take a quote from the *Gospel of Mary* out of context,

“why do you pass judgement on me though I have not passed judgement?”<sup>41</sup>

The vision itself describes the soul’s journey as it escapes and defeats the powers of Darkness, Desire, Ignorance, and Wrath, which has seven forms, until it comes to rest in Silence (again much is missing). While this could be the metaphorical journey of the soul after death it can also be read as the journey to enlightenment while still in this body. It is reminiscent of the “seven deadly sins,” inner demons relating to the false self which Mary overcomes to become “Single” in the words of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* — inwardly still and composed and undisturbed. But the whole journey

could also be an account of Christ’s “Harrowing of Hell,” a description of the three days Jesus spends in the tomb and the hero’s journey he traditionally undertakes in that time to bring light into the furthest reaches of darkness.<sup>42</sup> In that case, the loss of the manuscript is even more unfortunate. When Mary concludes conflict erupts, with Andrew doubting her word, followed by Peter who is quite incensed by the idea of giving a woman spiritual authority:

Did the Saviour, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?<sup>43</sup>

That is the Coptic version of Peter’s outburst. The Greek version reads:

“Surely he didn’t want to show that she is more worthy than we are?”<sup>44</sup>

Levi, crucially, replies:

“Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. Now I see you contending against

the woman like the adversaries. For if the Saviour made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her? Assuredly the Saviour’s knowledge of her is completely reliable. That is why he loved her more than us.

Rather, we should be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and announce the good news, not laying down any other rule or law other than what the Saviour said.”<sup>45</sup>

Did he really speak with a woman in private, without our knowledge? Should we all turn and listen to her? Did he prefer

her to us?

We can still hear Peter’s words reverberating down the ages. Are we supposed to listen to her, a woman?

This was of course one of the radical things about Jesus’ teaching and ministry —there is a real sense of him not treating his male or female followers differently. They are all inheritors of the Kingdom, sons and daughters of God. We see him mixing with women without fear of “pollution” and we see the twelve disciples and the circle of women (some sources say seven) all travelling together accompanying him.

However, Mary Magdalene as leader and teacher had a lot to contend with in a society that officially left women with few rights and little self-determination. The position of women was severely constricted. They were denied education, had no legal standing since they were the legal property of men, and their testimony was inadmissible in court. Women were inferior in all things and their submission

was required for their own good so that they could be directed and instructed by men. Women were thought to be disobedient of Scriptural law if they had authority over men.<sup>46</sup> But Mary Magdalene and the other women do not come across as submissive, they are not under male authority and they are freely traveling around the countryside following a charismatic rabbi. They are equals in his circle, not merely reduced to their gender and sexuality. This in itself tells us a lot about Jesus and his teaching. Thus Mary Magdalene was clearly a figure who challenged patriarchal assumptions. Was that also part of the reason, as stated earlier, that she was then made into a figure who confirmed them?

In all the clashes recorded in the texts between Mary and Peter, Mary is justified and defended by Jesus (*Gospel of Thomas*, *Pistis Sophia*, *Gospel of Philip*), or after his death, by another disciple. In each one of the texts Peter objects to Mary Magdalene because she is a woman, with Peter representing the proto-Orthodox position in the conflict. But each time Mary's authority as a teacher and a leader is unambiguously affirmed. However, it would also be incorrect to say that there is conflict with the male disciples in all of the texts. Even in the *Gospel of Mary* Peter begins by deferring to Mary, even if he does end by expressing frustration at this woman who does not know her place, effectively calling her a liar. Peter's outbursts invariably draw attention to the questioning of Mary's — and by extension all women's — authority, something that is an important leitmotif in these texts. Yet the question, Levi's question, remains even now: "If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her?" And it applies not just to Mary, but to all women.

### A Woman's Authority

Mary Magdalene again appears as the leading character in *Pistis Sophia*, a text usually divided into four books (though some scholars say five or six) and probably put together from multiple different sources.<sup>47</sup> Mary is prominent in Books I-III (the bulk of the text), asking by far the most questions, giving the best answers and the most scriptural inter-

pretations, and is repeatedly praised by Jesus for her level of understanding. She is clearly the outstanding student. John "the Virgin" is the next most important disciple in the text, with Jesus saying:

But Mary Magdalene and John the Virgin will surpass all my disciples and all men who shall receive mysteries in the ineffable, they will be on my right hand and on my left. (PS 96)<sup>48</sup>

Jesus repeatedly acknowledges Mary Magdalene as spiritually superior to the other disciples, as one "whose heart is set on heaven's kingdom more than all your brothers":

"Blessed Mary, you whom I shall complete with mysteries on high, speak openly, for you are one whose heart is set on heaven's kingdom more than all your brothers." (PS 17)

...

When Mary finished saying these things, Jesus said, "Well done, Mary. You are more blessed than all women on earth, because you will be the fullness of fullnesses and the completion of completions." (PS 19)<sup>49</sup>

Mary is also called "beautiful in her speech" (PS 24), "thou pure of the light" or "thou pure spiritual one" (PS II, 87), "inheritor of the Light" (PS 61), "thou blessed one ... who will be blessed among all generations" (PS 34), and more besides. In the face of such fulsome praise Peter is unable to keep quiet:

Peter stepped forward and said to Jesus, "My master, we cannot endure this woman who gets in our way and does not let any of us speak, though she talks all the time."

Jesus answered and said to his disciples, "Let anyone in whom the power of the spirit has arisen, so that the person understands what I say, come forward and speak." (PS 36)<sup>50</sup>

Mary, not surprisingly, responds a little later that though she understands she can speak when the power of the spirit arises in her, she is "afraid of Peter, because he threatens me and hates our gender." Jesus responds that anyone

filled with the spirit of light can come forward to interpret his words and that none shall be able to oppose them, once again defending Mary's right to speak:

Mary came forward and said, "My master, I understand in my mind that I can come forward at any time to interpret what Pistis Sophia has said, but I am afraid of Peter, because he threatens me and hates our gender."

[Jesus replies:]

"Any of those filled with the spirit of light will come forward to interpret what I say: no one will be able to oppose them." (PS 72)<sup>51</sup>

The *Gospel of Thomas* includes a clash in the final logion 114 between Mary Magdalene and Peter in which Peter asks Jesus to tell Mary to leave them because women/females are unworthy of life. Jesus' response is that he will make Mary "male" so that she too is a living spirit, and that every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom.

Simon Peter said to them, "Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life."

Jesus said, "Look, I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom."<sup>52</sup>

Many scholars challenge this logion as a later addition. And indeed, it does seem to emerge from the context of pure classical dualism with its characteristic sharp split between matter and body (conventionally equated with female) and spirit (equated with male). In classical dualistic religions, such as Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, there are two deities, with the "Good God" creating spirit and soul, and the "Evil God" creating matter and the body. The human being and the world in general become the battleground of these two powers. This in itself lends credence to the theory that Thomas 114 is apocryphal, as the rest of the *Gospel of Thomas* makes no such distinction between matter and spirit. In fact, it is at pains to convince that the Kingdom of God is present all

around us could we but see it, and that the One God has created all that is. Apart from this, logion 114 demonstrates again that the clash between Mary and Peter is over her gender. It also indicates how deeply engrained Aristotelian male/female dualism was in the Hellenized world. "To become male" was to become pure, spiritual, non-material, heavenly, imperishable, "being female" meant belonging to matter, being sensual, incomplete, material, not capable of transcendence, perishable, earthly. This was a very fixed cultural dichotomy in an important current of thought in the Greek and Roman world that sought to "destroy the works of femaleness," and it became an important current in early Christian thought as well. Notwithstanding, logion 114 does give an affirmative answer to the implied question as to whether women should be allowed to be equal members of the community, the implied message being that if Jesus made them worthy who are we to dispute that.

However, there is no tension between the disciples and Mary Magdalene in the *Dialogue of the Saviour* (probably 2<sup>nd</sup> century), a dialogue between Matthew, Judas Thomas, Mary Magdalene and Jesus (interestingly, Peter is missing) in which Mary again plays the leading role and receives mystical visions. All present receive special teachings and Mary is praised by Jesus as "the woman who knows the All":

This word she spoke as a woman who knew the All.<sup>53</sup>

Her own desire is unambiguous:

Mary said, "I want to understand all things, just as they are."<sup>54</sup>

The *Sophia of Jesus Christ* features Mary alongside four other disciples (Philip, Matthew, Thomas and Bartholomew) who are all protagonists in this dialogue with the Savior and preachers of the gospel, but here again there is no conflict between them. Jesus addresses them all equally:

"I have given you authority over all things as Sons of Light."<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion



Why is Mary Magdalene's resurgence into consciousness so significant? I venture to suggest that talking about Mary Magdalene, talking about the past and the origins of Christianity is actually talking about the future — and the vision of a Christianity that could be. But to develop this vision we need in a sense to go back if we are to go forward. Mary Magdalene is a pivotal figure at the heart of the Christian story. She holds the gate open for the risen Christ. She could also hold the gate open for the rediscovery of the Hebrew Oriental traditions of Christianity, reconciling East and West, Jews and Hellenes, the church of Peter and Paul with the church of James, Thomas and Philip. And it should not be yet another case of either/or — there is both room and need for both/and.

Many of the texts and traditions in which Mary Magdalene figures strongly show the diversity of early Christianity, especially in Egypt, and many are imbued with Oriental Wisdom traditions. As such, they could provide a much-needed balance that many in the West have recently been seeking in other (mostly Eastern) faiths and spiritual traditions. However, we do not need to lurch from one position to the other — this would only lead us to losing the balance we seek all over again, though in a different way. When it comes to the question of gender and women's authority and leadership in religious and spiritual movements, it would not be true to say, for instance, that all orthodox texts are anti-women while the Gnostics accorded women more respect and gave them leadership positions. First of all, the Gnostics were a very varied group and it is not right to indiscriminately group them all together as has been posthumously done. Both canonical and non-canonical texts show evidence of misogyny and of concern with women's position. The true radical was Jesus — he was the one who treated women as equals, accorded them full respect, included them among his disciples, and imparted important teachings and revelations to them. His successors on both sides of the divide came up short in following his example to become "truly human" — apart, maybe, from Mary Magdalene. And, just perhaps, therein lies her true significance and the reason

Jesus had selected her to be the Watchtower of the Flock.

Like it or not, there is something missing from the Christian story. It is the Sacred Feminine, which incorporates Eros, the place where masculine and feminine meet as intimate and equal partners. But it isn't really missing, for Mary Magdalene is there at the center of the Christian mystery and she has it in abundance. Her reinstatement at the heart of Christianity would go a long way toward healing the mono-gender view Christianity rapidly adopted in the process of becoming formalized into a religion and bring back the balance implicit in Jesus' own teaching. The way history, including the history of the church, has been portrayed has been almost exclusively in male terms. But the future won't be like the past. Women, and this includes many women of faith, need women's voices in their everyday and, most importantly, in their spiritual life. Mary Magdalene is one such voice.

### *Miriam the Magdalene*

How shall I look beyond so many layers of faces

To glimpse your face

O Watchtower of the Flock

For we have made of you the sum of prejudice and aspiration

Reviled and honoured

Priestess, wife and whore

And any other image which could serve imagined needs

And justify opinions

Or fill up our lack.

All this we saw in you –

All you have been

Your outline still a beautiful seduction to our minds

Which found the content that best suited their delusions and their dreams

Yet – even so –

Maria Magdalena

Your image shines despite all slander, wish fulfilment and denials

For you were of the one we call the Saviour

Companion and Beloved

Witness and Priestess

And you've become the space  
Which a real woman could inhabit  
The Space of Love, of Passion,  
Inner Knowing and courageous Faith.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Pistis Sophia* is a Gnostic text in four books (and 143 chapters) purchased by Anthony Askew in 1773. The Askew Codex was subsequently purchased by the British Museum. The full text is available in various translations. The translation here is by Marvin Meyer in Marvin Meyer with Esther A. de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary: The Secret Tradition of Mary Magdalene, The Companion of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 66, 68. See also *Pistis Sophia*, translated by G.R.S. Mead, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1921). The pdf is online at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/pistis-sophia>; and Violet MacDermot, *The Fall of Sophia* (Herndon, VA: Lindisfarne Books, 1978; 2001).

<sup>2</sup> There are several good translations of the *Gospel of Philip* available, among them: Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Philip* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2004). This numbering, *Philip 48*, is according to Leloup. Other translations (which use different numbering) include that by Ward J. Bauman in Lynn C. Bauman, Ward J. Bauman and Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Luminous Gospels: Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Philip* (Telephone, TX: Praxis Publishing, 2008) in which it appears as Analogue 30; and Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Gregory the Great delivered his Thirty-Third Homily in 591 AD at the basilica of St Clement in Rome. The full text may be found at: Gregory the Great, *Homily XXXIII*, PL LXXVI, col.1239. Another sermon by Gregory on Mary Magdalene was his Homily XXV in which he also called her 'a sinner.'

<sup>4</sup> *Dialogue of the Saviour* was one of the Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. Good recent translations of the texts are to be found in Marvin Meyer (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), and in Meyer and de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*. For *Pistis Sophia* see above.

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<sup>5</sup> The famous, or infamous, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982) was one of the sources for Dan Brown's bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Hellenic vs Hellenistic – Hellenic refers broadly to Greeks before the time of Alexander the Great, Hellenistic to the period after his death in 323 BC. Clearly there is much overlap in terms of philosophy and worldview, which is what principally concerns us here.

<sup>7</sup> Extracts from Gregory the Great's Homily XXXIII in the translation cited by Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 96. Haskins wrote one of the first detailed and erudite historical studies of the figure of Mary Magdalene and her work remains one of the best in the field.

<sup>8</sup> Kontakion to Mary Magdalene as translated from Church Slavonic on <https://orthodoxwiki.org> (accessed February 14, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> The full inscription is quoted by Susan Haskins in Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 192.

<sup>10</sup> There is a translation of this lengthy prayer from the Latin in Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 195-196. It was written by Anselm for Adelaide, youngest daughter of William the Conqueror.

<sup>11</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints as Englished by William Caxton*, London 1900, Vol. IV, 75.

<sup>12</sup> See entry for Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples in Catholic Answers <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia> (last accessed February 16, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> First published in Irina Kuzminsky, *Artists and Lovers* (San Francisco: Tayen Lane, 2017; Melbourne: Coventry Press, 2018), 61.

<sup>14</sup> For an excellent discussion of this point see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, (first published 1976; new ed. Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*, vii.

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Haag, *The Quest for Mary Magdalene: History and Legend* (London: Profile Books, 2016), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Theodosius, translated by J. H. Bernard, in *On the topography of the Holy Land* Vol. II 440-

- 570 AD (Palestine Pilgrims' Trust Society, 1893). Also cited in Haag, 13.
- 18 The *Vita S. Willibaldi* was written by Hugeburc some time between 767 and 778. See Hugeburc – Wikipedia <https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugeburc> (accessed February 16, 2018); also Haag, 13.
- 19 St Jerome, *Epist. CXXVII ad Principiam virginem (Letter 127 to the virgin Principia)* in the translation by W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W.G. Martley, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol.6* (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893). Available online edited by Kevin Knight at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001127.htm>, (accessed February 19, 2018).
- 20 The first person to suggest that 'the Magdalene' was a title was Margaret Starbird who wrote *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 1993), followed by *Magdalene's Lost Legacy* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2003) and *Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2005). In *Magdalene's Lost Legacy* Starbird uses gematria, a well known literary device of the time based on the numerical equivalents of Greek letters, to prove that "the Magdalene" was a title. However, her work was wrongly criticized as New Age numerology and was not broadly accepted by Biblical scholars. The evidence for "the Magdalene" as a title though is becoming harder to refute.
- 21 From Irina Kuzminsky, *In Memory of Her: The Woman who Knew the All* (unpublished MS, 2008).
- 22 It was customary for relatives to visit the tomb of the deceased in the first three days to anoint the body, so it is interesting that Mary Magdalene came to perform that task.
- 23 Translated by Meyer, in Meyer with de Boyer, *The Gospels of Mary*, 72-73. This translation is based on the Coptic text from *A Manichaean Psalm Book: Part II* (Kohlhammer, 1938), ed. C. R. C. Allberry. Heracleides was a follower of the Persian teacher Manes (c.216-276).
- 24 See Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*, 70-71.
- 25 Hippolytus' commentary to the *Song of Songs*, as cited by Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 63-67.
- 26 This translation of the *Gospel of Thomas* 22 is from Meyer with de Boyer, *The Gospels of Mary*. There are several scholarly translations of the *Gospel of Thomas* available, including Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Thomas* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005); Marvin Meyer with Harold Bloom, *The Gospel of Thomas* (New York: HarperOne, 1992); Marvin Meyer (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (New York: HarperOne, 2007); Stevan Davies and Andrew Harvey (series ed.), *The Gospel of Thomas* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2002); Bauman, Bauman and Bourgeault, *The Luminous Gospels: Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Philip*. Each contains an element of interpretation and reconstruction of the text but all are based on a solid study of the original.
- 27 *Gospel of Philip* 77 translated by Leloup, in Leloup, *The Gospel of Philip*, 109.
- 28 Mary R. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala: Apostle and Leader* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 102.
- 29 From Celsus' *True Doctrine*, as quoted by Origen in his *Contra Celsus* (c. 248 AD). The translation by H. Chadwick of Origen's *Contra Celsus* (Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., 1965), 109, is cited by Richard Bauckham, in Bauckham, *The Women at the Tomb: The Credibility of their Story* (a Laing Lecture at London Bible College available as a pdf online at <http://www.richardbauckham.co.uk>).
- 30 *Gospel of Philip* 59:6-11; Bentley Layton and Wesley Isenberg (text and trans.), "The Gospel of Philip", in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7, Vol.1* (ed. Bentley Layton) (Nag Hammadi Studies XX) (E.J. Brill, 1989), 131-217.
- 31 *Gospel of Philip* 63-64, trans. Meyer, in Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*, 49.
- 32 *Gospel of Philip* 31, translated by Leloup, in Leloup, *The Gospel of Philip*, 63.
- 33 *Gospel of Thomas* 108, translated by Davies, in Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 131.
- 34 *Gospel of Philip* 63-64, translated by Meyer, in Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*, 49.
- 35 This passage has been translated differently and simplified to say that there were three women named Mary. However, as Karen King says in Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003),

fn.50, 204, the syntax of the Coptic text does not support this reading.

36 On the historical likelihood that Mary Magdalene preached the gospel and on the opposition she would have encountered in a culture which did not permit women to have authority over men, see Esther A. de Boer, “On the possibility of a historical reconstruction of Mary Magdalene”, published online at <http://www.womenpriests.org/deboer> (accessed February 22, 2018).

37 See *Acts of Philip* Wikipedia entry, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org> (accessed February 22, 2018).

38 *Gospel of Mary* 8, translated by Meyer, in Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*, 19. Other translations of the *Gospel of Mary* include Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002); Cynthia Bourgeault (intro. and text), “The Gospel of Mary Magdalene”, in Bauman, Bauman and Bourgeault, *The Luminous Gospels*, 53-71, and Karen L. King in King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*.

39 *Gospel of Mary* 9-10, translated by Meyer, in Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*, 20.

40 Kuzminsky, *In Memory of Her: The Woman who Knew the All*.

41 *Gospel of Mary* 15, translated by Meyer, in Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*, 21.

42 I am indebted to Cynthia Bourgeault for this insight, see Bauman, Bauman and Bourgeault, *The Luminous Gospels*, 60-62.

43 *Gospel of Mary* 10:3-4, Berlin Codex, translated by Karen L. King, in King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 17.

44 *Gospel of Mary* 10.4, Papyrus Oxyrhynchus, translated by Karen L. King, in King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 17.

45 *Gospel of Mary* 10:7-13, Berlin Codex. The Greek text says even more emphatically, “For he knew her completely and loved her steadfastly.” Translated by Karen L. King, in King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 17-18.

46 For a further discussion of the problematic nature of Mary Magdalene’s active role and authority in the early Church, see Esther A. de Boer, “On the possibility of a historical reconstruction of Mary Magdalene.”

47 For more on *Pistis Sophia* see en.1.

48 As quoted by Jane Schaberg, in Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 150.

49 Translated by Meyer, in Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*, 66, 67.

50 Ibid., 68.

51 Ibid.

52 Translated by Meyer, in Meyer with Bloom, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, 63.

53 See *The Dialogue of the Saviour*, 139:13. This translation is from Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 26. Other translations have “everything” or “understood completely” instead of “knew the All.”

54 *Dialogue of the Saviour*, 141, translated by Meyer, in Meyer with de Boer, *The Gospels of Mary*, 60.

55 *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, translated by Douglas M. Parrott, The Coptic Gnostic Library Project, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, (ed. James Robinson, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Brill, 1996), published online at <https://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/sjc> (accessed February 23, 2018).

56 Kuzminsky, *In Memory of Her: The Woman who Knew the All*.