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Memory, Jesus, and Mary Magdalene: Whose memory matters?

ABSTRACT

This article explores how the collective memory of the Christian tradition draws on the characterisation of Mary Magdalene in two sets of writings: the canonical Gospels, and the Gnostic Christian writing, Gospel of Mary. It argues that the interpretations of these characterisations are deeply shaped by ideologies concerning gender and female sexuality. This rings true for past and present contexts and is not limited to more conservative or traditional views on gender, sexuality, and theology. As such, the article attempts to highlight the role of subjectivity and ideology in the acts of remembering in the Christian tradition based on New Testament and Early Christian writings and argues for critical interpretations of both the characterisations in the writings themselves, and the subsequent "lives" of these characterisations in the Christian tradition.

1. INTRODUCTION: MEMORY AND THE SHAPE OF WHO WE ARE

> **We need to be reminded that memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena … We are constantly revising our memories to suit our current identities. Memories help us make sense of the world we live in;**

> and 'memory work' is … embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end (Gillis 1994:3, 4).

These words rings true for all social identities, including those shaped within the contours of the Christian faith tradition, whose authoritative texts are deeply dependent on memory. Given the oral roots of much of the New Testament writings, especially the Gospel writings as form of narrative literature, eyewitness accounts were shared and retold from memory and eventually resulted in the scribal traditions whereby the proverbial pen was put to paper. Memory and the act of remembering are not merely the recalling of precise facts and observations, as constructivist approaches to memory suggest. Rather, the one/s relying on memory – whether their own or of others – actively participates in the selection, reception, and reconstruction of past events, informed by their own past experiences, frames of reference, and world views.[1] As such, memory can be described as ideological representations and recallings of the past, serving agendas and ideals in the present and the future, whilst continuously being shaped, pressed, and formed to fit the purpose it serves.[2]

In this contribution, I opt for engaging with the textual representations of Mary Magdalene in two sets of writings in the Christian tradition: the canonised Gospels, and the Gnostic writing known as the Gospel of Mary. In line with the contours of narratological approaches to New Testament writings, I engage these two sets as narrative texts, in which Mary Magdalene is portrayed as a character. Thus, my primary concern is not the historicity or factual correctness of these portrayals in comparison to a historical figure; rather, I am curious as to the manner in which the implied authors of these early Christian writings depict her, also in relationship to other characters in the narratives.[3] Thereby I attempt to discern some memory strands that contribute to the ongoing processes of memory-making about Mary Magdalene in the Christian tradition.

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1 As noted by Robbins (1996:14): "New Testament texts are not simply historical, theological or linguistic treatises. Rather, their written discourse is a highly interactive and complex environment. Interpreting a biblical text is an act of entering a world where body and mind, interacting with one another, create and evoke highly complex patterns and configurations of meanings in historical, social, cultural and ideological contexts of religious belief. Rhetorical argument, social act and religious belief intertwine in them like threads and yarn in a richly textured tapestry."

2 For a sound overview on the relationship between social memory, orality, and the gospels, and research over the past few decades in this regard, see Duling (2011:1-11).

3 This approach is selected in recognition of the contributions made to narratological exegesis and narrative critical research of New Testament writings by Prof. Francois Tolmie during his academic career, to whom this contribution is dedicated. For a thorough introduction to his view and application of narratological models to biblical literature, see Tolmie (1999).

2. WHO WAS MARY MAGDALENE?

Paradoxically, collective memory concerning Mary Magdalene is both vague and very specific – and transcends the scholarly circles of biblical interpretation. On the one hand, some closely follow the canonical Gospels' characterisation and subsequently regard her as an important follower of Jesus, the apostle to the apostles, and as a clear reminder of the importance of female followers of Jesus during his earthly ministry (albeit with a demonic past). On the other hand (and especially in popular culture), she is remembered for what is not stated in the canonical Gospels: that she was loved more by Jesus than any other woman or even married to him. Furthermore, the conflated collective memory of different female characters in the Gospels continues to persist after centuries, recalling Mary Magdalene as a (repentant) prostitute. Who Mary Magdalene was, historically, what ancient sources mention about her, and how she has been and is remembered in the Christian tradition and in popular culture, do not necessarily correspond closely, or even at all. In fact, the vast majority of the representations of Mary Magdalene (whether oral, textual or visual) rely heavily on assumptions, elaborations, and fictive insertions which may sound convincing (or at the very least intriguing), but for which there is often hardly any or no historical and/or biblical textual basis.[4]

Therefore, the point of departure in this contribution in responding to the question of who Mary Magdalene was, is to focus on the characterisation of Mary Magdalene in the canonised biblical texts available to us, namely the Gospel writings of the New Testament. All four of these writings mention Mary Magdalene in similar and unique ways.

2.1 Gospel of Mark

As most likely the oldest gospel manuscript, a helpful point of departure is the Gospel of Mark, in which readers are introduced to Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross (Mark 15:40).[5] She is one of the women watching from a distance, along with Mary, mother of James the younger and Joses,

4 One of the persistent portrayals of Mary Magdalene in art, fiction, and film is that she was formerly a prostitute turned follower of Jesus and the first witness to Jesus' resurrection, although her former (unsubstantiated) status is much rather emphasised than the latter (see Brown 2006:291).

5 The majority of contemporary scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark is the oldest of the gospel writings. The exact date is still up for debate, due to the lack of internal evidence in the gospel itself. The relationship between the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE and the interpretation of Mark 13 (especially Mark 13:14) plays a key role in these discussions. However, and the extent to which it relates to the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE most likely, the gospel was written before the start of the Jewish war (66-70 CE) and between 60-65 CE (Du Toit *et al.* 1988:117-118).

and Salome. It is further stated that they went everywhere with Jesus while he was still in Galilee, and "served" or "rendered assistance" to him (Mark 15:41). Although not mentioned by name, many other women, who came with Jesus to Jerusalem, were also there (Mark 15:41). Mary is again mentioned at his burial, alongside Mary, the mother of Joses, when Joseph of Arimathea wrapped his body in linen and placed him in the grave (Mark 15:47). At the end of the sabbath day, she is mentioned alongside Mary, mother of James and Salome. Intending to balm Jesus' body with oil, they are met with an empty grave, an open grave entrance, and an anonymous young man with white close inside the grave who tells them not to be afraid (Mark 16:1-6). They receive the message of the resurrection of Jesus, and the command to go to the disciples and especially to Peter with the notice that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee (Mark 16:6-7). They exit the grave and run away in fear. According to the Gospel of Mark, they did not tell anyone else anything about it, because they were afraid (Mark 16:8). Should one prefer the shorter ending to the Gospel of Mark, this is the last word we have of not only Mary Magdalene but of the entire Gospel. The longer ending provides us with the third mention of Mary Magdalene. Jesus appears "first" to her – the one from whom He had driven out "seven evil spirits/demons" (Mark 16:9). She relays the appearance to his disciples who were mourning and crying over Jesus, yet they did not believe her testimony that she had seen him alive (Mark 16:10-11).

2.2 Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew first mentions Mary Magdalene at the crucifixion of Jesus, again at a distance, along with Mary the mother of James and Joseph, the mother of the sons of Sebedeus, and many other women. Mention is also made of them following Jesus from Galilee and "serving/supporting" him (Matt. 27:55-56). When Joseph of Arimathea wraps Jesus' body in linen and places it inside, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" were also there and sat right in front of the grave – more specific in their location than the Markan version (Matt. 27:59-61).

The Matthean version of the resurrection of Jesus is markedly more dramatic than in the Gospel of Mark. At dawn, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" went to see the grave. There was a terrible earthquake, an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, went to the grave, rolled the stone away, and sat on it. His appearance was as bright as lightning and his clothes as white as snow. The guards were in a state of shock, shaking and "becoming like the dead" (Matt. 28:1-4). No mention is made of the women's reaction to all of this. When the angel turned to the women, he tells them not to be afraid and not to seek Jesus in this place, as he has been raised from the dead. Again, the command to go and tell the disciples

that Jesus has been raised and is going to Galilee ahead of them (Matt. 28:5-7). They leave the grave hurriedly, "scared yet joyful", and ran to tell it to the disciples (Matt. 28:8). The Gospel of Matthew provides an account of Jesus meeting the women and greeting them. They, in turn, go closer to him, grab his feet, and worship him. He repeats the words the angel spoke to them: "Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers they must go to Galilee, where they will see me" (Matt. 28:9-10). The last mention of the women is that they were on their way (Matt. 28:11).

2.3 Gospel of Luke

The Gospel of Luke is the only one of the canonical gospels that mentions Mary Magdalene prior to the crucifixion of Jesus. In Luke 8:2-3, the reader is introduced to several women who, along with the twelve, travelled in the company of Jesus. These women were healed from evil spirits and illnesses and included Mary, known as Magdalene – from whom seven evil spirits were driven (see Mark 16:9); Johanna, the wife of Gusa, a high official of Herod, and Susanna. These women supported or cared for Jesus and the twelve from their own means, as is also stated in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew.

Unlike the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, Mary Magdalene is not mentioned by name at the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Mention is, however, made of the women who had followed Him from Galilee and who stood at a distance with Jesus' friends and saw the events taking place (Luke 23:49). These same nameless women appear at Jesus' grave, see the grave, and watch his body being laid down by Joseph of Arimathea. They then return home to get oils and balm ready. On the sabbath day, they rest, as per the law (Luke 23:50-56). They return to the grave early the Sunday morning, see the open grave, enter it, and find it empty. "They did not know what to make of it." Suddenly they are met by not one, but two men with shiny clothes (Luke 24:1-4). In fright, they bow and lower their faces to the ground, to which the two men react: they confirm the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and remind them of Jesus' own prophecies concerning his death and resurrection (Luke 24:5-7). The women then remembered Jesus' words, and without any command, they return from the grave to the eleven and "all the others" to tell them "all these things" (Luke 24:8-9). Only then are the names of three of the women mentioned: Mary Magdalene, Johanna, and Mary, the mother of James. Together with the other women, these things were told to the apostles (Luke 24:10). They react in disbelief and make it off as nonsense. Yet Peter jumps up, runs to the grave, finds only the linen, and returns home in awe (Luke 24:11-12).

2.4 Gospel of John

As noted by Clark-Soles (2016:626), Mary Magdalene "appears in crucial roles in the Gospel of John, but only at the end and then suddenly". In the Fourth Gospel, she is first mentioned at the crucifixion of Jesus. In contrast to the synoptic gospels, the name of Mary Magdalene appears last in the sequence instead of first. Jesus' mother, his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene are specified (John 19:25).[6] Unlike the synoptic gospels, no mention is made of the presence of women at Jesus' burial. It is also the only instance where Nicodemus is mentioned as assisting Joseph of Arimathea in applying fragrant oils and wrapping the body of Jesus (John 19:38-40). John 20:1-18 contains the most detailed descriptions of Mary Magdalene. A few noticeable differences are contained in this resurrection episode. Mary Magdalene arrives alone at the empty grave early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark. She rushes back to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple, implying that the body of Jesus had been removed with no indication of where he has been buried (John 20:1-2). In an odd race, Peter and the "other" disciple rush to the grave, see only the empty grave and the linens that were wrapped around Jesus, and return home (John 20:3-10). Mary remains outside the grave, crying. Looking into the grave, she sees two angels with white clothes, sitting where the body of Jesus was – one at the place of the head and the other at the place of the feet. Seemingly ignorant, they ask her why she is crying. She expresses her despair with the body of Jesus being gone, without a forwarding address (John 20:11-13). Turning around, she does not recognise that Jesus is standing in front of her. She mistakes him for the gardener when he asks her: "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?". She hopes he might solve the riddle of where the body of Jesus is and requests any information he may have (John 20:14-15). At that point, Jesus addresses her by her name, Mary – and she responds to him in Hebrew with "Rabboeni", that is, "Teacher" (John 20:16). Jesus then commands her not to "hold on" to him as he has not yet ascended to his father, but rather to go to "his brothers" and to relay that he is going to his father who is also their father, his God who is also their God (John 20:17).[7] Mary Magdalene then goes to the disciples, exclaiming that she had seen the Lord, and tells them what he had told her (John 20:18).[8]

6 Tolmie (2014:1-6) offers an important narratological perspective on the women at the cross of Jesus, particularly emphasising the group character of these women (rather than their role as individuals) and the role they fulfil as a group in the narrative at this particular point of the plot.

7 "Jesus directs Mary as if he is directing a play whose plot must drive forward so that the narrative's goal as expressed by 20:31 might be accomplished" (Clark-Soles 2016:637).

8 In one of two intertextual readings of John 20, Reinhartz (1999:53-69) focuses on Mary Magdalene as a disciple, but she argues that this description should be considered in the broad sense of the

2.5 Mary Magdalene and the canonical gospels: A few observations[9]

Tolmie (1999:39-53) highlights the role of traits in defining a character. The processes whereby traits of a character are revealed to the implied reader can be either directly or indirectly. To define the character of Mary Magdalene, according to the canonical gospels, is not necessarily a simple task. Yet a few observations are still possible.

The New Testament contains references to seven Marys. In the canonical gospels, Mary Magdalene is the only Mary who is not described in relation to a male figure, whether a son, brother, or husband (see Gaventa 2000:863-865).[10] As Mary Magdalene, she is identified by her town of origin, Magdala. It is noteworthy that the name of Mary Magdalene is only mentioned 13 times in the New Testament (including parallel passages). Not once is she mentioned in the book of Acts, the letters of Paul, or any of the other writings in the New Testament (Ehrman 2006:185). Hardly anything is said in those instances where she is mentioned.

The lack of mention of a husband, son, or brother does not necessarily imply that she was unmarried or without family. Yet the description of her as one of the women who supported Jesus during his ministry could indicate that she was at least financially independent and/or owned property. It is noteworthy that she is listed first in most instances where she is named in a list. This could hint at a leadership role (at least then among the women who travelled with Jesus).[11] Being mentioned last in John 19:25, at the crucifixion of Jesus, does not automatically disqualify this possibility. In this instance, she is mentioned in relation to the mother of Jesus (interestingly, whose name Mary is never mentioned in the Gospel

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word as a follower of Jesus and one who believes that he is the Messiah, instead of in the narrow sense of someone who travelled with him, sharing in his life.

9 For a comprehensive exegetical analysis of the presentation of Mary Magdalene in the four gospel writings, see Bieringer & Vanden Hove (2007:186-254). Their detailed discussion adopts redaction-critical, literary-critical, and feminist-critical methods to determine the unique portrayals of Mary Magdalene in each of these writings.

10 The frequency of the name Mary in the New Testament is not surprising, given its popularity in Jewish circles in the 1st century (Ehrman 2006:188). The Marys of the New Testament are as follows: Mary, mother of Jesus; Mary Magdalene; Mary of Bethany (as found in John 11:1-44, sister of Martha and Lazarus – not to be conflated with Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42); Mary, the mother of James and Joseph; Mary, the wife of Clopas (only mentioned in the Gospel of John); Mary, the mother of John Mark (mentioned in the Gospel of Luke and in Acts 12), and Mary of Rome (Rom. 16:6) (Gaventa 2000:863-865).

11 Some scholars caution reading too much into the textual positionality of Mary Magdalene in these lists. I do think that the consistency of this first mention of her name is not simply coincidence.

of John), two other women, and the beloved disciple. It is argued that the placement of her name in this list emphasises the role of Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple, rather than contradicting a possible leadership role on the part of Mary Magdalene. She is, after all, the first witness of Jesus after his resurrection and the first to share the news thereof to the disciples in the very next chapter of the Gospel of John.

In sum, based on the characterisation in the canonical gospels, Mary Magdalene was a follower and co-traveller of Jesus during his ministry in Galilee and contributed to the support of Jesus and the disciples during their travels. She was present at his crucifixion; she was one of the first eyewitnesses of Jesus after his resurrection (either alone or with other women), and she shared the news of his resurrection with the disciples shortly after her first-hand experience thereof.

3. EARLY CHRISTIAN APOCRYPHAL WRITINGS[12]

The canonical gospels, however, are not the only sources of the early church's collective memory of Mary Magdalene. As noted by Leloup (2002:x-xi),

> (t)he earliest materials that refer to Mary Magdalene appear from two very different sources: the canonical Gospels of the New Testament, and a group of fringe materials that have come to be known as the Gnostic gospels, which were rejected by the Roman Catholic Church.

Moreover, the presentation of her in the four canonical gospels is expanded and seemingly even challenged, when turning to writings outside of the New Testament canon.

12 Terminology for those writings that are not canonical – relating either to the Hebrew Bible or to the New Testament – is not a simple matter. Frey (2019:1-44) problematises the use of terms such as "apocryphal", "pseudographical", "deutero-canonical", and "extra-canonical" in his contribution to the edited volume titled, *Between canonical and apocryphal texts.* For this contribution, I use the term "apocryphal" to refer to those early Christian writings that were not canonised in the formal canonisation processes of the first few centuries.

In gnostic Christian circles, Mary Magdalene appears to have been held in high regard.[13] According to Van der Watt & Tolmie (2005:552), this was, at least in part, due to her faithfulness as a follower of Jesus, and her depiction as the first eyewitness of the resurrected Jesus in the Gospel of John. In these communities, she was reckoned as someone to whom Jesus revealed certain mysteries, and the content of their beliefs was sometimes traced back to her. Turning to gnostic Christian writings as representations of these gnostic Christian circles, Mary Magdalene appears to have represented a very particular point of conflict in the early church relating to theology, leadership, and gender. It is worth noting that she features prominently in a number of gnostic Christian writings. These include several of the Nag Hammadi writings, as well as one book found approximately 50 years before this library was discovered (at the turn of the 19th century), namely the Gospel of Mary (Ehrman 2006:207).[14]

The apocryphal New Testament writing that I explore in more detail in this instance, is the Gospel of Mary – the only known Gospel named after a woman (De Boer 2004:1). My interest in this writing is not, in the first instance, to determine whether the text is historically accurate or not; contemporary criteria for historicity would be an exercise in anachronistic accuracy (or inaccuracy). Rather, I am curious as to how Mary Magdalene is remembered by means of characterisation in this text, as an example of yet another type of memory of Mary Magdalene in the early Jesus movement.

13 Defining Christian gnosticism and categorising early Christian writings as such is not without its challenges. Marjanen (2002:32) argues that, since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library, the term "gnosticism" has been redefined in various ways. Subsequently, Marjanen no longer classifies texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, and the *Gospel of Mary* as gnostic. Despite the agreement of the anthropology and the soteriology of these writings to that of gnosticism with an emphasis on the return of the pre-existent soul to the realm of light as a sign of ultimate salvation, they do not contain the other central feature of gnosticism, namely the idea of a cosmic world created by an evil and/or ignorant demiurge (Marjanen 2002:32). For this contribution, I will regard the Gospel of Mary as a Christian gnostic writing.

14 Texts traditionally included in the "Mary texts" group are the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the *Dialogue of the Saviour*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Philip*, *Pistis Sophia*, the *Great Questions of Mary*, and some *Psalms of Heracledides* in the *Manichaean Psalm-Book* (Marjanen 2002:31). For a brief summary of these gnostic writings in which a Mary occurs, who is commonly identified as Mary Magdalene, see De Boer (2004:4-6).

3.1 Gospel of Mary

Exploring the Gospel of Mary is no simple task. This 2nd- or 3rd-century gnostic Gospel likely dates from 150 to 200 CE. It is, therefore, also one of the earliest gospels outside of the New Testament. The surviving evidence of this gospel is sparse. It survives in three incomplete manuscripts, of which two are small 3rd-century fragments in Greek (P. Berolinensis 8502,1), and the third is a more extensive copy of the original Greek in a 5th-century Coptic codex (P. Rylands III 463). Knowledge of the Gospel of Mary is heavily dependent upon the latter (King 2002:54), which is severely damaged (Tite 2000:865).[15] Pages 1-6 and 11-14 are missing, leaving only approximately half the gospel intact. Unfortunately, the two Greek fragments do not contain the missing sections (Van der Watt & Tolmie 2005:551). This gospel writing presents Mary Magdalene as "a revealer of secret wisdom in the post-Resurrection era ... This wisdom is cosmological and soteriological in essence" (Tite 2000:865).

The Gospel of Mary consists of two parts. In the first half (of which much has been lost), the author narrates a discourse between Jesus and the disciples on the nature of the world (matter), sin, and ethics (1^{1}-9^{5a}) (Tite 2000:865). Its content is framed in typical gnostic thought: matter is sinful, and the Son of man is within them (Van der Watt & Tolmie 2005:553). This section ends with the blessed one pronouncing a peace wish, a warning to avoid false teachers and not to impose legalistic requirements on others, and an admonition to the disciples to preach (Tite 2000:865; Ehrman 2006:239). He then leaves, without any mention of how this departure takes place. A brief transition is provided in 9^{6-24}, in which the name of Mary appears for the first time (at least, in the remaining text). The disciples are left confused and sad ("wept greatly"), and concerned that they may also face execution, like Jesus did. Mary rises, comforts them, and "directs their hearts on the Good" (Van der Watt & Tolmie 2005:556-557).[16]

The second part commences in 10^{1}. Peter calls on Mary to speak. His words are more or less as follows:

> Sister, we know that the Saviour *loved you more than all the other women*. Tell us the words of the Saviour that you remember – the words you know, but that we do not know and did not hear (own emphasis).

15 The most extensive copy of the Gospel of Mary is written in Sahidic Coptic and includes a number of dialectical borrowings (Leloup 2002:5).

16 According to the Greek text, she also kissed them (Van der Watt & Tolmie 2005:557).

Mary then answers, "I will tell you what is hidden from you" (Van der Watt & Tolmie 2005:557). She then proceeds to share the vision she saw. The first vision is a discussion between Mary and the Lord on the nature of visions – whether it is seen by means of the soul or the spirit. The saviour answers her that it is neither, but instead, it is seen by means of the mind that is between the two (10^{9}-10^{22}). Pages 11-14 are missing, and scholars assume that Mary continues to explain how the soul of a person returns through various stadia until it finally finds rest at the origin (Van der Watt & Tolmie 2005:558).

After the gap, the text resumes where Mary shares how the soul was challenged by the second force, as it ascends through the heavenly spheres controlled by forces opposed to it (desire) (15^{1-9}). In view of gnostic thought on salvation and the journey of the soul through "spheres" underway to heaven, it is assumed that part of the preceding missing text narrates how the soul was challenged by the first force. In 15^{10}-16^{1}, the challenge of the soul by the third force (ignorance) follows, and thereafter follows the challenge of the soul by the fourth force (anger); and is concluded in 17^{9}: "After Mary said these things, she fell silent, because this was as far as the Saviour had spoken to her" (Van der Watt & Tolmie 2005:558-560).

Finally, the disciples' reaction to her vision follows. Andrew is first to react and tells the disciples that he cannot believe that the Saviour said these things, as it is clearly wrong ideas (17^{10-15}). Despite his initial affirmation of and request to Mary, Peter follows suit, asking the disciples:

> Did He then speak to a woman in secret, without us knowing it? Should we now change our point of view and listen to her? Did He choose her above us? (17^{16-23}).

Mary starts crying and responds to Peter:

> Peter, my brother, what do you think? That I thought of all of this myself, or that I am telling lies about the Saviour? (18^{1-5}).

Levi then answers, rebuking Peter:

> Peter, you have always been quick to anger. I see how you are now challenging the woman, just like the opponent/adversary. If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you to reject her? The Saviour knows her well, after all! That is why He loved her more than us. Let us rather be ashamed and put on the perfect person. Let us distance ourselves as He commanded us and go preach the good message and let us not lay down any other rule or law than that which has been spoken by the Saviour (18^{6-21}).

The Greek and the Coptic endings of the Gospel of Mary differ; according to the Greek text, only Levi went out to teach and preach. The Coptic text includes the disciples in these activities (19[1]) (Van der Watt & Tolmie 2005:560; Tite 2000:865-866).

It can be gathered, from the remaining text of the Gospel of Mary, that Mary's vision – and especially her identity as a woman sharing this vision – was problematic for at least some of the disciples. By name, these are portrayed as being the characters, Andrew and Peter. Mary is upset by their reaction, as it questions not only her own integrity but also that she holds the authority to testify concerning the saviour. A male character, Levi, rebukes Peter, and his closing words seem to settle the resistance against Mary and the role she assumes; at least, for the time being.

3.2 Further explorations of the Gospel of Mary

In the Gospel of Mary, Mary is never identified in relation to Magdala, her town of origin. In fact, the only Christian apocrypha which does specify her identity is *The Gospel of Philip* and the *Pistis Sophia* (see Shoemaker 2002:7-9). The consensus view, however, still holds that the gnostic writings do refer to Mary Magdalene, of which Antti Marjanen is a leading scholar. Such consensus has often been based on explorations of the different spellings of "Mary" in different texts (Maria, Mariam, Mariamne) or even within the same text (Jones 2002:3). The root of this consensus view appears to be the work of Carl Schmidt. As one of the earliest editors and translators of the text of the *Pistis Sophia*, after its discovery in 1773, he identified the figure of Mary in this text as Mary Magdalene, rather than Mary of Nazareth. Subsequently, this understanding has been decisive for many of the Coptic "gnostic" texts that were discovered since then, including the *Gospel of Mary*, whose manuscript Schmidt acquired for the Berlin Museum in 1896 (Shoemaker 2002:9-10). Typically, the spelling of Mary as "Maria" in both the Coptic and Greek texts (with or without further definition as the virgin mother of Jesus) is assumed to be Mary of Nazareth, whereas the forms "Mariam" or "Mariamne" are almost always used with reference to Mary Magdalene (Shoemaker 2002:10-11; see Marjanen 1996).

However, this view has been challenged, prominently so by Shoemaker. He argues

> that in many cases the Mary who has been assumed to be Mary Magdalene could actually be Mary the mother of Jesus (Jones 2002:2).

Shoemaker rejects the notion "that the form of the name Mary is a reliable indicator of the identity of the intended person" (Jones 2002:2-3). Rather, he argues that there "has been an intermingling of traditions regarding the various Marys in ancient Christian tradition", making it difficult to clearly discern which Mary is referred to when – especially in gnostic writings. Surveying a spectrum of both Eastern and Western Christian traditions is what brings him to this point. For Shoemaker, "the 'gnostic Mary' is a curious composite figure who requires careful handling" (Jones 2002:3). For this article, I agree with the consensus view, at least pertaining to the Gospel of Mary, in identifying Mary as Mary Magdalene.[17] Jesus is never mentioned by name in the Gospel of Mary. Rather, an array of titles serve as personal names: Saviour, Lord, and Blessed One (King 2002:55).

King (2002:54) raises numerous questions about the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Mary and her relationship with the disciples:

> Scholars are divided over the identity of Mary and her significance in this Gospel. First of all, which Mary is she: Mary Magdalene, Mary the virgin-mother, or some other Mary? And how important is Mary for the roles that are played by her character, that is, could some other disciple (male or female) be substituted without changing the meaning of the work? Or is the specific figure of Mary crucial to the interpretation of the Gospel of Mary? And if so, why? Is it because of a widespread tradition portraying her as a leading disciple or a visionary? What about her relation to 'the Twelve'? Was the positive portrait of her and Levi meant to counter a tradition that only the twelve male disciples were the true guarantors of apostolic tradition? Or is Mary the prime character because the work reflects historical reality, either that she was a leader in some segment of the early Christian movement or that she was designated the apostolic guarantor for some Christian tradition? Was that tradition gnostic? Was Mary a gnostic? If not, why might gnostics have chosen Mary as their guarantor? All of these questions regarding the figuration of Mary are related to the interpretation of inner-Christian controversies in the Gospel of Mary over such issues as the nature of discipleship and apostolic authority, the leadership roles of women, the meaning of Jesus' teachings, and the role of prophetic (visionary) experience in the formative centuries of Christianity.

17 The literary depictions of Mary and Peter, in the Gospel of Mary, strengthen the argument that Mary Magdalene is referred to in this writing. In early Christian literature, Peter and Mary Magdalene often stand in relation to each other, either as alternatives in the appeal to apostolic authority, or in conflict with each other (King 2002:57).

I find the narrated conflict between the characters of Peter and Mary in the Gospel of Mary – or the "thematisation of conflict in the work", as noted by King (2002:57) – interesting. This conflict seems especially bound to Mary's gender, on the one hand, and to her role as an apostle, on the other (King 2002:57-58). Why is that, and how might this have impacted on how Mary Magdalene was remembered in later times?

3.3 Peter and Mary in conflict

In her monograph titled, *Mary Magdalene, the first apostle – The struggle for authority* (2003), Brock provides an in-depth overview of the portrayals of apostolic authority in canonical and apocryphal New Testament texts. For her, the Gospels of Luke and John show the most disparity with respect to apostolic choices, with the Gospel of Luke clearly in favour of Peter, and the Gospel of John in favour of Mary Magdalene (Brock 2003:17). Brock (2003:40) contends that it is

> not merely coincidence that the Gospel of Luke, the most pro-Petrine of the canonical gospels, is also the one in which the witness of Mary Magdalene is most diminished … In Luke, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as witnessing two messengers at the sepulchre scene instead of witnessing the resurrected Jesus himself. Furthermore, in contrast to the other three canonical gospels, only Luke refuses her a commission to spread the news of the resurrection, and only Luke refers to the resurrected Lord appearing to Peter alone (Brock 2003:40).

We see the opposite in the Gospel of John: the privileging of the figure of Mary Magdalene over that of Peter. She alone among the women and alone among all the disciples is singled out to receive an individual resurrection appearance from Christ. Furthermore, she also receives commissioning from Christ to go and tell the others what she has seen and heard (Brock 2003:60). The Gospel of John also clearly privileges the figure of the Beloved Disciple, with a diminishment of Peter's role on numerous occasions in the gospel (Brock 2003:60).

Aside from noticing differences in the portrayals of both Mary Magdalene and Peter in the resurrection narratives of the canonical gospels and in the Gospel of Peter, Brock also devotes an entire chapter to the theme of "competition" between Peter and Mary Magdalene in gnostic "Mary texts", including the Gospel of Mary. Subsequently she makes the following observations. First, both Mary and Peter receive special appearances from the risen Jesus, but they never both receive individual resurrection appearances from Jesus in the same text. Secondly, in those cases where

Mary and Peter are both present in the text, Peter consistently challenges the authority of Mary or diminishes her status, often in overt and blatant ways (Brock 2003:101-102).[18]

4. CONFLATION OF TEXTUAL REFERENCES

Despite the relative sparsity of information about Mary Magdalene in the canonical gospels, imagination and ideologies have left their mark firmly on the memory of her identity – both inside and outside Christian faith settings and far beyond the early history of the Christian church. Although the apostolic fathers do not care to mention her, or even many of the earliest church fathers (Ehrman 2006:185), the image of Mary Magdalene continues to persist as one of paramount importance. However, without any specific reason to do so – and despite being factually incorrect – numerous (diverging) textual references in the canonical gospels were gradually conflated in the first few centuries CE and formalised in the 6th century by Pope Gregory the Great – despite the lack of textual evidence to do so convincingly. Up to this day, the Western church struggles to shake off this incorrect monolithic image of who Mary Magdalene was. Some of these traditional interpretations of Mary are that she was a prostitute, that she was nearly stoned for committing adultery, and that she had a sister, Martha, and a brother, Lazarus (Ehrman 2006:187).[19]

This is due to a few factors, including the popularity of the name "Mary" among Jewish women in the 1st century and confusion between the different Marys in the New Testament; and the faulty allocation of Mary Magdalene's name to Gospel stories of unnamed women (Ehrman 2006:187). These confusions and allocations may seem innocent, but they are also undergirded by very particular ideas concerning gender, female sexuality, and male ecclesial hierarchy.

18 The strained relationship between Mary Magdalene and Peter becomes even more obvious when it is compared to the portrayal of Mary, the mother in relation to Peter: in no ancient Christian text are they in controversy with one another. Instead, when Mary, the mother, is in Peter's company, she rather consistently acknowledges or defers to Peter's authority, and to male authority in general (Brock 2003:102).

19 Beavis (2012:281-297) offers an interesting perspective. Without reinstating the traditional fusion between Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene in the Gospel traditions, she argues that there is some blurring of boundaries between these two gospel characters (especially in the Gospel of John) which becomes evident in early postbiblical Christian traditions. Moreover, she suggests that the qualities of Mary of Bethany, as represented in the New Testament, assist in accounting for the popularity of "Mary" in many early Christian writings – especially those that are gnostic. As such, she wishes to draw attention to the role of Mary of Bethany, that was conflated early on with Mary Magdalene, in nascent Christian tradition.

Probably the prominent confusion concerning her image, is that Mary Magdalene is the sinful woman who anoints Jesus in Luke 7. In Mark 14, an unnamed woman pours ointment over Jesus' head prior to his arrest and trial. Jesus praises her for anointing him for his burial (Mark 14:3-9). In John 12:1-8, a woman named Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus. Besides not being Mary Magdalene, it is also not the same event as mentioned in Mark. In Mark, the event takes place in the home of Simon the Pharisee in the land of Galilee; in John, it takes place in the house of Mary (of Bethany), Martha, and Lazarus in the land of Judea. Further confusion sets in when readers assume that the unnamed woman who is a "sinner" anoints Jesus in Luke 7, and Simon the Pharisee is surprised that Jesus allows her to touch him (Luke 7:37-39). These three stories are taken to be the same event, despite the fact that Mary Magdalene is introduced in Luke 8:1-3 by name, in reference to her town, and with the description that seven demons had gone out from her. What is more, the category of "sinner" is translated to mean "prostitute", whereas it simply meant a woman who did not keep the law of Moses rigorously. The result? Jesus is thought to have been anointed by a prostitute named Mary (Ehrman 2006:188-189). Another narrative drawn into the conflated image of Mary Magdalene, is John 8, where a group of men want to stone an unnamed woman for committing adultery. The later insertion of this narrative in the Gospel of John and the lack of mention of any name, rules out the possibility that this can be Mary Magdalene (Ehrman 2006:189-190).

In the year 591 CE, Pope Gregory the Great (540-604 CE) delivered a sermon that would formalise this conflated image of Mary Magdalene in the tradition of the Christian church. His 33rd homily, delivered on the story of Jesus' anointing in Luke 7, includes the following:

> 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. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly yes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer's feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt (Ehrman 2006:190).

Thus, a conflated image of Mary Magdalene became even further removed from the canonical gospel accounts; she became an imagined Mary representing conversion from the most hideous and scandalous sexual sins to humble repentance as follower of Jesus Christ: her perfume, eyes, hair, and mouth no longer sin, but have become instruments of her devotion to him. Her dangerous body is no longer a threat to men; she has become the sorrowful, penitent woman who falls to the feet of the man Jesus, in submission (Ehrman 2006:191-192).[20] I now turn to these ideologies concerning gender and female sexuality, which inform how Mary Magdalene is remembered.

5. REMEMBERING NEW TESTAMENT CHARACTERS: NO OBJECTIVE TASK

Whether looking for the good, the bad, or the ugly in memories of Mary Magdalene, it appears that it can be found. Some feminist biblical scholars and female readers of the New Testament have often found a very positive and affirming image of Mary Magdalene to be worth holding onto; that is, her portrayal as a strong female, as first witness to the resurrected Jesus, and her role as "apostle to the apostles" – in a world where such prominent roles were not exactly a given to women. This rings true for references to her in the canonical gospel writings, they argue, as well as gnostic writings.[21]

20 A very recent example of this conflated and skewed portrayal of Mary Magdalene is the manner in which she is portrayed in the crowd-funded evangelical series titled, *The Chosen* – one of the largest crowd-funded projects to date. Burnette-Bletsch (2022:192-201) offers a critical perspective on this depiction, arguing that it reinscribes patriarchal ideology by means of a narrative structure, in which the woman is rescued and reformed by a virtuous man at risk of his own reputation.

21 Some feminist scholars are less positive in their evaluations of the characterisation of Mary Magdalene. Cwikla (2019:95-112) challenges this view with regard to the Gospel of Thomas. She argues that early Christian writings should not be too quickly conflated as presenting a homogenous and overly positive view of Mary Magdalene, but rather evaluated individually. Doing so from a feminist critical position with the Gospel of Thomas, she concludes that ancient authors and audiences would be most concerned with the interests of male characters such as Jesus; the mere inclusion or mention of female characters as "placeholder figures" does not equate to reverence or allegiance to them, and the narratives depict the creation of male bonds which are telling for determining the ideologies and common interests of men.

As eyewitness to Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, Mary Magdalene holds a central position in the gospel testimonies concerning the central faith truths of the Christian tradition. It is understandable that her depiction in the canonical gospels as one of Jesus' devout followers and as the first witness to the risen Christ, continues to play a pivotal role in the centuries-old discussions and debates on female leadership in the Christian church. Despite this relative certainty of her role in the Jesus movement – and also the explicit mention of other women who travelled with and supported Jesus during his ministry and who also bore witness to his death and resurrection – it remains painfully ironic that the injustice of gender exclusion in ecclesial structures remains so prevalent up to this day. No wonder, then, that biblical scholars also continue to seek ways in which to counter patriarchal and sexist practices by turning to the ancient writings; to find "evidence" of how it could (should?) be different. This also rings true of the gnostic writings, as summarized by Marjanen (2002:31):

> When, more than ten years ago, I began to work on texts dealing with Mary in the so-called gnostic writings of the second and third centuries, the research situation seemed pretty simple. Mary texts were taken to represent gnostic views characterized by great sympathy toward women and strong antipathy toward nongnostic 'mainstream' Christians, who were pictured in these texts, especially through the figure of Peter, as hostile enemies of the female race. Based on these interpretations, stereotypical views received confirmation: gnostic movements adopted a favorable stand toward women's engagement in leadership roles in religious groups, whereas formative 'mainstream' Christianity radically tended to limit female participation in the church.[22]

The affirming stance toward women and female leadership was seemingly evident. However, ideological interpretations – whether toward female submission or to gender egalitarianism – should all be approached with caution. These texts, whether canonical or apocryphal, remain ancient texts, originating in ancient settings, where particular ideas about gender and sexuality were held – as is still the case at present. Furthermore, representations of characters in particular texts should not too easily be regarded as the rule of thumb in all communities of faith at a particular point in time, or as historically accurate. Texts can represent ideals rather than actuality. What was valid for one group of Jesus followers, was not necessarily valid for all. Simply because a narrative text appears to be more inclusionary, and simply because one hopes that it is equally representative of all persons, does not leave an interpreter without the

22 See Pagels, *The gnostic gospels* (1990); Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and metaphor* (1993).

task of delving into the historical realities of a text and asking, "What can be remembered – also if the memory perhaps does not affirm what I hope it does?"[23]

Returning to the Gospel of Mary, we cannot deny the prominence of Mary as a character in the writing. Her gendered position as a woman in a leadership role of some sorts is not irrelevant; it is precisely that she is a woman who is part of Peter's outcry after Mary speaks. He is not simply jealous because of her seemingly spiritual advantage depicted in her visionary experience (King 2002:58-59). For King, the third model of gender imagery, as identified by Marjanen, is deployed in the Gospel of Mary, namely a nongendered ideal in which gender and sexuality belong to the lower sphere – both men and women exercise leadership based on spiritual maturity, not on gender or sexual identity (King 2002:59-60). In a positive sense, this distinction between spiritual identity and material/bodily identity – gendered identity – meant that a woman's identity and spirituality could be developed apart from her roles as wife and mother or slave, whether she withdrew from these roles or not. Secondly, she could exercise leadership because of spiritual achievement apart from the low status accorded to her as a woman in society at large. Such rejection of the body as the self opened up the possibility of an ungendered space within the Christian community, in which leadership functions were not in the first instance determined by gender, but on spiritual achievement. Peter seems to be unable to see beyond the body, and his resistance illustrates his lack of spiritual maturity in comparison to Mary. By the same token, because of Peter's views of Mary's female body over and against his own male body – something that provides him with a higher status in the material world – this point of the irrelevance of gender and sexuality can be made (King 2002:61).[24]

Yet the non-gendered ideal state of spiritual existence is not without its problems. It finds its place within a framework where the goal of human beings is to become like the gods – or the God – whom one reveres. In order to attain this goal, movement on a spectrum or a continuum was required: from lesser, to greater. The honourable male was, by virtue of

23 For a sound overview of earlier feminist studies of the Gospel of Mary, see Balstrup (2015:7-22). She notes that, from the variety of these earlier feminist readings, "the most common is that which presents Mary and Peter as adversaries in a battle over the future of Christianity" (Balstrup 2015:17).

24 This also raises the question: Who can be an apostle? Time before the exclusive tradition of the Twelve was fixed. Arguments for and against women's ordination were not a concern in the Gospel of Mary. Rather, the issue is: Who has understood and appropriated the teachings of the saviour. Who can preach the gospel? Apostolic witness is not enough (King 2003:62-63).

his maleness, closer to transcending his mortal limitations than women. Women (and also children, slaves, and effeminate males) first had to move along the continuum through the place occupied by men. Therefore, for a woman to have life, she must first become a male. Until then, she is an imperfect man. The erasure of the female material body or the non-relevance thereof, from the ancient point of view on gender and sexuality, was clearly not based on the principle of gender equality – as proponents of gnostic gender egalitarianism would have hoped for. Rather, it represents a world in which the distinction between male and female is not important, because the "lesser female" has been absolved in the "superior male". In relation to gnostic Christian writings, women could attain the perfect state of being with the help of Jesus; by learning his secret teachings, the gnosis about how the spirit came into this world, and how the spirit can return to its heavenly home. The Gospel of Mary seems to assert that both men and women – Peter and Mary – are included in this process (Ehrman 2006:210-213).[25]

6. CONCLUSION: MARY MAGDALENE, MEMORY, JESUS, AND POWER: WHO DECIDES?

How Mary Magdalene is remembered also impacts on how Jesus is remembered. Such remembering includes how Jesus' position toward women is portrayed in the texts representing the early Jesus communities and their memories. Whether narrative writings based on eyewitness accounts such as the canonical gospels, or later imaginings of visions involving dialogues with Jesus in Christian gnostic writing such as the Gospel of Mary, both male and female characters are depicted in relation to Jesus.

In my discussion of Mary Magdalene and the memories of her, available to us as characterisations in the canonical gospels and the Gospel of Mary, I have attempted to show how ideologies concerning gender and sexuality have played a role in various stages of memory in the Christian tradition; evident particularly in the conflated image of Mary Magdalene based on bits and pieces in the canonical gospels, as well as the conflict between Peter and Mary in the Gospel of Mary, with specific reference to her gender. Whereas some scholars might hope for clear evidence in

25 The Gospel of Thomas is much more explicit in its depiction of these ancient, gendered ideals and Christian gnostic thought. Saying 114 - Simon Peter said to them, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."

the person of Mary Magdalene – whether from the canonical gospels or the Gospel of Mary – to validate female leadership in ecclesial settings, I contend that this is not the case if one takes up seriously the contexts in which these ancient writings originated and what is stated in the texts (or not). However, I do find helpful, perhaps even more so than "clear evidence", the stark reminder of how influential and intertwined ideologies concerning gender and sexuality have been in shaping memory – or should we rather say, strands of memories – in the history of the church. For all the canonical gospels to mention Mary Magdalene by name, and specifically so about the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is not insignificant. For the Gospel of Mary, to depict Peter and Mary in conflict based on her gender, is worth exploring further. Ancient understandings of honourable maleness and the attainment of ideal states requiring all other persons to become male, to move beyond gender, begs for further questioning. A conflated image of a prostitute Mary Magdalene turned meek and submissive, decreed in the 6th century and still preached from pulpits nowadays, has to be interrogated.

Where this is done, interpreters take up their role and responsibility – I believe – to move beyond simplistic "for" and "against" positions of female leadership based on the depictions of prominent characters in New Testament writings, or on an idealised gender-inclusive Jesus who has no place in 1st-century Galilee. Rather, it creates space to raise questions about what is inherited in the shape of memory in the Christian faith tradition, whose lives are impacted by memory in which manner, how memory can be engaged in a dialogical fashion, in what ways malestream memory can be countered, and to what extent memory can be reshaped and reformed – re-membered – so that life-giving biblical interpretation can come to the fore. It matters how the memory of the Christian faith is depicted, whether in academic or ecclesial settings. The persistent theological thread between sinful, sexual female bodies, the need for subordination, and the idealised male, matters. The resistance to embodied spirituality, and the teachings that particular bodies hold more authoritative power than other, matter. How we remember and whom we remember, matters.

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