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Peer reviewed

The Gospel of Mary:
Reclaiming Feminine Narratives Within Books Excluded from the Bible

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Abstract

Religious history is often preserved by the winners of ideological debates. The twenty-seven books composing the New Testament canon were selected by prevailing players in the battle for ideological supremacy within the early Christian movement and the emerging Catholic Church. The struggle culminated with an accepted definition of orthodoxy and a tradition of apostolic succession for legitimizing religious texts. The Gospel of Mary is an early Christian text deemed unorthodox by the men who shaped the nascent Catholic church, was excluded from the canon, and was subsequently erased from the history of Christianity along with most narratives that demonstrated women's contributions to the early Christian movement. My thesis explores the intricacies of early canon formation within the context of the controversy surrounding women's participation in authoritative roles within early Christianity and how the Gospel of Mary was labeled as an unorthodox text due to its pro-feminine narrative. I maintain that the motive for excluding the Gospel of Mary was not the text's lack of conformity to the requirements of apostolic succession or orthodoxy, but was grounded within the struggle to suppress the agency and participation of women from the patriarchal hierarchy that defined the developing structure of the Catholic Church. I claim the exclusion of the gynocentric narrative of the Gospel of Mary facilitated the androcentric interpretation of religious doctrine and history that has predominated Christian scholarship for almost two millennia.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART ONE: ALTERNATIVE TEXTS/ALTERNATIVE CHRISTIANITIES	1
EXCLUDED FOREVER?	2
THE VICTORS WRITE HISTORY	5
THE CREATION OF CANON, THE CREATION OF HISTORY	8
FOUND TEXTS, FOUND CHRISTIANITIES	10
PART TWO: THE GOSPEL OF MARY: RECLAIMING PRO-FEMININE CHRISTIANITY	16
“...THE SAVIOR MADE HER WORTHY...”	17
LISTENING TO THE SILENCE, MARY SPEAKS	17
“MARY STOOD UP”	18
MARY, THE PURE SOUL	19
“DID HE, THEN, SPEAK WITH A WOMAN...?”	21
MARY MANEUVERS THROUGH MISOGYNY	24
“...THE SAVIOR MADE HER WORTHY...”	25
JESUS SAYS NO NEW LAWS	25
TEXTS IN CONVERSATION	28
MARY IN “HERETICAL” CHRISTIAN WRITINGS	28
WOMEN IN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN WRITING	31
THECLA SPEAKS	33
PART THREE: RECLAIMING MARY, RECLAIMING WOMEN	35
FINDING MARY	36
LEGITIMIZING MARY	37
THE PATRIARCHY STRICKES BACK	39
THE CRUCIFIXION OF MARY MAGDALENE	42
THE END OF MARY, THE SWAN SONG OF FEMININE NARRATIVES	42
TO END AT THE BEGINNING	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY	48

Part One

Alternative Texts/Alternative Christianities

Excluded Forever?

In an interview conducted aboard his private plane on October 31, 2016, Pope Francis was questioned by reporters regarding the Roman Catholic Church's stance on allowing women to hold positions of church authority. As the jet soared through the atmosphere at 40,000 feet, progressing towards its destination of Vatican City, Pope Francis re-affirmed the Church's longstanding position on women's roles within the institution as he unequivocally stated that, "on the ordination of women in the Catholic Church the last word is clear, the Roman Catholic Church's teaching that women cannot be ordained as priests will likely last forever."¹

At the time of the interview Pope Francis was returning to the Vatican from an ecumenical mass in Lund, Sweden, presided over by Archbishop Antje Jackelén. Archbishop Jackelén is the Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala in Sweden, and Primate (*prima inter pares*—which translates from Latin as *first among equals*) of the Church of Sweden. The Archbishop of Uppsala has been the primate of the Church of Sweden in an unbroken succession since 1164 CE, initially as part of the Catholic church and then under the Lutheran church from 1531CE after the Protestant Reformation. Archbishop Antje Jackelén is a woman. The mass was a ceremonial celebration recognizing the upcoming 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. For the Pope to reaffirm the Catholic church's exclusion of women from positions of church authority, after just having participated in a religious event with a female Protestant Archbishop, highlights the Catholic church as an institution firmly committed to maintaining antiquated ideologies within a world increasingly influenced and defined by modernity. During

¹ Laurie Goodstein, "Pope Francis Says Ban on Female Priests Is Likely to Endure," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2016) 1.

the interview, Pope Francis also made a point to praise the Swedish government as a champion of human rights in their efforts to welcome and integrate refugees and immigrants. Ironically, Pope Francis noted that, “It’s not human to close doors! It’s not human to close the heart.”²

In stating the rationale behind his reaffirmation of the church’s position, a seemingly outdated ideology frozen in space and time for millennia, Pope Francis cited the *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, an apostolic letter written to the Bishops of the Catholic Church by Pope John Paul II in 1994, maintaining the ordination of priests was reserved only for men.³ The *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* was an official declaration of the church’s long standing position excluding women from the priesthood and positions of church authority, a stance that can be traced back to the very beginnings of the Christian movement. Pope Francis cited the two fundamental reasons outlined in the *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: 1) That it has been the constant practice of the church from the beginning of Christianity, and 2) Based on scriptural evidence, Jesus only chose male disciples.

Did he?

The notion that an exclusively male priesthood is in accordance with Jesus’ teachings has been preserved by the universal tradition of the Catholic Church for two thousand years. Yet, a debate now exists regarding the role of women in early Christianity, one that is being shaped by recently discovered texts concerning the formation of the early Christian church, and calls attention to narratives that influenced church doctrine and ideology. The understanding that women should be excluded from church leadership relies on the interpretations of texts widely accepted as being the definitive authority in representing the history and teachings of the founder

² Ibid., 2.

³ Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of John Paul II to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone, 1.

of the Christian religion, his followers, and the events that shaped the emergence of the Christian church as an ideological structure and institution. Yet, the discoveries of these ancient manuscripts has provided alternative narratives that counter the widely-accepted interpretations of the history of the early church and its doctrine. The *Gospel of Mary* is one of these newly unearthed ancient Christian texts that challenges the established role of women in the church, and offers an alternative narrative of early Christianity.

The following thesis explores the intricacies of early canon formation within the context of the controversy surrounding women's participation in authoritative roles within early Christianity. I will demonstrate how the Gospel of Mary was labeled as an unorthodox text due to its pro-feminine narrative and how analysis of excluded texts allows scholars to understand the process of canon formation in a way that was not possible by simply by focusing on the texts that were not excluded. I will challenge the exclusion of the Gospel of Mary for the texts lack of conformity to the requirements for apostolic succession or orthodoxy, and confront the predominant focus on the gospel's exclusion as a heretical Gnostic text. I maintain that the motive for excluding the Gospel of Mary did not stem from the text's lack of conformity to the requirements of orthodoxy, or the apparent gnostic nature of its content, but was grounded within the struggle to suppress the agency and participation of women from the patriarchal hierarchy that defined the developing structure of the Catholic Church. I claim the exclusion of the gynocentric narrative of the Gospel of Mary facilitated the androcentric interpretation of religious doctrine and history that has dominated Christian scholarship for almost two millennia. Further, I address how the androcentric narrative of early church formation has impacted how scholars understand and interpret the history of Christianity, and I argue that this male-centered lens has not only erased feminine contributions from history, but disenfranchised women from

their own history and intrinsically excluded them from their own essential experience of the sacred.

The Victors Write History

The early Christian movement did not possess any of the features traditionally associated with Christianity today, such as an official New Testament canon, the Nicene Creed, the establishment of the Trinity, or any formal hierarchical structure. Early Christianity consisted of several emerging groups or sects, each with its own diverse and rich developing ideology, that did or did not necessarily align themselves with the beliefs and ideologies of any of the other emerging groups. As Christianity developed over the first few centuries of the common era, many of these sects found themselves in direct competition with one another over possession of the “true” ideology. Christianity has been steeped in controversy and debate since the death of its founder initiated a new religious movement and, as scholar Karen L. King observes, “All early Christian literature bears the traces of these controversies.”⁴ It is important to note that Christianity was not a ready-made institution of agreed upon beliefs and texts, but a slowly forming structure that took shape over the first six centuries of the common era. This formation was marked by struggle, and its history was preserved and recorded by the winners of ideological debates.

Three significant ideas had emerged by the second century: 1) Orthodoxy versus Heresy, 2) Gnosticism was synonymous with heresy, and 3) Women in leadership equated heresy. The concept of orthodoxy, or “right belief,” was developing as a measure for competing ideologies within early Christian communities. The texts that countered this measure, or “Canon,” were

⁴ Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003) 6.

deemed heretical, meaning to “choose against” right belief. Recent scholarship has revealed that unorthodox beliefs were by no means in the minority, and that theological concepts that became associated with right belief were inextricably connected to theologians and communities that were part of the forming hierarchal, and stratified, power structure of the nascent church. The orthodox movement was determined to form a universal, or “Catholic,” church with uniform theology and practices. These unified churches would become the definition of orthodoxy, and all other opposing views or practices that countered this unified front were deemed heretical. Therefore, the separation between heretical and orthodox communities is largely an orthodox construct.

Competing ideas that challenged the definition of orthodoxy were increasingly called “Gnostic” in nature. It is important to note that the people within these groups did not have a homogeneous set of beliefs and did not refer to themselves as Gnostics or heretics, but as Christians. The term Gnostic, which translates as “knowing or knowledge”, was coined by early orthodox theologians to disparage alternative Christianities, thus the term Gnostic would become a synonym for heretical. Although Gnostic theology was based on the concept of knowledge of god through self-knowledge, and a cosmology that modern observers may associate with Eastern religions, it was “unmistakably related to a Jewish heritage.”⁵ Gnostic Christianity adopted much of the same ideology, terminology, and narratives as the orthodox movement, yet interpreted this knowledge within its own theological framework and rejected the need for hierarchical structure.

The Gnostic Christians were heavily persecuted by the early orthodox Christian church. A large collection of Gnostic texts, known collectively as the Nag Hammadi Library, was

⁵ Elaine Pagels, H. *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979) xix.

discovered in a series of archaeological excavations in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt in the late eighteenth century and in upper Egypt in 1945. The Nag Hammadi collection includes thirteen codices, containing over fifty varied texts, including “Gnostic Gospels” that either added to, mirrored, challenged, or refuted many traditional Catholic canonical texts. Some of these important gnostic texts include: The Gospel of Thomas, The Sophia of Jesus Christ, The Gospel of Judas, and The Gospel of Mary.

A commonality among many gnostic sects was that many allowed women in positions of church authority. Women would teach, preach, prophesize, and perform rituals such as the Eucharist. It is understandable that these communities would adopt an egalitarian methodology within their churches and congregations as many gnostic cosmologies were based on a godhead that possessed both masculine and feminine attributes, and argued that the physical realm was transitory and illusory. Gnosticism promoted the idea of the body as intangible and immaterial, therefore it is not surprising that gender divisions and gender roles were also considered illusory in many gnostic communities. Women could participate equally in many gnostic churches, and these women were sources of conflict between orthodox and heretical communities. Thus, women in authoritative roles became a target and also became synonymous with heresy.

Texts and writings were extremely important in early Christianity. Christian communities formed around a text, or group of texts, and their varying interpretations of these texts reflected their beliefs systems. Scholars agree that most Christian gospels and writings, orthodox as well as heretical, were written anonymously or pseudonymously and named for figures closely associated with Jesus or his disciples to give them legitimacy.⁶ Between the second and seventh

⁶ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 184; Ehrman, Bart D., *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 11.

centuries heretical texts were actively suppressed and destroyed—whether by the Orthodox or Roman authority—and all but erased from the historical record for more than fourteen centuries. The only evidence of their existence was through the polemic writings of orthodox theologians and historians, whose disparaging descriptions of the texts supported the orthodox master narrative being recorded for posterity. This master narrative was androcentric, that is male-centered, as it characterized the formation of the early Christian church as a process created, and rightly dominated, by men. Pro-feminine, or gynocentric, narratives were considered heretical and excluded from the orthodox history of the church.

The Creation of Canon, the Creation of History

The compilation of the Christian canon was a process that transpired slowly, over the course of several hundred years from the mid-first to late-fourth century. The exact date of the canon's official formalization is unknown, possibly occurring as early as the late second century or perhaps as late as the fourth. In the second century, Bishop Irenaeus of Gaul, a prominent Christian theologian and early church father, extensively quoted and cited at least twenty-one books that would later become part of the formalized canon. In 367, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, also a Christian theologian and prominent church father, composed a letter which contained the first complete list of all twenty-seven texts that would eventually become the official Christian New Testament canon. Although the exact date the canon was formalized cannot be determined, it is clear by the start of the second century that most of the texts that would eventually constitute the official Christian Canon were already in circulation among the prominent Christian thinkers and Christian communities of the era.

The New Testament canon includes the texts selected and approved by the developing Church hierarchy and by the fourth century the burgeoning Christian church was reaching a pinnacle in forming itself into a power structure. The influence of Constantine the Great and the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea would initiate the process of settling remaining theological conflicts regarding such matters as the nature of Christ and the Trinity, and solidify an orthodox doctrine and ideology which would manifest into the Nicene Creed. The Roman Empire played an integral part in the formation of the church as the actions of Constantine concretized a link between the church and the empire. In 313 CE, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan legalizing Christianity, and he handed over the power of the church to the winners when he officially “recognized a group of male bishops as the established leadership of the church, and in doing so sanctioned a power structure that would govern Christianity for centuries to come.”⁷

Yet, this power structure had already been dominating the Christian church and exerting its influence over Christian communities for over two-hundred years. When Constantine issued his edict of tolerance the losers in the ideological battle, namely any theology considered gnostic in nature or supporting women in church leadership, had already been marginalized by the orthodox community. Constantine merely threw his support behind a hierarchal structure that was already in place, and his insistence on calling ecumenical councils to settle disagreements among the winners brought the movement full circle, with the losers firmly on the outside. The last standing communities that formed around or circulated texts that were not on Bishop Athanasius’ orthodox list, and who had not already succumbed to “having been displaced,

⁷ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 188.

suppressed, reformed, or destroyed” by the orthodox movement, faced obliteration as the “Christian Bishops, previously victimized by police, now commanded them.”⁸

Early Christianity was marked by struggle. A conflict of ideas, and a battle for control of a fledgling religious movement whose adherents had a wide range of beliefs. A variety of texts recounting the events of Jesus’ life, his teaching, and the history of the Christian movement were in circulation and competing factions formed around one or many of these texts, each claiming their texts espoused the legitimate doctrine of the new movement. The legitimacy of these texts was connected to the author, and gospels that claimed to be directly connected to an apostle of Christ became the determining factor for its validity. Every sect claimed their text was written by a legitimate apostle, or a disciple of an apostle, and it became necessary to establish criteria for apostleship by which the text could be judged to determine the authenticity of its contents. To support a claim to apostleship a person would have to have been a witness to the resurrection and have received a commission directly from Christ to spread his teachings. Resurrection witness and apostolic commission became the standard by which authorship was legitimized. The orthodox church would assume the right to construct the master history of Christianity by claiming the legitimacy of the texts that supported their theology and characterizations of the movement.

Found Texts, Found Christianities

The first known fragment of the Gospel of Mary is the Codex Berolinensis 8502, referred to as “The Berlin Codex.” It was purchased by scholar Dr. Carl Reinhardt at a Cairo market in 1896. The codex, a precursor to the book form, was purported to have been unearthed in the city of Akhmim in Upper Egypt, but the exact location is unknown. The Gospel is a small

⁸ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 250; Elaine Pagels, H. *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979) xviii.

papyrus codex, written in Coptic, dating from the fifth century. The Berlin Codex contains the most complete copy of the Gospel of Mary found to date and consists of eighteen and a quarter pages with the first six pages, and pages eleven through fourteen, missing from the text. The Berlin Codex also contains fifth century fragments of the Apocryphon of John, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, and the Acts of Peter.

Two additional fragments of the Gospel of Mary were discovered in the early twentieth century in Oxyrhynchus, Northern Lower Egypt. Papyrus Rylands 463 was acquired by the Rylands Library in Manchester England in 1917. It is a small fragment of the Gospel of Mary, written in Greek on both sides of papyrus leaf, and only contains chapters 9:29 thru 10:4 and 10:6-14. Papyrus Rylands 3525 is a second fragment of the Gospel of Mary found at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, and is written in Greek on a single side of papyrus scroll, not in codex form. Papyrus Rylands 3525 only contains chapters 4:11 thru 7:3. Both the Papyrus Rylands 463 and the Papyrus Rylands 3525 date to the early third century CE.

The three fragments of the Gospel of Mary narrative are believed to be copies of an original text dating to at least the early second century, if not an earlier oral tradition. There are compelling reasons many scholars agree on this earlier date. First, it is unusual for several copies of a single text from such early dates to have survived. The fifth century Berlin Codex included copies of the Apocryphon of John and the Sophia of Jesus Christ, copies of which were also found in Nag Hammadi along with the Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas dates to the early second century and was referred to by name in polemic writings against heretical texts by early church theologians such as Origen and Hippolytus. Secondly, we know that early Christian communities formed around a particular text or texts that were: 1) copied and circulated repeatedly, 2) often moved through Early Christian Communities in groups, and 3) often buried

together. These circumstances, when considered together, make it highly likely that the Gospel of Mary narrative dates to at least the early second century.

The Nag Hammadi Library was a discovery of ancient writings that is of great importance in not only reconstructing alternative Christianities existent in early Christianity, but also in indirectly validating the Gospel of Mary as a significant early Christian text. The Nag Hammadi Library is a large collection of ancient manuscripts, discovered in 1945, on Jabal al-Tarif cliff along the Nile River in Upper Egypt. The collection includes fifty-two separate tractates, written in Coptic on papyrus, that date to the fourth century. Although the Nag Hammadi Library does not include a copy of the Gospel of Mary, it does include copies of the Apocryphon of John, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, and an epitome of the Acts of Peter, copies of which were all found in the Berlin Codex purportedly unearthed in Akhmim, also in Upper Egypt. The fact that the Nag Hammadi discovery includes copies of manuscripts that were also found with the Gospel of Mary in the Akhmim excavations, combined with the other fragments of the Gospel of Mary founds in Oxyrhynchus, strongly indicates that copies of the Gospel of Mary were in circulation throughout the region in late antiquity at the same time other substantiated texts contained in The Nag Hammadi discovery were, including the Gospel of Thomas and Plato's Republic. It is for this reason that the Gospel of Mary is included as a part of the Nag Hammadi collection.

Until the recent discovery of these ancient Christian texts, the conception of early Christianity had been dominated by the religious and world views presented within the orthodox canon of the New Testament. Yet, as the Berlin Codex, the Papyrus Rylands, and the Nag Hammadi discoveries have demonstrated, there was a rich and diverse counter-narrative which existed alongside the orthodox narrative that has been widely acknowledged as defining

Christianity. Rejected by early orthodox Christian theologians, labeled as heresies, and targeted for suppression, the voices within these alternative narratives and ideologies were silenced for two-thousand years. Scholar Karen King comments:

History, as we know it, is written by winners, and in the case of early Christianity this has meant that many voices in these debates were silenced through repression or neglect. The Gospel of Mary is an example of the diversity and controversy that existed within the early Christian debate, as its narrative challenges several orthodox Christian notions including the acceptance of women in positions of authority within the newly established faith and church structure.⁹

It is important to note that the “winners” who shaped and established Christian history, doctrine, and ideology were all men. Modern critical scholarship has come to understand the impact an interpreter’s bias has on the analysis and interpretation of biblical texts and in biblical exegesis. The lens through which critical analysis is viewed shapes the outcomes and conclusions of that analysis. Biblical interpretation is dominated by a patriarchal mindset and often neglects or discounts the feminine experience as relevant to the androcentric worldview. King observes, “the exclusion from the canon, under the label of heresy, of every significant type of early Christianity which supported women’s leadership is a fact that we cannot ignore.”¹⁰ As writings were excluded as gnostic heresies, and relegated to the periphery, the pro-feminine narratives that were a common

⁹ Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁰ Phyllis Trible, Hershel Shanks, and Jane Schaberg, *Feminist Approaches to the Bible: Symposium at the Smithsonian Institution, September 24, 1994*. (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995) Kindle edition, Location 1294 of 1693.

aspect of their theological and operational structure were also excluded, and faded into obscurity.

Most biblical scholars' framework originates from a place within the patriarchal structure itself and does not consider historical texts from a feminist perspective. That is, from within a context that understands women as a sociological group whose rights have been systematically restricted by an institution and power structure that is inherently dismissive of the female experience. An essential component of biblical interpretation and analysis must be to recognize that half of the story is missing because Christianity has marginalized women and excluded them from contributing to the narrative of its origin and foundation. As Jane Schaberg observes, "Biblical sexual politics must be explored, and literary strategies that are used by the biblical narrative to promote patriarchal ideology must be analyzed."¹¹

There is little evidence of women in leadership within the early Christian movement, or the development of the Christian church, when only orthodox texts are used as reference. Yet, when excluded texts are subjected to close textual analysis there is a rich pro-feminine history outlining the many contributions made by women to early Christianity. The erasure of female voices, and the minimization of female narratives, can be viewed as an oppression of women through religious ideology and a patriarchal institutional structure. Women's claim to their history within Christianity has been negated and they have been alienated from their own experience. Furthermore, as Schaberg notes, women have "been trained to read [biblical texts] as men, to identify against themselves with a masculine perspective and experience, and are lead to participate in an experience from which they are explicitly excluded."¹² Women have been

¹¹ Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

alienated from their own experience, interests, and history, which is the “most insidious form of women’s oppression.”¹³

As pro-feminine narratives were removed from the chronicle of early Christianity, a male-centered—or androcentric—narrative dominated not only the record of Christianity as it was forming, but also the scholarship that followed continuing into the current era. It is crucial to understand that the record of women in positions of church authority was erased, and then the absence of this record was used to exclude them from further positions of church authority. This circular reasoning has resulted in women being excluded from their own history, and disenfranchised from their experience of the sacred. Additionally, it has also facilitated the domination of androcentric scholarship in Early Christianity because the traditional history of Christianity portrays it as a patriarchal institution from its very inception, both structurally and ideologically, and has perpetuated the suppression of pro-feminine narratives.

¹³ Ibid., 15.

Part Two

The Gospel of Mary

Reclaiming Pro-Feminine Christianity

“...The Savior made her worthy...”¹⁴

Listening to the Silence, Mary Speaks

The most complete fragment of the Gospel of Mary is relatively short, and the first six pages are missing. It begins at the end of a dialogical teaching by Jesus to his disciples, which includes Mary Magdalene, one in which he discusses the nature of matter and sin. Jesus issues an apostolic commission to the group, but not before emphatically warning the disciples against becoming distracted by false teachings and rules that are counter to his directives. The text then moves to a post-resurrection scene where Mary steps up to lead the disciples, who fear they may suffer the same fate as Jesus if they follow his command to spread the gospel. Peter acknowledges Jesus' preference for Mary, and asks Mary to reveal secret teaching given to her in private by Jesus. Mary's authority is challenged by Andrew and Peter, then defended by Levi, then with renewed resolve they all go out to preach the gospel.

Although the gospel is brief, the text reveals multiple layers through exegesis that clearly demonstrate a pro-feminine theme when unpacked. The narrative describes Mary as: 1) a full disciple of Christ, 2) possessing a deep and advanced understanding of the Gospel, 3) given the authority to teach by Christ, and 4) challenged by male disciples, specifically Simon Peter, also known as Cephas. These pro-feminine themes are repeated multiple times within early Christian texts, both heretical and canonical, and are important in not only representing women in authoritative roles within early heretical Christian communities, but also indicates these female leaders were the source of conflict as evident within the texts themselves. These embedded pro-feminine narratives can be drawn out of the texts and reclaimed through exegesis, allowing for the

¹⁴ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 17, Berlin Codex, King Trans., Gospel of Mary, 10:9.

reconstruction of the pro-feminine narrative erased from the master story of orthodox Christianity. These reclaimed narratives also support the claim that these narratives were suppressed due to their pro-feminine nature.

“Mary Stood Up”

The following exegesis will focus on the passages from the Gospel of Mary that are important in establishing Mary’s role within the group, the resulting conflict surrounding her authority, and how this theme of challenge and conflict is an intimation to its eventual declaration as heretical, and its suppression. First, after Jesus’ departure, the disciples are “distressed and wept greatly,” about the prospect of publicly spreading the gospel because they feared, “if they did not spare him [Jesus], how will they spare us?”¹⁵ Upon seeing her group in distress, Mary takes charge of the group:

Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all, addressing her brothers and sisters, “Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us true Human beings. When Mary had said these things, she turned their heart toward the good, and they began to debate about the words of the Savior¹⁶

When Mary steps up to take control, assuming the role of leadership among the apostles, she demonstrates her respected position within the group. The apostles listen to Mary, a woman, and accept her counseling, trusting in her words to lead their hearts “toward the good.” Mary also repeats the words of the Savior back to them when she reminds them that Jesus had made them

¹⁵ Ibid., 14, Berlin Codex, 5:1-3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14-15, Berlin Codex 5:4-10.

all “true Human Beings,” a reference to Jesus’ dialogical teaching earlier in the text. Scholar Karen King argues that Mary steps into a position “parallel to the Savior,” as she demonstrates she has an advanced understanding of his teachings and demonstrates her unwavering resolve in completing his apostolic commissioning of them.¹⁷ Mary shifts the mood of the group with confidence and is not challenged by any of the apostles, indicating this is a natural and possibly common occurrence. Mary also, “greeted them all, addressing her brothers and sisters,” establishing that the group of apostles includes both genders, without suggesting this is in any way out of the ordinary within this early Christian sect. The lack of attention drawn to the presence of the women in the text speaks volumes about the attitudes towards women espoused by Jesus to the group. Obviously, this group was accustomed to Jesus accepting both male and female apostles equally.

Mary, the Pure Soul

When the group is settled down, Peter validates Mary’s standing in the group by telling her, “Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than all other women,” and asks Mary to reveal to them secret teachings of the Savior known to her alone, the “...things which you know that we don’t because we haven’t heard them,” and Mary responds, “I will teach you about what is hidden from you,” and imparts the savior’s teachings to the group.¹⁸ Mary repeats teaching she heard from Jesus in a post-resurrection vision, teaching considered to be gnostic in nature, yet the wider significance of this scene is the fact that Mary is portrayed as having an elevated status in the group and having experienced divine revelation. Peter’s words establish that the apostles are aware not only that Jesus prefers Mary above others in the group, but that her preferred status

¹⁷ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 30.

¹⁸ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 17, Berlin Codex, Gospel of Mary, 6:1-4

has afforded her the right to advanced teachings in private. Mary is also the recipient of divine revelation in the form of a post-resurrection appearance from Christ. This revelation demonstrates Mary's impeccable character as only those men and women with strong moral fiber and a pure soul were considered worthy to receive revelation through visions or prophesy. These circumstances would lead Mary to possess an elevated understanding of Christ's teachings, have a deeper relationship with Christ, and have a higher position within the group.

The ability to prophesize and receive revelation was widely accepted by early Christians as they were a part of a religious community, and a wider Mediterranean society, that accepted that gods and spirits could communicate with humans via visions and trance-like states. Early Christians considered revelation reserved for those who were pure in spirit and without sin. One of the ways in which women participated within leadership roles within early Christian sects was by prophesizing and receiving revelations of secret teachings from Christ, and many early Christians churches formed around one or more prophets, many of them women. It was difficult to dispute these women leaders acts of receiving divine revelation in and of themselves because prominent orthodox figures also made similar claims. Paul, considered a founder of Christianity, received his conversion experience and apostolic commission from Jesus in a divine revelation.¹⁹ It is interesting to note that, as women became prominent figures within early churches as receivers of divine revelations, it became increasingly common to challenge their legitimacy by attacking their character. This tactic would play an important role in the demise of Mary and pro-feminine narratives, as we shall see later, as Mary's character would be attacked with such severity that her image would be tarnished and altered for centuries.

¹⁹ Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 2 Galatians 1:11-12.

“Did he, then, speak with a woman...?”

After Mary finishes relaying her secret teachings, Andrew and his brother Peter challenge Mary on two fronts: 1) They question the validity of her teaching because it is unfamiliar to them; 2) then Peter challenges Mary as a woman. Andrew leads the confrontation:

Andrew responded, addressing the brothers and sisters, “Say what you will about the things she has said, but I do not believe the Savior said these things, for indeed these teachings are strange ideas.”²⁰

Peter had already established that the rest of the disciples were unfamiliar with these teachings when he asked Mary to reveal secret teachings to the group, therefore to use that as an argument against them is illogical after the fact. Andrew does not reveal what about the teachings he finds strange or unbelievable. A challenge to the content appears an odd motivation as well because the teachings, on the nature of the soul and its ascent to heaven, are consistent with that of teachings by Jesus earlier in the text, which was a discourse on the nature of matter. The nature of this theology is also consistent with teachings found in additional texts found together with the Gospel of Mary in Oxyrhynchus, as well as theologies of many texts in the Nag Hammadi find. As discussed, groups of texts with similar theologies were often used together by early Christians communities, therefore, if Mary’s secret teaching was consistent with theology espoused earlier in the text, and within texts buried with it by the same group, it seems unusual that Andrew would challenge the content of the Mary’s teaching. When Andrew states he does not believe that Mary’s teachings are truly those of the Savior, he is declaring that he does not believe her claim to a divine revelation and, therefore, is issuing an attack on her character. This is a strong

²⁰ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 17. Berlin Codex, King Trans., Gospel of Mary, 10:1-2.

indication that this strategy was employed not only by orthodox Christians, but by the broader early Christian community.

Peter then joins in the attack on Mary, and confronts the legitimacy of her teachings by introducing, for the first time, the issue that she is a woman. Peter angrily says:

Did he, 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?²¹

What is interesting about this exchange is that Peter does not challenge Mary's authority to teach, or even her right to be an apostle because she is a woman. After all, he was the one who had previously acknowledged Jesus' preference for her, and asked Mary to teach to the group. He appears to take issue that Jesus imparted secret teaching to her alone, a woman, without the men present. Peter appears surprised that the teachings Mary imparts, although not foreign in theological concepts, are teachings he had never heard before, as if he was not expecting to hear something new from her. Teachings Jesus had not revealed to the men. Peter's reaction hints at a possible internal power struggle among the disciples, or at least between Peter and Mary. Peter seems to acknowledge Mary and challenge her within the same text. His motivations seem to be based in jealousy alone as he is incredulous that Jesus chose a woman over the men, and he does not challenge Mary's worthiness as a teacher or as a recipient of secret teachings. He only challenges Mary as a woman.

The issue of internal struggle among the disciples, often with Peter at the center, is not unusual and is evident in both canonical and heretical texts. In the canonical book of Galatians, the text shows Paul confronting Peter (Cephas), "I opposed him [Cephas] to his face, because he

²¹ Ibid., 17, Berlin Codex, 10:3-4.

stood self-condemned.”²² This passage reveals the internal tensions existent within the nascent orthodox movement, as differences of opinions and conflicts of power complicated the pursuit to build the Christian church. Yet, a power dynamic between Peter and Mary can be seen within the texts as well, one that reveals a struggle for authority within the community of Apostles. Biblical Scholar Jane Schaberg argues that the tension between Mary and Peter can be witnessed within the differing narratives of the canonical gospels, noting that: 1) Mary and Peter never appear in equal standing within the same text, that one is always figured more prominently than the other with each text, and 2) whenever the two figures are portrayed together in a text Peter consistently challenges Mary’s presence or authority.²³

In the Gospel of Luke, Peter is listed as one of the twelve disciples and is the first to witness the resurrection, and although this gospel devoted more space to discussing women, all the women portrayed in roles as followers and not leaders. In contrast, in the Gospel of John Peter is figured less prominently and there is no list of disciples mentioned, Mary is the first witness to the resurrection and receives an apostolic commission, and includes strong representations of women leadership.²⁴ Luke appears to have a pro-Peter, anti-feminine leaning, while John appears to favor Mary and women in roles that denote leadership qualities.²⁵ That these conflicting portrayals and narratives were included within the canonical gospels speaks to the possible scope of the debate surrounding women’s roles within early Christianities,

²² Coogan et al., Galatians 2:11

²³ Ann Graham Brock. *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School, 2003) 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that a debate exists regarding the possible Gnostic nature of the canonical Gospel of John, especially the theology presented in John 1:1–18. Given the pro-feminine theme within many Gnostic texts, and the pro-Mary/pro-feminine reading of John by Schaberg, it is a significant similarity that supports the argument that the debate regarding women in early Christianity can be seen playing out within the texts themselves, both canonical and heretical.

Mary Maneuvers Through Misogyny

Mary becomes distraught and begins to weep. She confronts Peter by directly coming to her own defense:

My brother Peter, what are you imagining? Do you think that I have thought up these things by myself in my heart, or that I am telling lies about the savior?

Mary's accusations are both telling and surprisingly manipulative. Mary takes issue with Peter calling her a liar, indicating she is offended at the disparaging of her character, as if this is a strategy of attack that she is accustomed to enduring, just not from members of her own group. Mary's manner of challenge to Peter is also revealing, as she suggests to Peter, in a passive way, that it is outrageous that he accuse her, a woman, of being able to produce such advanced teachings from her own heart. Mary uses Peter's own misogyny against him, as she simultaneously panders to his notion that she is not worthy or wise enough as a woman to make up such ideas, and insinuates that he is the one who is unworthy or unwise for having suggested she could dream up such ideas on her own. This is a tactic of defense familiar to modern women, who have had to learn how to manipulate misogyny to their favor when in situations where they cannot control. A tactic unique to women who have learned to navigate through a patriarchal society. Mary's creative response indicates that she is accustomed to responding to a patriarchal environment, and that she has developed certain methods of combating resistance to her agency and exertion of authority as a defense mechanism.

“...the Savior made her worthy...”

As the scene unfolds, Levi then comes to Mary’s defense:

Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. Now I see you contending against the women like the Adversaries. For if the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her?²⁶

Levi defends Mary’s right to teach, as well as the integrity of her character, by pointing out that it was Jesus himself who gave her the authority to teach. He points out to Peter, and the group, that Jesus would not have chosen her to be part of the group, or as a recipient of advanced theological knowledge, if he had not deemed her worthy in character and wisdom. He also insinuates that their adversaries do not believe she should teach either, as he compares Peter’s behavior to those that oppose them. Levi’s defense affirms Mary’s familiarity with opposition to her participation in a role of equality and leadership, and supports the idea that woman teaching men was, not only, a point of contention within the larger Christian community, but so was developing skills and methods to combat the resistance shown to them by an increasingly patriarchal structure.

Jesus Says No New Laws

In a final exegesis on the gospel of Mary, it is necessary to return to the beginning dialogic teaching by Jesus to Mary and the other apostles. Jesus warns the group:

Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, ‘Look over here!’ or ‘Look over there!’ For the child of true Humanity exists within you. Follow it! ...do not lay down

²⁶ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 17, Berlin Codex, King Trans., Gospel of Mary, 10:7-9.

any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it.²⁷

What is the “law” Jesus refers to? The Gospel begins with Jesus’ warning against accepting and becoming dominated by teachings that counter his own, indicating to the reader that the theme of the content to follow will be associated with this idea, the laws and teachings that threaten to deceive the apostles. Jesus reminds them that he has already prepared them with the proper laws and teachings when he assures them that, “the child of true Humanity exists within you,” and this is reaffirmed by Mary who, in verse five, reminded the apostles that, “we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us true Human beings.” Considering the gospel focuses on the role of Mary in the group as a teacher and leader, and the challenge to this role, it is likely Jesus’ was warning the apostles against the adversaries that would deny Mary and the women in his group.

Scholar Elaine Pagels argues that, “Peter’s attempt to denounce Mary as a liar recalls other attempts to silence women” within orthodox texts.²⁸ A first Corinthians verse familiar to feminist biblical scholars reads, “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, *as law also says*.”²⁹ If the texts are placed in conversation with each other, it can be inferred the author of the Gospel of Mary wanted to draw attention to the differing attitudes regarding women’s roles in church leadership, and was making a definitive claim to his or her opinion on the matter. The Gospel of Mary supports the idea that Jesus’ ministry was based on an egalitarian ideal, where women had equal access to spiritual knowledge, and were entitled to assume leadership roles to teach and spread the theology of the

²⁷ Ibid., 14, Berlin Codex, 4:2-10.

²⁸ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 33.

²⁹ Coogan et al., 1 Corinthians 14:34

Christian movement. The gospel argues that equality in faith was Jesus' law, the law he laid down and ordered his apostles to follow, and suggests that Jesus was aware of, not only, the existence of the debate surrounding women's leadership, but also that the tension between the sexes was present within his own circle. If the greater implication of the text is drawn out, it is apparent that the author emphasized the problematic intricacies involved in the debate surrounding women in the church by fusing the issue with the pro-feminine theology of his or her Christian community and embedding the message within the text's narrative. The result is an acknowledgment of the divide caused by women's participation in early church communities, and a record of the pro-feminine sentiments that resulted in the deepening of the rift and the differentiation of these opposing sides into either "orthodox" or "heretical" groups.

Texts in Conversation

Mary in “Heretical” Christian Writings

Similar themes can be seen in other early Christian texts, both heretical and canonical, and the tension surrounding pro-feminine narratives and women’s roles in the church materializes when these texts are placed in conversation with one another. Several texts demonstrate many, or all, of same characteristics as the Gospel of Mary, that is Mary: 1) is a disciple of Christ, 2) possesses a deep understanding of the Gospel, 3) is given the authority to teach by Christ, and 4) is challenged by Simon Peter. In the late first century, early second century, Nag Hammadi text the Gospel of Thomas, we see the challenge and defense of Mary Magdalene theme repeated, once again with Peter as her antagonist:

Simon Peter said to him [Jesus], "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 shall enter the kingdom of heaven."³⁰

It is possible to focus solely on the gnostic nature of the lines regarding “making women male,” and cite this content as the primary reason for its exclusion from the orthodox canon. Yet, I argue this may be misleading, and that the focus should also be on the re-occurring theme of Mary as a disciple, the challenge to her leadership because she is a woman, and her defense by Jesus himself who asserts that women are equal to men in their roles within his ministry and in their

³⁰ James M. Robinson, editor, *The Nag Hammadi Library: Chenoposkion Manuscripts English* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 138, The Gospel of Thomas, Translated by Thomas O. Lambdin, 114.

capacity to reach spiritual fulfillment. Biblical scholar Helmut Koester points out that the definition of an ideal disciple within many unorthodox early Christian communities centered on the person's ability to lead a solitary life that involves rejecting all attachments to the physical world to find spiritual enlightenment. Koester argues that the Gospel of Thomas advocates that, "even women can obtain this goal, if they achieve the 'maleness' of the solitary existence."³¹ The beliefs represented within the Gospel of Thomas are consistent with "Gnostic" theologies, as well as orthodox teachings, that advocated for a detachment from physical distractions, or "sin" in orthodox ideology, as a path to attain spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, the reference to the means of spiritual enlightenment are not the unorthodox element within the verse, it is the proclamation that women can equally achieve the same spiritual perfection via the same means. The Gospel of Thomas can, therefore, be considered a pro-feminine heretical text.

The Sophia of Jesus Christ is a third to fourth-century heretical text, containing a dialogue that portrays Mary as a full disciple of Jesus, equal to the male disciples, who is given authority to teach by Jesus. The following text describes a dialogical teaching between Jesus and the disciples pertaining to the meaning of the words of Isaiah in relation to his teaching on the Pistis Sophia:

It came to pass then, when Mary had heard the Saviour say these words, that she gazed fixedly into the air for the space of an hour. She said: "My Lord, give commandment unto me to speak in openness." And Jesus, the compassionate, answered and said unto Mary: "Mary, thou blessed one, whom I will perfect in all mysteries of those of the height, discourse in openness, thou, whose heart is raised to the kingdom of heaven more than all

³¹ Ibid., 126.

thy brethren."³² [Mary imparts her interpretation of Isaiah to the disciples.] It came to pass then, when Mary had finished saying these words, that he [Jesus] said: "Well said, Mary, for thou art blessed before all women on the earth, because thou shalt be the fulness of all fulnesses and the perfection of all perfections." ³³

This passage reveals a great deal about the inner workings of this early Christian community, both in what is stated and what is not stated. The group of disciples includes not only Mary, but Jesus' mother Mary, Martha and Salome. It is clear the women are held in equal standing to the men as disciples, without being explicitly stated. This lack of attention being drawn to their presence in the group indicates that women being disciples was not an issue, but an accepted part of Jesus' teaching and a common trait in this congregation. Each of the women given the opportunity to question Jesus, and is encouraged to freely express their ideas to the group throughout the discourse precisely as the men present, which includes Peter. Mary, in fact, is given permission to interpret his teachings and is praised by Jesus for having correctly interpreted his philosophy.

After the exchange, Mary continues to speak on the matter of the repentance of the Pistas Sophia, and is challenged by Peter:

And Peter started forward and said unto Jesus: "My Lord, we will not endure this woman, for she taketh the opportunity from us and hath let none of us speak, but she discourseth many times."³⁴

³² *Pistas Sophia* Book I, Chapter 17, translated by G. S. R. Mead, The Gnosis Archive: Resources on Gnosticism and Gnostic Tradition." Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://gnosis.org/welcome.html>.

³³ *Ibid.*, Chapter 19

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter 36

The outburst suggests jealousy and competition exists between Peter and Mary within the group. This idea is further supported when Jesus de-escalates the situation by, not only gently admonishing Peter, but by diverting Peter's attention by allowing him to speak next. Jesus behaves like a parent as he defends Mary, and skillfully maintains peace between the apostles while simultaneously encouraging each disciple's strengths, and praising their accomplishments. As if this scene is something he is accustomed to witnessing and defusing. Peter does bring Mary's gender into his argument, yet the fact that she is a woman is not the main issue he is speaking out against. The crux of Peter's argument is that he feels Jesus is allowing Mary to dominate the conversation and is afforded an unequal amount of time in the discourse. Peter refers to Mary as "this woman" to minimize her importance, by not using her name, and refers to her gender to disparage her by attacking a personal attribute. This theme is repeated within multiple heretical texts, and the portrayal of Mary within these heretical writings, that her challenge is consistently rebuked by either Jesus or her fellow male disciples, reveals a significant pro-feminine sentiment within the communities that produced them and speaks to the debate concerning women's leadership.

Women in Orthodox Christian Writings

This debate can also be seen within the canonical texts. The Letters of Paul are of the oldest known Christian writings, and date to the mid-first century. In Paul's letter to Timothy, the text declares a blatant anti-feminine stance:

Let women learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.³⁵

³⁵ Coogan et al., First Letter of Paul to Timothy 2:11-12.

Yet, in Paul's letter to the Romans, the text seems to promote pro-feminine sentiments by referring to a woman in a role of church leadership:

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; for they are prominent among the apostles,³⁶

When we compare these verses, we see that Women cannot teach and must be silent, yet Women can be Apostles, which entails teaching and preaching the Gospel. The texts contradict each other, and I argue we can see the debate surrounding women's roles within the early Christian movement reflected even within the canonical texts with, in some cases, opposing views expressed within the same texts, or in writings attributed to the same Christian figure. As if the debate was being waged within the texts themselves. The contradictions regarding the portrayal of women within the texts associated with Paul are numerous and highly debated, in both early and modern Christian communities.

These inconsistencies are directly linked with the pseudonymous nature of the texts and reflect that early Christian texts were: 1) representations of the current debates, at any given time, involving differences in theology and operational norms within individual sects or communities, both heretical and orthodox, and 2) representations of the attitudes of the authors towards these controversial issues, as opposed to the beliefs of the Christian figures for whom they were named. The textual disagreements also support the argument that texts were deemed heretical for their pro-feminine narratives, and not the gnostic nature of their content. For example, the Fourteen letters of Paul were included in the canon, and the canon was an effort within the orthodox community and Paul's letters are afforded the utmost legitimacy, therefore

³⁶ Coogan et al., *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* 16:7.

the discrepancies in a uniform attitude towards women demonstrated within the texts cannot be unilaterally dismissed as heretical Gnostic theology. Although there is a debate regarding the authorship of many of Paul's epistles today, the theology espoused in the letters authored by, or attributed to, Paul was considered orthodox at the time the texts were canonized. This also calls into question the pervasive tendency to dismiss pro-feminine narratives labeling as heretical due to their Gnostic theology, instead of their portrayals of women in church leadership.

Thecla Speaks

A relevant example of how pro-feminine narratives were inexplicably enmeshed within, and often casualties of, the tension between orthodoxy and heresy is the narrative of Thecla. The Acts of Paul and Thecla was a second century text that recorded the missionary work of Paul and his companion Thecla. The manuscript was lost to scholars until the Thecla narrative resurfaced in the eighteenth-century as part of the discovery of the larger work, the Acts of Paul. Although Thecla's story had faded into obscurity, it remained a popular myth through the middle ages, with legends purporting Thecla had "become male" by cutting off her hair and dressing like a man, being accepted by Paul because she had "made herself male," in order to meet the apostolic ideal, the male ideal.³⁷ We also know a great deal about this text through the writings of early Christian theologian Tertullian, who named the Acts of Paul and Thecla in his many polemic tirades opposing its pro-feminine narrative promoting women in church leadership. Biblical scholar Bart D. Ehrman notes that, "For Tertullian, women were to play no leadership role in the church, and Thecla's example was simply an old wives' tale that was to be given no credence."³⁸

³⁷ April D. De Conick, *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter* (New York: Continuum, 2011) 81.

³⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: the followers of Jesus in history and legend* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006) 145.

Tertullian actively led a successful campaign to label the text heretical for its promoting the idea that women be allowed to perform baptisms and the eucharist. He accused the presbyter in possession of the text of forgery, had him severely punished, and had the manuscript confiscated and destroyed. The fact that the manuscript resurfaced some fifteen-hundred years later is a testament that it was not an obscure text, but was in circulation throughout early Christian communities with enough frequency that Thecla's story also lived on as legend even after the text was eradicated from Christian society. The legend portraying Thecla as having "made herself male," also speaks to the impact active suppression had upon the shape of pro-feminine narratives as they moved through an increasingly patriarchal Christian structure. The narrative of Thecla lived on in the collective consciousness even after its physical manifestation was destroyed, yet Thecla's contributions were only allowed to survive, and given credence, if she shed her feminine characteristics and made herself male. It is interesting that Paul plays a secondary role and is not present in the majority of the narrative, yet instead of the Acts of Thecla, it is titled the Acts of Paul and Thecla, with Paul taking the prominent position. The feminine narrative was only allowed to survive orally within a masculine construct, furthering the Androcentric master narrative that defined the history of Christianity.

Part Three

Reclaiming Mary, Reclaiming Women

Finding Mary

The figure of Mary Magdalene has historically received a great deal of attention considering she is only mentioned on thirteen occasions within the entire New Testament canon. Mary is only identified within the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and there are discrepancies between the portrayal of Mary in the four gospels as she plays a more prominent role in some gospels as opposed to others. She is specifically named as a witness to the crucifixion, even though the male disciples had fled the scene, and is the first to witness the resurrection in Matthew, Mark, and John, yet not in Luke. Mary Magdalene then disappears from the orthodox Christian narrative as she is not mentioned in Acts, the Letters of Paul, or any other New Testament writings, and she is not often mentioned by name by early orthodox theologians.

Although the orthodox story of Mary Magdalene appears superficial, scholars have developed a more complex portrait of her by unpacking the meager information relayed in the orthodox scriptures. Despite the conflicting stories of Mary in the bible, it is possible to construct a brief master narrative of Mary Magdalene from the information provided across the four gospels: Mary's name indicates she was from the town of Magdala and the fact that she is known by her place of origin, and not by the last name of a man according to tradition indicates, she was unmarried; Mary had seven devils cast out of her, indicating possible mental health issues that she alleviated through her involvement with Jesus and his ministry; Mary followed Jesus across his ministry providing for him and his disciples, indicating she must have been a woman of

means and financial resources; and Mary was a witness to the crucifixion and one of the first witnesses to the resurrection.³⁹

Of course, the depictions of Mary within heretical writings provides a richer and even more complex description of this enigmatic figure, one that moves beyond the two-dimensional characterization relayed in dates, events, and an actor on the periphery. Mary in heretical literature, such as the Gospel of Mary and the Pistas Sophia, is a character with emotion and agency, a woman who leads and contribute to her religious community, and faces opposition to her participation from outside adversaries as well as from within her own group. It is this portrayal of Mary Magdalene, and her actions as a model for women in the church, that threatened the patriarchal structure of the nascent church and the men assuming control of the Christianity through the orthodox movement.

Legitimizing Mary

As previously discussed, authors infused Christian writings with legitimacy by associating the authorship with apostles or people directly associated with them such as disciples or companions. One of the identifiers of an orthodox text was a proven, unbroken, line of apostolic succession which, according to orthodox theologians, ensured a theology that was as close to the original teachings of Jesus as humanly possible. Yet, in the modern era, scholars now know that most Christian writings, including that of the new testament, were written anonymously or pseudonymously and actual authorship in most cases is impossible to verify.⁴⁰

The author of the Gospel of Mary is anonymous, and never claims to be Mary Magdalene

³⁹ Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 65-68; Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 185-199.

⁴⁰ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 13-28, 204-217.

herself, therefore the author must have hoped to gain apostolic legitimacy by naming the text after Mary. This indicates that the author was from a community that accepted the apostolic succession of Mary Magdalene and, thus, believed Mary had been an apostle of Christ. Additionally, the fact that the Gospel of Mary was found with other heretical texts, in multiple locations, that portrayed Mary in a similar role of leadership supports the claim that Mary's apostolic succession was an idea widely accepted throughout these heretical communities.

As the portrayal of Mary Magdalene as the first apostle circulated through early Christianity she began to be referred to as “the apostle to the apostles.”⁴¹ This honorific title was based on the idea that Mary was portrayed in three of the four gospels as having been the first witness to the resurrection and had received an apostolic commission from Jesus. Therefore, it was argued, Mary Magdalene had a legitimate claim to apostolic succession and was in fact a disciple of Jesus which made the use of her name to title gospels, writings, and groups a means of legitimizing those texts and communities. The debate over women in authority was contentious, and was recorded within patristic writings and polemics. The debate surrounding Mary Magdalene's apostolic succession was also debated within the orthodox movement and reflected within, and impacted, the broader conflict regarding women's authority.

Although there is little record within the orthodox master history of this debate, evidence does exist in early Christian writings. Hippolytus, a third century Bishop of Rome wrote, “Christ himself came to them so that the women would be apostles of Christ...Christ showed himself to the (male) apostles and said to them...’It is I who appeared to these women and I who wanted to send them to you as apostles’.”⁴² The fact that an orthodox Bishop of Rome wrote that Jesus

⁴¹ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 1.

⁴² Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle*, 2.

chose women as apostles suggests that apostleship in some early communities was not limited to men alone. Additionally, Hippolytus implies Jesus found it necessary to confirm women's rights of apostleship to the male apostles indicating there were differences of opinion on women apostles.

In Contrast, in his third century polemic titled *Against Celsus*, orthodox theologian Origen dismisses the idea that Mary Magdalene was a leader of great importance to Christianity, and dismisses the trend of gnostic Christian sects that followed Mary naming their communities after her.⁴³ Apostleship authorized women to perform various church duties such as teaching, baptizing, and performing the Eucharist, therefore recognition as a legitimate apostle had significant implications to church leadership roles. Church communities who allowed women these rights faced great opposition from the orthodox movement. Tertullian wrote, "It is not permitted for a woman to speak in church, but neither to teach, nor baptize nor offer [the elements], nor to claim for herself the allocation of any duties, much less that of priestly office."⁴⁴ It is evident that, by the third century the argument over women's right to claim apostolic status, and in turn authority within the church, was being actively disputed within the Christian community at large and that the recognition of women's leadership had not yet been universally condemned.

Patriarchy Strikes Back

The patriarchal model that was solidifying within the Christian church was not a new structure, but mirrored the male-dominated institutionalized gender ideology that was the norm

⁴³ Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 85-86, 119; Celsus was a prominent second century philosopher and opponent of Christianity. There are no surviving works by Celsus, and he is only known through Origen's polemic against him, titled *Contra Celsum* written in the third century.

⁴⁴ David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 175.

within Roman and Greek society. Feminist biblical scholar Karen Jo Torjesen notes that the division between the male-dominated public or city sphere of the *polis*, and the largely female controlled private or household sphere of the *oikos*, provided the environment in which Christianity struggled to form.⁴⁵ Pagan women found an outlet of control within household management, and could exert agency within this private sphere. Christian women also capitalized on this system and assumed leadership roles by offering their homes as gathering places to early Christian communities. Women often owned, or were the mistresses of, these earliest “churches” within Christianity. This potentially provided a two-fold validation of women in church leadership as members would recognize women as theologians or church leaders, or sometimes both.⁴⁶

Yet, despite the potential offered by this environment, Christian women found themselves bound to the same patriarchal mechanisms in place to control all women who attempted to test the boundaries of the well-established gender norms within society. When Christianity entered the world scene, women were already well versed in the cultural values that connected their worth with their reputation, and women exercising too much public authority in a culture that consistently viewed their honor as a commodity could find themselves accused of being masculine, unchaste, and shameful. Christian women would often find themselves as the targets of these misogynistic methods of control when their authority was being challenged, as Torjesen observes, “Christian writers who attacked women’s authority evoked the frightening image of the female leader as a disreputable woman who was probably also promiscuous.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) 1-53.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 53-87.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

The figure of Mary Magdalene was no different in this regard and by the fourth century, when pro-feminine literature and congregations had refused to fade into obscurity, a significant movement to diminish the image of Mary Magdalene, and to delegitimize the notion of women's authority, was underway and would have long-term consequences on the collective consciousness of Christianity. In the mid-fourth century Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria began circulating the list of the twenty-seven orthodox texts that would later become canonized in 367 CE, and this list would be systematically endorsed by prominent church leaders and theologians, such as Augustine of Hippo, over the next hundred years. By the end of the fourth century heretical gospels and writings were under attack by the Catholic church with the support of the Roman empire. As heretical writings were suppressed, destroyed, and forgotten, the textual support for heretical Christianity was fading into memory, but the image of certain feminine heroines lingered and proved more difficult to erase.

The Crucifixion of Mary Magdalene

The End of Mary, the Swan Song of Feminine Narratives

As pro-feminine narratives continued to stubbornly persist despite almost four-hundred years of concerted effort to destroy them, the patriarchal church defended itself as in 591 CE when Pope Gregory the Great gave a sermon that would diminish the character of Mary Magdalene for centuries, in fact into the modern era, and women's roles within the church would be permanently relegated to the periphery. In his thirty-third Homily, Pope Gregory declares:

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? ...It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts...She turned the mass of her crimes to virtue, in order to serve God entirely in penance.”⁴⁸

The mistake Pope Gregory made was to conflate three separate women from the New Testament gospels: an un-named sinner from Luke 7:37- 39; Mary of Bethany from John 12:1-6; and Mary Magdalene who had seven devils cast out of her by Jesus Luke 8:2 and Mark 16:9.⁴⁹ It is widely accepted by modern biblical scholars that the three women Pope Gregory refers to are three separate women, and only the woman who had seven demons cast out is named as Mary Magdalene. A summary of the arguments against this interpretational error are as follows: 1)

⁴⁸ Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 190.

⁴⁹ Coogan et al., Luke 7:37- 39; John 12:1-6; Luke 8:2 and Mark 16:9.

Mary Magdalene is not the un-named woman in the Gospel of Luke, who incidentally is never identified as a prostitute, because Mary is introduced in the very next story and named as Mary Magdalene, therefore the author would have initially named the un-named woman as Mary Magdalene if it had been the same person, 2) Mary Magdalene is not Mary of Bethany as Magdalene and Bethany are both indicators of their place of birth, therefore Mary Magdalene cannot originate both from Magdalene and Bethany.⁵⁰ Pope Gregory does correctly identify Mary Magdalene as the woman who had seven demons cast out, yet the scriptural references do not state the nature of the “demons” that were cast out, and there is no biblical association with prostitutes and demon possession. Pope Gregory associates the seven demons with the seven vices and labels Mary a reformed prostitute although there are no biblical scriptures that state, or indicate, that Mary Magdalene was ever a prostitute.

Pope Gregory’s sermon served to institutionalize the assassination of Mary Magdalene’s character, and solidify Mary as a repentant prostitute within orthodox theology and the master narrative despite the lack of any scriptural evidence for centuries. Mary was symbolically crucified as Pope Gregory’s labeling of her as a reformed woman of sin served to hammer the final nail in the coffin to depictions of Mary as an apostle, teacher, and leader in the Catholic church. Mary’s role within Jesus’ ministry was diminished, and, in turn, so was the role of women in the church. Mary could reach the ideal of the pious woman in the Church, a woman rescued from her sinful nature and turned towards the good by Christ’s teachings, yet her sinful past would forever restrict her from leadership. Being worthy enough to follow, and worthy

⁵⁰ Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 188-189; Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 74-75; J., De Keijzer Arne, Daniel Burstein, and Elaine H. Pagels. *Secrets of Mary Magdalene: The Untold Story of History’s Most Misunderstood Woman*. New York: CDS Books, 2006.

enough to a lead, were two entirely different matters. The debate within the catholic church was closed as far as its architects were concerned, woman would follow, and men would lead.

The image of Mary as a reformed prostitute spread and, as this new narrative began to dominate within orthodox communities, pro-Mary and pro-feminine narratives finally faded into obscurity, and women's roles within the patriarchal structure of the church became static and rigidly defined. Pro-feminine narratives would remain minimized within the historical master narrative of the church, and heretical pro-feminine narratives would remain lost for over a thousand years facilitating the rise and continuation of the male-dominated historical record, and the subsequent androcentric lens used within the scholarship of that record. This androcentric focus in scholarship became a natural phenomenon as the lack of gynocentric literature and historical record only served to validate the androcentric history and literature of the Catholic church.

Yet, early Christian writers used figures like Mary Magdalene to record the controversies within early Christian history, and managed to preserve pro-feminine narratives by embedding them within both orthodox and heretical writings, protecting forbidden narratives from destruction. Analyzing heretical texts, and placing them in conversation with the master history, has revealed alternative narratives and alternative Christianities in which women contributed to theological conversations, and belonged to communities that recognized their authority as teachers, ministers, apostles, and leaders. These were subversive acts by women that were in direct conflict with orthodox ideologies, and were the center of significant debate. The absence of these alternative narratives has created a silence of feminine voices, a silence that speaks volumes to modern scholars of the eradication of women's contributions to Christian history. The lack of these suppressed pro-feminine narratives has been exploited to exclude women from

positions of authority, as well as full participation in a religion that, for many women, defines them. Women have been excluded from their own history, and disenfranchised from their experience of the sacred. The canonical texts and early Christian writings are important works of literature that recorded the history of the formation of the Christian church, a master narrative that is hallmarked by orthodoxy and patriarchy. It is possible to reconstruct a counter narrative through reclaiming lost texts, one that includes women's acts and contributions, that is "in a number of respects more historically accurate than the master story."⁵¹

To End at the Beginning

The apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* to the Bishops of the Catholic church was a twentieth-century reaffirmation by Pope John Paul II of the church's reserving priestly ordination to men alone. Pope John Paul:

...out of fidelity to his office of safeguarding the Apostolic Tradition, and also with a view to removing a new obstacle placed in the way of Christian unity, reminded Anglicans of the position of the Catholic Church: "She [the church] holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church."⁵²

⁵¹ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 190.

⁵² Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of John Paul II to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone, 1.

The Pope's statement was intended to definitively close the door on the matter of women in the priesthood, and for twenty-three years has managed to extend a two-thousand-year old policy that excludes women from equal access to positions of church hierarchy, and from full participation in the religious institution that defines their worldview and identity. Yet, as I have argued, this exclusion is founded upon two millennia of doctrine structured around a patriarchal master narrative that encompasses only a single perspective of what was a multi-dimensional history of the church. The discovery of ancient Christian texts has allowed for the reconstruction of the master narrative to include alternative Christianities and intersectional debates that the architects of the nascent Christian church sought to suppress and erase. Pro-feminine narratives were the casualties of this dominant history and women's contributions to early Christianity became a motive to exclude alternative narratives from not only the orthodox canon, but from the orthodox history of the church.

As alternative Christianities are analyzed, and feminine narratives are reclaimed, it becomes difficult to comprehend that the patriarchal institution of the church would struggle to maintain its integrity in the face of new evidence that may support women's inclusion within positions of ecclesiastical authority. Women would not be infringing upon the static structure, but reclaiming their positions within what was once a fluid and inclusive apparatus. Scholar Helmut Koester observed, "If the Bible has anything to do with justice and freedom, biblical scholarship must be able to question those very structures of power and expose their injustice and destructive potential."⁵³ The research concerning lost feminine narratives within early Christianity is ongoing, and has fueled new specialties in scholarship examining early Christian literature and history through a gynocentric lens: a pro-feminine gaze that acknowledges that

⁵³ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 15.

“religion plays a key role in the dynamics of women’s oppression—as well as liberation.”⁵⁴ With continued scholarship, the reclaiming of feminine narratives will construct a complete understanding of Christian literature and history, one that includes the contributions of all participants regardless of gender, and lead to opportunities for women to reclaim their equal access to positions of authority within modern Christianity, because after all, forever is a long time.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 12.

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