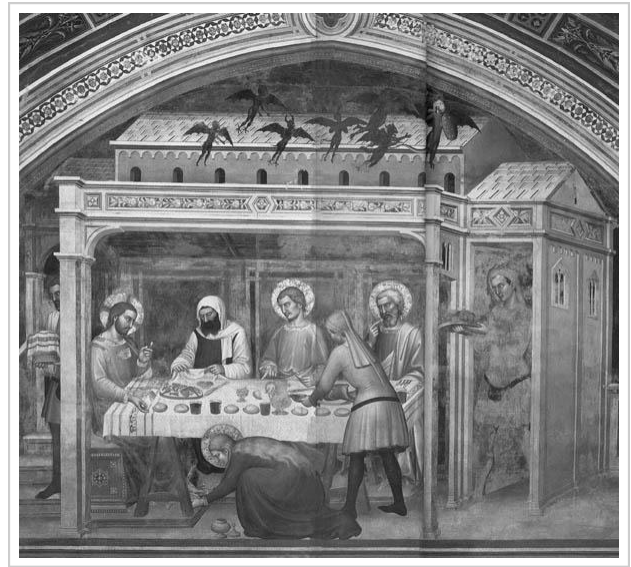


How Mary Magdalene Became a Whore

Mary Magdalene is in fact the primary witness to the fundamental data of early Christian faith

By Jane Schaberg

Mention the name Mary Magdalene and most people will free-associate the word “whore,” albeit the repentant whore whose love for Jesus led him to forgive her. In *Jesus Christ—Superstar*, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Timothy Rice’s 1970s musical, she is depicted as a prostitute platonically in love with Jesus, not having a sexual affair with him but obsessed and baffled by him, not knowing how to love him. At about the



same time as *Jesus Christ—Superstar*, in Franco Zeffirelli’s TV movie *Jesus of Nazareth*, Anne Bancroft plays the Magdalene as a prostitute of angry intelligence, in contrast to Jesus’ disbelieving male disciples. More recently, in Martin Scorsese’s controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (based on the 1955 novel by Nikos Kazantzakis), the Magdalene is a tattooed prostitute to whom Jesus was attracted physically—his last temptation.

In the popular mind Mary Magdalene represents the repentant sinner, lifted from the depths of whoredom by her romantic love for Jesus—proof that even the lowliest can be saved through repentance and devotion.

Yet this is a very different picture from the one the Gospels give us. How did this happen? And when? And why?

In all four Gospels the Magdalene participates in Jesus' Galilean ministry, she follows him to Jerusalem, she mourns at his crucifixion and on, the first Easter, she goes to his tomb and finds it empty. Except in the Gospel of Luke, she is said to have been sent with a commission to proclaim to the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead. According to the three accounts in *Matthew 28:1–10*, *John 20:14–18*, and *Mark 16:9* (the Marcan addition^(a)), she is the first to whom the risen Jesus appears. In short, Mary Magdalene is the primary witness to the fundamental data of early Christian faith.

The earliest reference to the Magdalene in Jesus' life comes during his Galilean ministry. In Luke, in a passage without parallels in the other Gospels, we learn that while traveling with his disciples, Jesus healed some women of evil spirits and infirmities. One of them—the first named—is the Magdalene, from whom Jesus exorcised seven demons:

“[H]e went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources” (*Luke 8:1–3*).

Mary is called Magdalene because she is from the town of Magdala, generally identified with the site of Migdal on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. She, along with other women, travels with Jesus and the 12 disciples.

But, as we shall see, as early as the period when the Gospels were written (late first to second centuries C.E.^(b)) the Magdalene's role is gradually diminished and distorted. In the Pauline corpus, she is not mentioned at all, not even in the passage in *1 Corinthians 15:3–8* that lists those to whom Jesus made post-resurrection appearances.

In the passage from Luke we just looked at, she and the other women are cast in a subordinate role of service and support to the males in the movement. In Luke (and in Acts, which was probably written by the same author) the 12 disciples—all men—are the major witnesses and leaders.

But does this reflect the actual experience of Jesus' original followers? In the passage from Luke, the women "provided for them out of their resources." The Greek verb translated here as "provided for" is *diakonein*, which means to serve, wait on, minister to as a deacon. Although some ancient manuscript authorities have the women ministering to "him" (that is, to Jesus alone), instead of "them," the canonical text of *Luke 8:3* has "them." In *Mark 15:41* and *Matthew 27:55*, however, the women, including the Magdalene, who watched Jesus' crucifixion from afar, are identified as women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to *him*. That Luke has the women ministering to the disciples is consistent with his general tendency to subordinate the role of women.

Although these women travel with Jesus, none of them is ever given the title of "disciple" by the Gospel writers.

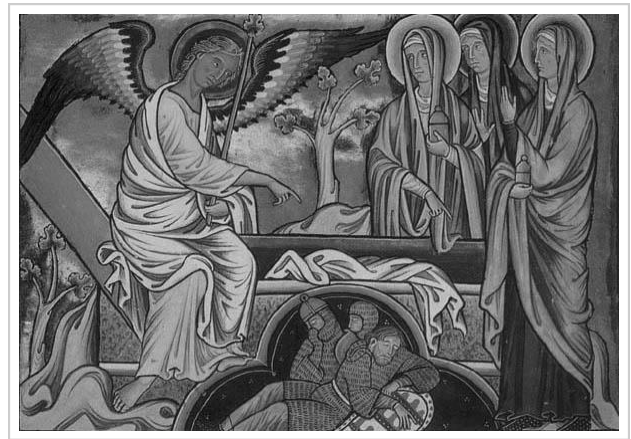
One scholar Ben Witherington, has said that for a woman "to leave home and travel with a rabbi was not only unheard of, it was scandalous. Even more scandalous was the fact that women, both respectable and not, were among Jesus' traveling companions."⁽¹⁾ But do we really know this? If it was so scandalous, why did the scandal leave no mark on the traditions?⁽²⁾ Why was the fact that women traveled with Jesus never explicitly defended in the Gospels? And on what basis does Witherington conclude that some of the women who traveled with Jesus were not "respectable"? Perhaps he is thinking of Mary Magdalene as a whore, a subject to which we will return.

What kind of service did the women traveling with Jesus provide? Some see it as domestic—shopping, cooking, sewing, serving meals, the work of a traditional wife. On the other hand, behind this passage in *Luke 8:1–3* may be a tradition that women were significant figures in the table fellowship and intellectual leadership of the Jesus movement. In the early Christian community, the Greek noun *diakonia* (which is related to the verb *diakonein* used in *Luke 8:3*) referred to eucharistic table service and to proclamation of God's word.

Others have suggested that these women were wealthy philanthropists or benefactors. Yet it is widely agreed that most members of the earliest Jesus movement were poor. Writing in the 80s or 90s, Luke often places wealthy women in support roles (see *Acts 13:50, 17:4, 12, 34*), but this cannot be accepted as accurate historical memory. This

passage from Luke, therefore, cannot give us reliable information about Mary Magdalene's social status or life's work.

At a meeting of scholars where I recently gave paper on this subject, a professor of New Testament suggested that this passage proved that Magdalene was a whore: "How else could a woman be wealthy?" he said. That women should be regarded as prostitutes simply because they had resources reflects the same kind of mindset we find in those who somehow conclude from Jesus' exorcism of seven demons from the Magdalene that she had been a whore. There is simply no reason to connect this healing with previous prostitution—or immorality, for that matter.

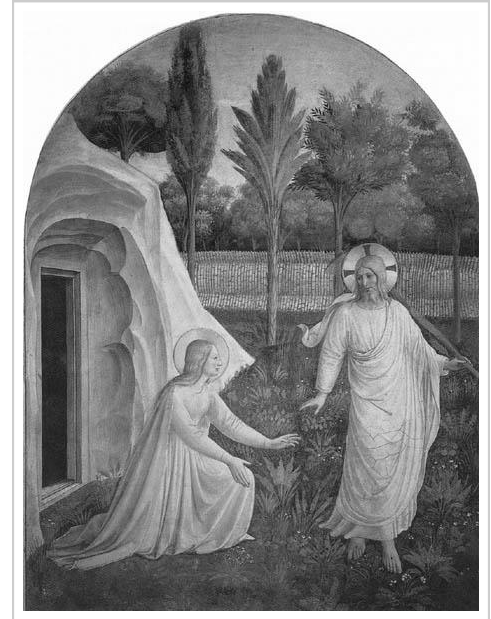


The next time we meet the Magdalene is at the crucifixion in Jerusalem. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all name her as a witness to the crucifixion. In Mark and Matthew we learn that among the "women looking on from afar" was Mary Magdalene (*Mark 15:40; Matthew 27:55–56*). Mark also identifies the women present as those "who when he was in Galilee followed him and ministered to him". (*Mark 15:41; compare Matthew 27:55–56*). Although Luke does not mention any of the women by name at the crucifixion scene, he does state that "the women who had followed him from Galilee" were there (*Luke 23:49*), and when he names them later in the scene at the tomb (*Luke 24:10*), Mary Magdalene is among them. In John, she is standing at the cross with Jesus' mother, among others (*John 19:25*).

The Magdalene watches as Jesus is laid in the tomb (*Mark 15:46–47; Matthew 27:59–61; Luke 23:55*). She returns to the tomb on Sunday. The accounts of what happens at the tomb vary. In Mark, the women bring spices to anoint Jesus. They see that the stone has been rolled away from the door of the tomb. Entering the tomb, they are

amazed to see a young man in a white robe. He tells them that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised and is not there. He instructs the women to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going before them to Galilee, where “you will see him.” The women, however, flee from the tomb, “for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (*Mark 16:1–8*). Most scholars think that the Gospel of Mark, our earliest Gospel, ended here at verse 8, with the women’s silence. Most scholars think also that Matthew and Luke then used and edited Mark’s Gospel as they wrote their own.^(c)

In Matthew, Mary Magdalene goes toward dawn with “the other Mary” to see the sepulcher. There is an earthquake at the tomb, “for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone.” The angel tells the women to “go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.” The women are full of great joy as well as fear, and they run to tell the disciples. As they run, Jesus meets them and tells them again to tell his brothers to go to Galilee where they will see him (*Matthew 28:1–10*).



In Luke the women find the stone already rolled away; they go into the tomb and are perplexed not to find the body of Jesus. Two men “in dazzling apparel” ask them why they seek the living among the dead. They remind the women that Jesus told them while he was still in Galilee “that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise.” The women remember the words. On their own, they decide to tell the 11 and others. But the apostles consider their words “an idle tale” and they do not believe them (*Luke 24:1–11*).

In John, the Magdalene comes alone to the tomb early Easter morning. She finds the stone has been taken away. She runs and tells Simon Peter and “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” that “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him.” Peter and the other disciple run to the tomb, find it

empty and see Jesus' burial linens. They leave, and Mary Magdalene is alone, weeping outside the tomb. She stoops and looks inside the tomb, and sees two angels sitting there. They ask her why she is weeping. She replies, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." She turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she does not recognize him. He too asks her why she weeps, and, thinking he is the gardener, she says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus speaks her name, "Mary," and she recognizes him. He tells her to tell his brothers, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." She goes and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (*John 20:1–18*).

In John, then, the Magdalene is the first to see the risen Lord. The Marcan addition shares this view: "Now when he arose on the first day, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene" (*Mark 16:9*). In Matthew, she and the other Mary are first to see him.

So how did this woman who traveled with Jesus in Galilee and was a witness to these epochal events become known as a whore? Nothing in the texts that name her indicates that she had such a past. The most that can be said is that she traveled with Jesus in Galilee where he exorcised demons from her, and she had resources of her own with which to serve.

It is clear that the text itself does not stigmatize the Magdalene as a whore. The first step in giving her this sullied past lies in interpretation. In early Christian interpretation, women mentioned in several passages became identified with the Magdalene, even though these texts do not explicitly name her as the woman involved.

The most important motif that links some of these stories to the Magdalene—and on which much interpretation is hung—is the motif of anointing. The Magdalene, it will be recalled, came to Jesus' tomb on the first Easter with spices to anoint him (*Mark 16:1*; see also *Luke 24:1*). Jesus was, of course, called the Anointed One (*Christos*, in Greek). So it is perhaps natural that the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' head in *Mark 14:3–9* and *Matthew 26:6–13* is identified in early tradition as the Magdalene, especially because in these pre-crucifixion passages this anointing is explicitly said to be for Jesus' burial. Adapting this motif of anointing, in *Luke 7:36–50* a woman "who was a sinner" anoints Jesus' feet. Jesus tells Simon, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." Here too later tradition

identifies the woman as the Magdalene. The identification is made easier because in *John 12:1–3* a woman named Mary at Lazarus’ home in Bethany anoints Jesus’ feet (see also *John 11:2*).

Thus, in one of the passages that became associated with Mary Magdalene, there is a woman named Mary; she is therefore assumed (although this Mary is from Bethany) to be the Magdalene. In other passages, no name is given to the woman, but she is nevertheless identified in later tradition as Mary Magdalene. In one episode the unnamed woman is a public sinner, “a woman of the city” (*Luke 7:36–50*); her sin, it is clearly implied, is sexual. Sexual sin is the link between this passage and others in later tradition sometimes considered to be about Mary Magdalene: the story of an unnamed woman caught in the act of committing adultery (*John 7:53–8:11*) and the story of the Samaritan woman said to have had five husbands and to be living with a man not her husband (*John 4:8–29*).

These identifications—“conflation” is the technical term by which scholars tell us these stories were all combined—produced the beginnings of a “biography” of this remarkable woman who clearly was more important to the story of Jesus than the Gospel writers explicitly indicated. The initial motives behind this conflation may have been benign, even creative, but the conflation ended up as a basis for degrading the Magdalene.

The identification of her sin in later legend as prostitution has its source in the story of the “sinner” in *Luke 7:36–50*. This identification fulfills the desire—or the need—to downgrade the Magdalene, as well as the desire to attach to female sexuality the notions of evil, repentance and mercy. One scholar believes the later legend of the Magdalene as prostitute was “brought into existence by the powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity, which associates women with the dangers and degradation of the flesh.”⁽³⁾ The need for a penitent whore-heroine in Christian mythology shaped the understanding of passages like this that did or might (in the Christian imagination) concern her. In the words of this same scholar, Marina Warner, the development of the



prostitution legend represents “Christianity’s fear of women, its identification of physical beauty with temptation, and practice of bodily mortification.”⁽⁴⁾

I would add that the legend-making process also reflects a Christian reaction against female power and the authority of this major witness to the crucial data of Christianity, especially the resurrection.

Precisely how early this conflation produced the legend of Mary Magdalene’s whoredom, we do not know. Origen (c. 185-c. 254) and John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) comment that Mary Magdalene was a wholly unsuitable first witness to Jesus’ resurrection. So the legend, or basic aspects of it, may already have been in place at this time. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great gave prestige and authoritative sanction to this conflation in his homilies.⁽⁵⁾ The earliest extant text that harmonizes the episodes into a single, concise, coherent narrative of the Magdalene’s “life” appears to be a tenth-century sermon attributed to Odo of Cluny.⁽⁶⁾

Especially influential was a legend about her last 30 years, supposedly spent in Provence, France. Its fully developed and relatively stable form is that told by Jacobus de Voragine in his immensely popular *Legenda Aurea (Golden Legend)* in the mid-13th century.⁽⁷⁾ In this telling, very little attention is paid to the Magdalene’s presence in the passion and resurrection scenes; the emphasis, instead, is on her sin and repentance, and on love. Her story as told here shows that anyone, even the most sinful, can be forgiven. In her life after the ascension of Jesus, the Magdalene is said to have traveled widely, to have undergone many trials and to have spent her last 30 years in isolation. Actually, the ultimate source of this life of solitude is a legend about the prostitute Mary of Egypt, who did penance naked and wrapped in her hair in a desert retreat. By the ninth century this story was blended into that of the Magdalene. In this telling the prostitute has become a recluse; the Magdalene of the Gospels has all but disappeared.

Beginning in the 16th century, modern scholarship began to deharmonize the Gospels—instead of trying to make them consistent, scholars began to appreciate their differences and what lay behind those differences. In 1517 a scholar named Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples published a critique of the traditional view of Mary Magdalene as repentant whore.⁽⁸⁾ Within the next three years, 15 major treatises were written on the controversy. Lefèvre d’Etaples was censured by the theological faculty of the

Sorbonne. His works were placed on the Vatican's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (*List of Prohibited Books*). The controversy over the Magdalene, however, continued to rage for the next 350 years.

Today it's official. Roman Catholic and Protestant doctrines agree with that of Eastern Orthodoxy in distinguishing among three separate female Gospel characters: Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the unnamed "sinner" in *Luke 7*. Thus, the Magdalene can no longer be identified as a sinner. And of course the links between the Magdalene and the Samaritan woman caught in the act of adultery (*John 7:53–8:11*) and between the Magdalene and the Samaritan woman who had five husbands and was living with a man not her husband (*John 4:8–29*) were always so weak as to require little modern scholarship to break them.

But unofficially—in popular piety and among those adhering to unexamined assumptions—the Magdalene is still the ex-whore. For example, tales of Mary Magdalene's lustful early life and repentance take up half of Marlee Alex's 1987 book for children entitled *Mary Magdalene: A Woman Who Showed Her Gratitude*.⁽⁹⁾ According to this account, the Magdalene "was not famous for the great things she did or said, but she goes down in history as a woman who truly loved Jesus with all her heart and was not embarrassed to show it despite criticism from others." This description is of course still based on the conflated passages, especially *Luke 7* in which an unnamed sinner anoints Jesus. Relegated to a relatively minor position are those New Testament passages that actually mention the Magdalene. In those texts, she is remembered for the great things she did (she followed Jesus and was present at the cross and at the tomb) and for what she said (that the tomb was empty and that he was raised from the dead).

Another tradition about the Magdalene is preserved in several Gnostic works of the second to fourth centuries, including the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, *the Sophia of Jesus Christ*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Pistis Sophia* and the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene). These Gnostic works preserve a tradition about a rivalry, or conflict, between the Magdalene and Peter or other male disciples. When she is challenged by Peter, Jesus (or, in one instance, Levi) defends her. Neither silenced nor excluded, the Magdalene speaks boldly and powerfully, entering into dialogue with the risen Jesus and comforting, correcting and encouraging the male disciples. She is a visionary,

praised for her superior spiritual understanding and often identified as the intimate “companion” of the Savior. In the Gospel of Philip (63:34–64:10), Jesus is said to have kissed her often. An erotic element is also present in the Gospel of Mary: “The Savior loved [her] more than the rest of women” and “He loved her more than us [the male disciples].”

But unlike the Magdalene of later Western art and legend, the Gnostic Magdalene had not been a prostitute or sinner.⁽¹⁰⁾ She does not represent repentance nor forgiveness nor regenerate sexuality.

If the erotic element in the Gnostic works does not reflect the tradition of an earlier sinful life, what does it signify? According to Elaine Pagels, “The hint of an erotic relationship between [Jesus] and Mary Magdalene may indicate claims to mystical communion; throughout history, mystics of many traditions have chosen sexual metaphors to describe their experiences.”⁽¹¹⁾

It is likely that Mary Magdalene functioned in Gnostic circles not only as representative of the female followers of Jesus, but also as a symbol of the importance and leadership of women among Gnostics.⁽¹²⁾ She may have been a role model on which some women based their claim to power. Women may have played important roles in these communities, both as leaders and as sources of revelation and authority.

This probably reflects the egalitarianism within the Jesus movement, itself rooted in the egalitarian form(s) of Judaism. As one scholar, Rosemary Ruether, has argued, “The tradition of Mary Magdalene as a sinner was developed in orthodox Christianity primarily to displace the apostolic authority claimed for women through her name.”⁽¹³⁾ From the Gnostic materials, we can glimpse what was displaced, distorted, lost and overlaid by the legend of Mary Magdalene as the whore.

Now we can begin to restore the Magdalene to her rightful place, as we look more deeply into the Gospel episodes in which she appears—and those in which she does not appear. Despite her importance, the Gospels themselves have neglected to tell us much about her. We are not told of her call by Jesus (nor of any other woman’s call, only of the call of males). No discussion or teaching during his ministry involves her. Only the figure(s) at the empty tomb and the risen Jesus speak to her. Dialogue with

her as an individual occurs only in *John 20:1–18*. Outside of the Gospels, she is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament.

Yet the trace of her great significance remains. She travels with Jesus in Galilee and goes up with him to Jerusalem. She is there at the crucifixion and at the empty tomb. The risen Jesus appears first to her,⁽¹⁴⁾ and it is she who carries the word of his resurrection to the male disciples. In this loyalty, courage and religious insight is the foundation of her lasting memory.

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All work >

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Footnotes

1.

The Marcan addition is the longer ending of Mark (16:9–20) found in many manuscripts. It is accepted as canonical, although printed in smaller type in many translations.

According to most scholars, it was not written by Mark but added later. Some scholars think 16:9–20 is dependent on the other Gospels and summarizes their narratives of resurrection appearances; other scholars regard it as independent tradition.

2.

C.E. (Common Era), used by this author, is the alternate designation corresponding to A.D. often used in scholarly literature.

3.

The two-source theory of the literary relationship among the Synoptic Gospels holds that Mark has been used by Matthew and Luke. They also use a second, hypothetical source, simply called Q for the German word *quelle* (source). (See Helmut Koester and Stephen J. Patterson, “The Gospel of Thomas—Does It Contain Authentic Sayings of Jesus?” **BR** 06:02.) Further, Matthew and Luke each have access to special sources of written or oral information (M and L). The Gospel of John is viewed as having no direct literary relationship with the synoptics.

Endnotes

1.

Ben Witherington III, “On the Road with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and Other Disciples—*Luke 8, 1–2*,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 70 (1979), pp. 244–245.

2.

John 4:27 is the only exception, though it has nothing to do with travel. Jesus’ disciples find him with Samaritan woman: “They were astonished that he speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or ‘Why are you speaking with her?’”

3.

Marna Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 225–232. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has rightly remarked that the post-New Testament distortion of the image of Mary Magdalene signals a deep distortion in the attitudes toward, and in the self-understanding and identity of, the Christian woman and man (“Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles,” *Union Theological Seminary Journal* [April, 1975], p. 5; *Der Vergessener Partner* [Düsseldorf, Ger.: Patmos Verlag, 1964], pp. 57–59). That distortion calls for precise documentation and correction by historians. See also PHEME PERKINS,

“I Have Seen the Lord’ (*John 20:18*): Women Witnesses to the Resurrection,”
Interpretation 46 (1992), pp. 31–41.

4.

Warner, *Alone of All*, p. 232.

5.

Pope Gregory, *XL Homiliarum Evangelia* 2.25, 76:1188–1196 in *Patrologiae Latina*, ed.
Jacques Migne (Paris, 1844 *et seq.*).

6.

Odo of Cluny, *De Maria Magdalene & triduo Christi Disceptatio*.

7.

Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. T. Graesse (Dresden, 1846); English transl.:
Granger Ryan and Helmut Rippergar, *The Golden Legend of Jacobus Voragine* (New
York: Longmans, 1941; reprint New York: Arno, 1969), pp. 355–364.

8.

Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples, *De Maria Magdalene & triduo Christi Disceptatio* (Paris,
1517).

9.

Marlee Alex, *Mary Madgalene: A Woman Who Showed Her Gratitude* (Grand Rapids,
MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

10.

Rather, another gnostic figure, Sophia (Wisdom), associated with a fall through love and
an agony of remorse.

11.

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 18.

12.

See D.M. Parrot, "Gnostic and Orthodox Disciples in the Second and Third Centuries," *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. C.W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, Jr. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), pp. 218–219.

13.

Rosemary Ruether, *Women-Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), n. 1, p. 286. Contrast PHEME PERKINS (*The Gnostic Dialogue* [New York: Paulist, 1980], n. 10, p. 136), who thinks that the role of Mary Magdalene in Gnostic texts is not evidence that Gnostics upheld community leadership by women. Her role, however, is not the only evidence for this.

14.

This tradition is probably historical, despite the fact that in *Luke 24:34*, as in *1 Corinthians 15:5*, the first appearance is said to be to Peter (Cephas). *John 20:8* presents the unnamed Beloved Disciple as the first to believe. Already in the New Testament period, Magdalene's role was in the process of being diminished and distorted. In the memories, traditions and rethinking of the Pauline and Lucan communities, her prominence was challenged by that of Peter; in Johannine circles, by that of the Beloved Disciple.