Rethinking the "Gnostic Mary": Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala in Early Christian Tradition[1]

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Numerous early Christian apocrypha, including several so-called "gnostic" texts, include a character known as "Mary," whose identity is usually otherwise unspecified. Generally, this "Mary" appears as an associate or, sometimes, as a rival, of the apostles, who is filled with knowledge of the "gnostic" mysteries. Although scholars have persistently identified this Mary with Mary the Magdalene, rather than Mary of Nazareth, this interpretive dogma is based on evidence that it is at best inconclusive. This article reexamines the relevant apocrypha, as well as incorporating much previously overlooked evidence to argue that Mary of Nazareth is an equally important contributor to the "gnostic Mary's" identity. The gnostic Mary, it turns out, is a composite figure, who draws on the identities of both the Magdalene and the Virgin, rather than being the representation of a single historical individual. This new perspective will present both consequences and opportunities for feminist interpretations of early Christianity and the veneration of Mary of Nazareth.

"When women interpret texts, several things happen. The text no longer has a fixed meaning. The text may reveal women as subject; hitherto neglected elements may emerge. The text in turn becomes the subject of self-conscious critical inquiry. This invariably discloses the politics of

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knowledge—the environment of the text and how that shapes interpretation; the use and control of the text, and so on."[2] Thus Deirdre Good begins her article on *Pistis Sophia* in *Searching the Scriptures*, a recent feminist commentary on various early Christian writings, with contributions from a number of prominent scholars. In the essay that follows, I hope to demonstrate that such modes of reading are not necessarily sex-linked characteristics. I propose that we should reconsider the relatively "fixed identity" that most previous scholarship has given to an early Christian woman known from our texts simply as "Mary." This Mary is a prominent character in many early Christian apocrypha, including several so-called "gnostic"[3] texts, where she frequently appears as an associate or rival of the apostles, who is filled with knowledge of the "gnostic" mysteries. Only rarely is a specific Mary indicated by these texts, and in such instances, both Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala are present, making uncertain the identification of "Mary," when she is otherwise unnamed.

Nevertheless, students of early Christianity have by now grown quite comfortable with the notion that this figure represents Mary of Magdala

2. Deirdre Good, "Pistis Sophia," in *Searching the Scriptures*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 2 vols., vol. 2: *A Feminist Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1993–94), 678.

3. On the various problems surrounding the use of the terms "gnostic" and "gnosticism," one should now see the important contribution by Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 2. Despite Williams's arguments, I am determined to continue using this admittedly problematic term in the absence of any better alternative. Although Williams successfully demonstrates the incredible diversity that often passes under the label *gnosticism,* Williams's proposed replacement, "biblical demiurgical traditions," is, in my opinion, unsatisfactory. Its main problems lie in Williams's focus on biblical and demiurgical traditions, while excluding the importance of "gnosis" or knowledge in these traditions. Williams's category is at once too narrow and too broad, since biblical demiurgy would include, in addition to much traditionally "gnostic" material, both Philo and Arius. While Williams's construct presents an intellectually stimulating perspective on these traditions, it does not succeed as a definition of a particular tradition, in my opinion. I think that a more useful category would be "esoteric-demiurgic traditions," since many "gnostic" traditions are not biblical, but nevertheless do place a strong emphasis on salvific knowledge. I have dealt with Williams's arguments at more length in my forthcoming study, *The Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, forthcoming). There I conclude that, while the term "gnosticism" is best avoided, I will continue to use "gnostic," based largely on the reasoning given in Kurt Rudolph, "'Gnosis' and 'Gnosticism'—The Problems of Their Definition and their Relation to the Writings of the New Testament," in *Gnosis und Spätantike Religionsgeschichte: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, NHMS 42 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

and not Mary of Nazareth. So pervasive has this identification become that one might hardly think to question it. In fact, it is somewhat difficult to challenge this interpretation, since it is often assumed or asserted rather than explained,[4] making it sometimes unclear exactly what one is arguing against.[5] But this interpretive dogma is not so unproblematic as its repetition might make it appear; under scrutiny, it is seen to be decidedly less certain than most scholars have heretofore presented it. As this article will argue, several aspects of early Christian tradition make it difficult to rule Mary of Nazareth completely out of consideration. Among these is Mary of Nazareth's importance in the canonical gospels, where her significance may not surpass, but certainly rivals that of Mary Magdalene.[6] Likewise, the frequent confusion of these two figures in early Christian literature should caution against any easy assumption that their identities are carefully distinguished in these particular texts. More significant, however, are a number of overlooked traditions from late antiquity that link Mary of Nazareth with the gnostic Mary traditions, often imagining her in roles similar to those of the gnostic Mary. These witnesses, when combined with a careful reading of the gnostic Mary traditions themselves, make a strong case that the gnostic Mary may quite reasonably be identified with the Virgin rather than the Magdalene, by both modern and ancient interpreters.

The uncertainties of the gnostic Mary's identification with the Magdalene have not gone entirely unnoticed. In recent years, for instance, Enzo Lucchesi has challenged this interpretive orthodoxy, arguing briefly that scholars have perhaps too hastily removed Mary of Nazareth from consideration in identifying the Mary who is the *Gospel according to Mary*'s

4. See J. Kevin Coyle, "Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?" *Mus* 104 (1991): 39–55, 41–42, where he notes that, despite this figure's significant ambiguities, "undaunted, virtually all commentators on the Gnostic writings identify their "Mary" (or one of them) as the Magdalene, although this identifaction is explicit only in [*The Gospel according to Philip*] and *Pistis Sophia*"; as we will see, however, the identity of "Mary" even in these texts is more complex than Coyle here suggests.

5. The closest thing that I have found to a systematic investigation of the matter would be Antti Marjanen's recent study, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents*, NHMS 40 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996). Nevertheless, this work too seems to assume more than it argues on this matter, and, as I have argued elsewhere, it relies too heavily on a supposed distinction between the use of the names "Maria" and "Mariam," which I have shown to be falsely made in a forthcoming article: Stephen J. Shoemaker, "A Case of Mistaken Identity?: Naming the Gnostic Mary," in *Mary(s) in Early Christian Literature*, ed. F. Stanley Jones (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, forthcoming).

6. See also Shoemaker, "Case of Mistaken Identity?"

central character.[7] In proposing this he has (perhaps unknowingly) essentially revived Ernest Renan's earlier suggestion that the "gnostic Mary" of the *Pistis Sophia* is not to be identified with the Magdalene, but rather with the mother of Jesus,[8] a proposal deserving serious reconsideration. In both of these apocrypha, the evidence favoring a possible identification of this "gnostic" Mary with the Virgin is actually quite strong and has unfortunately been long overlooked by students of early Christian apocrypha.

Despite Renan's early suggestion, scholars have persistently followed the lead of Schmidt, who explicitly rejected Renan's interpretation and identified this figure with the Magdalene.[9] In order to justify his conclusion, Schmidt appealed to the form of the name Mary used as determining Mary's identity as a given point in the text.[10] From Schmidt's early commentaries, the firm notion has developed that the forms of the name Mariam and Mariamme, as opposed to Maria, reliably indicate the Magdalene's presence, with some scholars even going so far as to assert that Mary of Nazareth is always specifically identified in early Christian literature, making any unspecified Mary a reference to Mary of Magdala. In discussions of the gnostic Mary's identity, one finds this sort of argumentation everywhere: it is always a primary argument, and with very few exceptions,[11] it is usually the only evidence of this woman's identity

7. Enzo Lucchesi, "Évangile selon Marie ou Évangile selon Marie-Madeleine?" *AB* 103 (1985): 366.

8. Ernest Renan, *Histoire des origines du Christianisme*, 6th ed., vol. 7: *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du monde antique* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1891), 145 n. 1.

9. Carl Schmidt, *Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache aus dem Codex Brucianus*, TU 8.1 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche, 1892), 453–54, esp. n. 1 and 597, esp. n. 2.

10. Although it is somewhat difficult to trace the development of this hermeneutic principle, it appears to have its origin in Schmidt's early decisions concerning the different Marys of the *Pistis Sophia*. Firstly, Schmidt suggests that the character known simply as Mary in the *Pistis Sophia* is always to be identified as Mary of Magdala, whether or not her identity as the Magdalene is specified, while the mother of Jesus is present in the dialogue only when Mary of Nazareth is explicitly indicated. Schmidt's second contribution was to identify this Mary with a woman (or perhaps women?) named Mariamme, whom Origen (actually, Celsus) and Hippolytus associate with early Christian heterodoxy. Presumably, it was this equation that birthed the notion that the names Mariamme and, by association (?), Mariam were infallible indicators of the Magdalene's presence in a text. See especially ibid., 452–54, 563–64.

11. This is true especially of Karen L. King, "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 618–20, and seemingly also of Michel Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques: Codex de Berlin*, Sources gnostiques et manichéennes 1 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1984), who for the most part simply assumes this, but at one point he does suggest that her identity is related to her status as the first witness to the resurrection (225).

that is offered.[12] These principles (and the first especially) figure prominently, for instance, in Antti Marjanen's recent study, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents*. Here Marjanen relies heavily on a supposedly firm distinction in the usage of these different nominal variants, identifying Mariam, Mariamme, and any unspecified Mary in general as failsafe indicators of the Magdalene.[13]

As I have demonstrated in another article, however, these names absolutely do not provide a reliable means of distinguishing between these two

12. Schmidt's conclusions are often cited in this context (see n. 9 above), and while he is not as clear on the Mariam/Mariamme/Maria distinction, he does seemingly generate the notion that an otherwise unidentified Mary is to be equated with the Magdalene. See also Silke Petersen, *Zerstort die Werke der Weiblichkeit!: Maria Magdalena, Salome und andere Jungerinnen Jesu in christlich-gnostischen Schriften*, NHMS, 48 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 94; Anne Pasquier, *L'Evangile selon Marie*, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section textes, 10 (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1983), 23 n. 75; Coyle, "Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?"; Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993), 37. Richard Atwood, *Mary Magdalene in the New Testament Gospels and Early Tradition* (Bern: P. Lang, 1993), 186–96, largely assumes the identity of this figure with the Magdalene, but the repeated emphasis on the form of the name seems to suggest that Atwood has this principle in mind; Esther de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 81; Renate Schmid, *Maria Magdalena in gnostischen Schriften* (München: Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Religions- und Weltanschauungsfragen, 1990), 93 n. 9 and 101 n. 29, addresses the question of Mary's identity in light of the variant names, further explaining "Daß dabei jedoch immer M[aria] M[agdalena] gemeint ist zeigt die Tatsache, daß es keine Stelle gibt, an der die Charakterisierung der Frau eher auf die Mutter als auf M[aria] M[agdalena] zutreffen würde, diese aber nicht als solche bezeichnet wird. Die Mutter Maria ist immer als solche genau bestimmt"; François Bovon, "Le privilège pascal de Marie-Madeleine," *NTS* 30 (1984): 50–62, repeatedly emphasizes the significance of the form of the name, assuming its importance, without ever really explaining why.

13. This argument is most prominently featured in Marjanen's discussion of *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, where he explains the importance of the different variants (Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 62–63), a passage that is often crossreferenced in discussion of subsequent texts. Other texts for which this is the primary or only argument given for Mary's identity with the Magdalene include: *The Gospel according to Thomas* (Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 39); *The Gospel according to Mary* (94–95); *The First Apocalypse of James* (131); *Pistis Sophia* (173–74 and 184 n. 43); *The Manichean Psalm Book* (206–7; see especially n. 11 here, where the importance of name spelling is emphasized). Although Marjanen sometimes gives the appearance of relying on other criteria, such as conflict with the Apostles (*Gospel according to Thomas*), the "Philip group" (*Sophia of Jesus Christ*), etc., many of these will be seen to rest ultimately on decisions about Mary's identity in other texts, where the decision is based primarily on this criterion.

women.[14] Likewise, in this same article I have also treated the representation of these two women in the canonical gospels, evidence that is often adduced as somehow favoring of the gnostic Mary's identity with the Magdalene. This article argues that, on the contrary, the gospel traditions are in fact inconclusive, offering evidence able to support equally either woman's claim to this role.[15] Leaving these two important issues behind us, the present article will consider both the gnostic Mary traditions themselves and various other late ancient traditions suggesting Mary of Nazareth's possible identity with the gnostic Mary. The case that I will present, however, is not meant so much to depose the Magdalene from this position and replace her with Mary of Nazareth as it is to raise the hermeneutic question of whether this figure might reasonably be (or might have been) identified with Mary of Nazareth. Although I will at times argue vigorously for the gnostic Mary's identification with Mary of Nazareth, my arguments are intended to be probative, rather than definitive, suggesting a new direction of thought, instead of closing off completely a more traditional interpretation. As will become apparent in the ensuing discussion, there is much to suggest that the gnostic Mary is in fact a composite figure, and that she has absorbed elements of both the Magdalene's and the Virgin's identities. Her simple identification with one or the other figure simply cannot accommodate all of the evidence.

MARY OF NAZARETH AS APOSTOLA APOSTOLORUM IN EARLY SYRIAN CHRISTIANITY

In spite of the relatively equal importance shared by these two Marys in the New Testament, certain scholars have appealed to the risen Christ's appearance to the Magdalene at the close of the fourth gospel as something of a trump card, outweighing any other biblical evidence to establish Mary Magdalene's identification with the gnostic Mary.[16] Here Christ instructs Mary Magdalene to announce his resurrection to the apostles, effectively making her an "apostola apostolorum," an event that does indeed suggest an important role for the Magdalene in the early commu-

14. On this point, see my forthcoming article, Shoemaker, "Case of Mistaken Identity?" In response to a paper delivered at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the SBL (on which this previous article is largely based), Antti Marjanen freely conceded this point, although he maintained reservations in regards to other points of my argumentation.

15. Ibid.

16. See, e.g., King, "Gospel of Mary Magdalene," 618.

nity. When this is combined with the apostles' skepticism at her report (in Luke and the longer ending of Mark), the Magdalene's composite begins to look something like the gnostic Mary, who is often in conflict with certain of the apostles (especially Peter). Moreover, at least one scholar, Antti Marjanen, has added to this a claim that the risen Savior's appearance to his mother is unprecedented in early Christian literature, arguing that this makes unlikely Mary of Nazareth's identification with the gnostic Mary. The gnostic Mary frequently appears in conversation with the risen Christ, and, while the fourth gospel offers precedent for Christ's appearance to the Magdalene, Marjanen maintains that there is no similar evidence for an early Christian tradition of Christ's appearance to his mother following the resurrection.[17] Marjanen's conclusions are somewhat overstated, however, and they depend very much on how one views the importance of certain data that suggest the contrary. There is a well-attested patristic tradition of Christ's postresurrection appearance to this mother, a tradition that begins with Tatian's *Diatessaron* and comes to engulf early Syrian Christianity. One can add to this tradition a number of apocrypha (especially in Coptic), including the *Pistis Sophia,* for instance, where Mary of Nazareth is, together with the apostles, a privileged interlocutor in dialogues with her risen son.[18] Marjanen's argument is far too dismissive of this body of evidence, which can be seen as strongly supporting Mary of Nazareth's identification with the gnostic Mary.

The most important component of this tradition is the early and influential tradition in the Syrian church that, after his resurrection Christ appeared first to *his mother*, Mary of Nazareth, and not the Magdalene.[19] Although some uncertainty surrounds the origins of this tradition, it almost certainly dates back at least as far as Tatian's *Diatessaron*, composed sometime between 150–80.[20] This harmony of the four canonical

17. Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 94–95 n. 2.

18. Lucchesi, "Évangile selon Marie," 366.

19. This is well discussed in Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 329–35.

20. When one dates the *Diatessaron* depends a great deal on where and in what language one supposes it to have been composed. See the discussions in Arthur Vööbus, *Early Versions of the New Testament: Manuscript Studies*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 6 (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1954), 1–6; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 30–32; William L. Petersen, "The Diatessaron of Tatian," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 77–96; and Carmel

gospels quickly displaced its sources to become the primary gospel text of Syrian church during the third and fourth centuries, after which time it was itself gradually supplanted by the four canonical gospels.[21] As a result of its displacement, no complete copy of the *Diatessaron* has survived,[22] and consequently its contents have to be determined indirectly, based largely on the testimony of several second- and third-hand witnesses. Only when a number of these converge can we obtain a high degree of certainty that a particular tradition was present in the *Diatessaron*, and, in the case of the risen Christ's appearance to his mother, we are fortunate that the assemblage of witnesses to this tradition is extraordinarily reliable.

One of the most important witnesses to this tradition is Ephrem's commentary on the *Diatessaron*, one of our primary sources for knowledge of the *Diatessaron*'s contents. In his commentary, Ephrem frequently quotes the text of the *Diatessaron*, and we are fortunate that he does so particularly in the case of the empty tomb's discovery and the appearance of the risen Lord to "Mary." In contrast to John's gospel, however, Tatian's second-century harmony (as Ephrem cites it) fails to identify this woman with Mary of Magdala, naming her only as "Mary," without further clarification. Moreover, when he comes to comment on Christ's appearance to "Mary," Ephrem considers Christ's command that Mary not touch him, for which he offers the following explanation: "Why, therefore, did he prevent Mary from touching him? Perhaps it was because he had confided her to John in his place, Woman, behold your son."[23] With this interpretation, Ephrem unambiguously identifies the

McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709*, Journal of Semitic Studies, Supplement 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3–7.

21. Vööbus, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 22–27; Louis Leloir, *Éphrem de Nisibe: Commentaire de l'Évangile concordant ou Diatessaron*, SC 121 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1966), 20; McCarthy, *Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 7–8.

22. According to a famous passage from Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. 458), 200 of the 800 churches in his North-Syrian diocese were still using the *Diatessaron* instead of the separate gospels. Theodoret put an end to this by rounding up and destroying these copies of the *Diatessaron* and replacing them with the four gospels. Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *haer*. 1.20 (PG 83:372A).

23. ܠܡܢܐ ܗܟܝܠ ܟܠܝܗ ܠܡܪܝܡ ܕܠܐ ܬܬܩܪܒ ܠܗ. ܟܒܪ ܡܛܠ ܕܐܫܠܡܗ ܠܝܘܚܢܢ ܒܕܘܟܬܗ. ܐܢܬܬܐ ܠܟܝ ܗܐ ܒܪܟܝ. Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 21.27 (Louis Leloir, *Saint Éphrem, Commentaire de l'Évangile concordant Texte syriaque [Manuscrit Chester Beatty 709]*, Chester Beatty Monographs 8 [Dublin: Hodges Figgis & Co., 1963], 228. Translation: McCarthy, *Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 331).

woman to whom Christ first appeared, this *apostola apostolorum*, not with the Magdalene, but clearly with Mary of Nazareth, whom Christ had entrusted to the care of his beloved disciple. Initially, several scholars expressed reservations about this tradition, maintaining that it was probably Ephrem's own invention. Nevertheless, some of these very doubters have since been persuaded to accept the tradition as dependent on the *Diatessaron*, a point that is now generally conceded, thanks in large part to the work of Robert Murray.[24] Murray and others scholars have identified a substantial body of collateral evidence that has put this objection to rest, demonstrating with near certainty that this variant was present in Tatian's harmony and was not invented by Ephrem.[25]

The most important confirmation of this variant's antiquity comes from the assorted other witnesses on which scholars rely to determine the content of the *Diatessaron*. Each of the most important witnesses to Tatian's gospel harmony agrees with Ephrem's commentary in identifying this *apostola apostolorum* simply as Mary, as well as implying her distinction from the Magdalene. The medieval Arabic translations of the *Diatessaron*, for instance, fail to specify this "Mary's" identity in their reproduction of John 20.1–17. Then, following their report of Christ's appearance to "Mary" from John, the Arabic translations suddenly switch to Mark 16.9b, with which they introduce Mary Magdalene as if she were a completely different person from the woman to whom Christ first appeared.[26] This creates a very strong impression for the reader that the Mary who beheld the risen Christ was someone other than Mary of Magdala, possibly suggesting she is Mary of Nazareth, who was also involved in the events of the crucifixion. Such very well may have been the

24. Louis Leloir initially considered this to be Ephrem's invention, but later changed his mind, at the influence of Robert Murray, and came to recognize the antiquity of this variant: Leloir, *Éphrem de Nisibe*, 75 n. 3. William L. Peterson notes the possibility that this variant is the work of Ephrem, yet without going so far as to dispute its authenticity in William L. Petersen, *The Diatessaron and Ephrem Syrus as Sources of Romanos the Melodist*, CSCO 475, Subsidia 74 (Louvain: E. Peeters, 1985), 191, esp. n. 97.

25. In addition to what follows, see also Tjitze Baarda, *The Gospel Quotations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage*, 2 vols., vol. 1: *Aphrahat's Text of the Fourth Gospel* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 1975), 254–57, where this is quite thoroughly argued.

26. A. S. Marmardji, *Diatessaron de Tatien: Texte arabe établi, traduit en français, collationné avec les anciennes versions syriaques, suivi d'un évangéliaire diatessarique syriaque et accompagné de quatre planches hors texte* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1935), 508–10; see also Augustinus Ciasca, ed., دياطاسارون الذي جمعه طظيانوس من المبشرين الاربعة *seu Tatiani Evangeliorum Harmoniae Arabice* (Romae: Ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1888), ٢٠٠–٢٠١.

text that stood before Ephrem, prompting him to conclude that Christ's mother, rather than the Magdalene, was the recipient of this Christophany.

The Old Syriac version of the gospels is a second crucial witness to the text of the *Diatessaron* that offers similar confirmation of this variant. These translations were probably realized during the second century, at approximately the same time that Tatian was composing his gospel harmony, a text with which they have a close, if complicated, relationship.[27] No doubt because of the early dominance of the *Diatessaron*, which was later displaced by the establishment of the Peshitta version, the Old Syriac version is preserved by just two codices, both of which contain extensive fragments of the gospels. Only one of these preserves sections of the gospel of John, and we are fortunate that the conclusion has survived. This late fourth- or early fifth-century palimpsest from Sinai (one of the earliest manuscripts of the gospels in any language)[28] agrees with Ephrem in naming the woman of John 20.11–18 simply as Mary and failing to identify her with the Magdalene.[29]

The relationships among Tatian's *Diatessaron*, the different Arabic versions of the *Diatessaron*, and the Old Syriac version are admittedly quite complex, but this assortment of witnesses is sufficient to assure us that this tradition almost certainly reaches back to Tatian. As Bruce Metzger explains:

> When one or more of these witnesses [MSS B E O of the Arabic *Diatessaron*] implies a Syriac text different from the Peshitta, particularly when such readings agree with the Old Syriac and/or with other Diatessaric witnesses, we may with some measure of confidence regard such readings as genuine Tatianic remnants.[30]

27. The date of this translation is also complicated, and depends primarily on how one understands the relation of the Old Syriac version to the *Diatessaron*, with which it is somehow linked. See the discussions in Vööbus, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 73–88; and Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 36–48, esp. 45–47.

28. For the date, see Vööbus, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 74; and Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 38.

29. Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 264; F. Crawford Burkitt, *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 1: 528.

30. Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 17. Similar principles are espoused by A. J. B. Higgins, "The Persian and Arabic Gospel Harmonies," in *Studia Evangelica: Papers Presented to the International Congress on "The Four Gospels in 1957" held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1957*, ed. Kurt Aland et al., TU 73 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1959), 799; A. J. B. Higgins, "Tatian's Diatessaron and the Arabic and Persian Harmonies," in *Studies in New Testament Language and Text: Essays in*

Metzger later adds that "such a possibility becomes a probability with overwhelming compulsion when Ephraem and other witnesses . . . add their support."[31] Such is the case with Christ's appearance to "Mary": it is attested by the best Arabic manuscripts of the *Diatessaron*, the Old Syriac, and Ephrem's commentary, making its presence in Tatian's harmony extremely probable. This reading is further corroborated by a number of early Syrian witnesses, as studies by Robert Murray and Tjitze Baarda have shown, including the following: the Syriac *Didascalia*, the second Ps.-Clementine *Epistle on Virginity*, John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Jacob of Serug, Severus of Antioch, and the illuminations of the Syriac Gospel Codex of Rabbula.[32] With this the authenticity of this tradition draws near to certainty, and even in the slight chance that Tatian is not himself its "originator," the impact of this reading on early Syrian Christianity is undeniable.

Somewhat later evidence indicates that this tradition eventually made an impact elsewhere, including Egypt in particular.[33] In Egypt, as elsewhere, the Magdalene's identity was frequently merged with Mary of Nazareth's, to whom the risen Christ is also reported to have appeared. Many of these witnesses are admittedly more recent, including several "pseudo-patristic" texts,[34] but several third-century apocrypha also describe Christ's appearance to his mother; these include the different apoc-

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Honour of George D. Kilpatrick on the Occasion of his sixty-fifth Birthday, ed. John K. Elliott (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 255; Anton Baumstark, "Review of *Diatessaron de Tatien. Texte arabe établi, traduit en français, collationné avec les anciennes versions syriaques, suivi d'un évangéliaire diatessarique syriaque et accompagné de quatre plances hors texte*, by A. M. Marmardji," *OrChr* 33 (1936): 241–42; and Paul E. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, 2nd ed. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1960), 313.

31. Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 27.

32. See Robert Murray's discussion of these in Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 330–32; Tjitze Baarda, "Jesus and Mary (John 20:16f) in the Second Epistle on Virginity Ascribed to Clement," in *Essays on the Diatessaron* (Kampen: Pharos, 1994); R. H. Connolly, "Jacob of Serug and the Diatessaron," *JTS* 8 (1907): 581–90.

33. See, e.g., C. Giannelli, "Témoignages patristiques grecs en faveur d'une apparition du Christ ressuscité à la Vierge Marie," *REB* 11 (1953): 106–19.

34. See P. Devos, "L'apparition du Ressuscité à sa Mère : Un nouveau témoin copte," *AB* 96 (1978): 388; P. Devos, "De Jean Chrysostom à Jean de Lycopolis: Chrysostom et Chalkèdon," *AB* 96 (1978): 389–403; and E. Revillout, *Évangile des douze apôtres*, *PO* 2.2 (Paris: Librairie de Paris/Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1907), 182. See also Ps.-Cyril of Jerusalem, *Homily on the Passion I* 29 (Antonella Campagnano, *Ps. Cirillo di Gerusalemme: Omelie copte sulla Passione, sulla Croce e sulla Vergine*, Testi e documenti per lo studio dell'antichita, 65 [Milan: Cisalpiono-Goliardica, 1980], 44).

ryphal traditions associated with the apostle Bartholomew and, most importantly, the *Pistis Sophia*.[35] These texts not only describe the risen Christ's appearance to his mother, but, as will be seen in a moment, they also describe her involvement in discussions of the cosmic mysteries.

In light of this assemblage of evidence, Alfred Loisy went so far as to propose the possibility that John's gospel originally placed Christ's mother, rather than the Magdalene, at the tomb, and that this tradition was only later harmonized to agree with the Synoptics.[36] If this less than popular suggestion is somewhat unlikely, as Loisy himself was quick to concede,[37] it nonetheless seems quite likely that the earliest form of the gospel to reach the Syrian East failed to identify the woman to whom Christ first appeared with Mary of Magdala, possibly suggesting in addition that she was a different Mary. It should be noted, however, that these witnesses do not indicate that Tatian's text explicitly identified Mary of *Nazareth* as the first to behold the risen Christ. They can only confirm that the earliest Syrian gospel traditions did not specify this Mary's identity and perhaps gave the impression that she was not to be identified with the Magdalene. Nevertheless, I strongly agree with Tjitze Baarda's conclusion that the lack of specificity the early Syrian gospel traditions would more likely lead readers (and hearers) to identify this Mary with Christ's mother. This is because the gospel traditions almost always specify Mary of Magdala's town of origin, in order to distinguish her from Mary (of Nazareth), who usually passes simply as "Mary," without any reference to her town of origin.[38] This conclusion is borne out by studies of Baarda and Murray

35. See *Pistis Sophia*, *passim* (Carl Schmidt and Violet MacDermot, *Pistis Sophia*, NHS 9 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978], 13, 16, 17, 20, 23, 24, 25); *Ev. Barth.* 2.1–22 (A. Vassiliev, *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina, Pars Prior* [Mosquae: Universitas Caesareae, 1893], 11–14); Andre Wilmart and Eugene Tisserant, "Fragments grecs et latins de l'Évangile de Barthélemy," *RB* 10 (1913): 161–90; 321–68, 321–23, 325, 329; The Coptic *Gospel of Bartholemew* (E. A. W. Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* [London: British Museum, 1913], 12, 31–32, 42; Pierre Lacau, *Fragments d'apocryphes coptes*, Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire 9 [Cairo: Imprimerie de l'institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1904], 51). For the date of these Coptic traditions, see Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, tr. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 1:537; J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 652.

36. Alfred Loisy, *Le quatrième évangile* (Paris: Alphonse Picard et Fils, 1903), 908 n. 1.

37. Ibid. Nevertheless, Martin Albertz, "Über die Christophanie der Mutter Jesu," *TSK* 86 (1913): 483–516, argues in favor of this position at some length.

38. Baarda, *Gospel Quotations of Aphrahat*, 486 n. 27, where he concludes that this is the correct interpretation of Tatian's text.

that make clear the early Syrian church's identification of this unspecified Mary with Mary of Nazareth.[39] Consequently, there can no longer be any question of Ephrem having invented this tradition. Its diffusion among various late ancient sources confirms that it was undoubtedly well in place before Ephrem wrote his commentary on the *Diatessaron*. Exactly how long before we cannot be certain, but the confluence of witnesses speaks strongly of its antiquity in the Syrian region.

The fact that this early tradition of Christ's appearance to his mother took hold in Syria is particularly significant for determining the gnostic Mary's identity. Scholars have frequently associated Syria with the development of early gnostic Christianity, Helmut Koester even going so far as to proclaim Syria "the Country of Origin of Christian Gnosticism."[40] This epithet is admittedly both speculative and overstated, since one could also make a strong case for Egypt's involvement in the beginnings of this phenomenon, and much is (and will no doubt remain) unknown regarding the "origins" of "gnosticism." Somewhat less speculative, however, and certainly more relevant to the present matter, is the likelihood that all but one of the relevant "gnostic Mary" texts had their origin in Syria.[41] Since the texts themselves specify this Mary's identity only rarely and inconsistently, and likewise since the writings of the New Testament are indecisive, perhaps we should look to the early Christian traditions of Syria in order to understand better the gnostic Mary's identity.

As described above, the gospel traditions of early Syrian Christianity were altered in a way that favors Mary of Nazareth's identification with the gnostic Mary. Tatian's *Diatessaron*, the dominant biblical text of early Syrian Christianity, had effaced the Magdalene's importance in the resurrection accounts, to the effect that the early Syrian tradition was prone to identify Mary of Nazareth as the one to whom the risen Christ first appeared. Moreover, not only was Mary of Nazareth represented as the first witness to the resurrection, but the Old Syriac version of John reports that when Christ appeared to his mother, he revealed things to her that

39. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 329–35 is the best discussion of this issue, but see also: Baarda, "Jesus and Mary"; Baarda, *Gospel Quotations of Aphrahat*, 254–57; and Walter Bauer, *Das Leben Jesu im Zeitalter der Neutestamentlichen Apokryphen* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1909), 263.

40. Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 207–18.

41. Excepting only the *Pistis Sophia*, whose Egyptian origin seems likely, Marjanen identifies a probable origin for each of the gnostic Mary texts in Syria: *Gospel according to Thomas*: Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 37; *Sophia of Jesus Christ*: 74; *Dialogue of the Savior*: 77–78; *Gospel according to Mary*: 99; *First Apocalypse of James*: 127–28; *Gospel according to Philip*: 147–48.

she in turn delivered to the disciples.[42] Given then the early Syrian emphasis on Mary of Nazareth's importance in the events of the resurrection (at the Magdalene's expense), together with the early gospel tradition identifying her as the bearer of revelation to the apostles, Mary of Nazareth suddenly emerges as a likely candidate for the gnostic Mary. This is particularly so if the gnostic Mary traditions first developed in early Syrian Christianity, as is generally supposed. In light of this, we must consider the strong possibility that these Syrian gospel traditions influenced the interpretation, if not the composition, of these apocrypha. These traditions make for a rather likely prospect that Mary of Nazareth may have been, in the eyes of at least some early Christians, identified with the gnostic Mary.

Robert Murray is the only scholar, to my knowledge, who has so far attempted to connect these two traditions. While Murray has proposed influence running in the opposite direction, that the gnostic traditions birthed changes in the canonical gospels, this too is admittedly a possibility, and one that likewise indicates Mary of Nazareth's significance for understanding the gnostic Mary. Murray suggests that these early Syrian traditions depend on earlier gnostic traditions that feature a certain "mysterious figure called Mariam (in Greek, Mariamme or Mariamne; in Coptic, Mariham), of uncertain identity."[43] Listing several of this character's main appearances in early Christian literature, he comes rather quickly to the *Gospel according to Philip*, where he initially notes the importance of Mary the Magdalene, but then also that of the other Marys ("his mother and her sister"). He then dwells for a moment on the *Gospel according to Philip* 59.6–11, a crucial passage in gnostic Mary tradition, which reads: "There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary, his mother and her sister and the Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. For Mary was his sister, his mother, and his companion."[44] On the basis

42. "And Mary came and said to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord.' And she told them the things that he revealed to her." ܘܐܬܬ ܡܪܝܡ ܐܡܪܬ ܠܬܠܡܝܕܐ ܕܚܙܝܬܗ ܠܡܪܢ ܘܐܠܝܢ ܕܓܠܐ ܠܗ ܐܡܪܬ ܠܗܘܢ (John 20.18); Agnes Smith Lewis, *The Old Syriac Gospels or Evangelion da-Mepharreshê* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1910), 264. This is similar in the Greek and other versions, but the Old Syriac particularly emphasizes the notion of a "revelation."

43. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 332; note especially the emphasis on the form of the name!

44. *Gospel according to Philip* 59.6–11 (Bentley Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7*, 2 vols., vol. 1: *Gospel according to Thomas, Gospel according to Philip, Hypostasis of the Archons, and Indices*, NHS 20 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989], 158–59). The translation is my own. The second sentence reads in Coptic: ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ ⲅⲁⲣ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲉϥⲥⲱⲛⲉ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲧⲉϥⲙⲁⲁⲩ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲉϥϩⲱⲧⲣⲉ ⲧⲉ. For more on the translation of this

of this passage, Murray makes an important conclusion regarding "Mary's" identity that only a few others seem to have reached. While many interpreters appeal to this passage in support of the gnostic Mary's identity with Mary of Magdala, Murray correctly notes its blurring of the three Marys into a single shared identity. Reading this passage in light of other early evidence, he concludes that "in the eyes of some Gnostics, especially the Valentinians, [Mary Magdalene] seems partially identical with, or inadequately distinct from, Mary the Mother of Jesus."[45] In this ambiguous "Mariam" Murray identifies the source of the early Syrian traditions identifying Mary of Nazareth as the witness to Christ's resurrection. This tradition was fueled especially by Tatian's *Diatessaron* and then subsequently embraced by the later Syrian church fathers, who, out of reverence for the Virgin, were delighted to attribute the risen Christ's first appearance to her.[46] If Murray is in fact correct that the influence moved in this direction and not the other, then the fact still remains that the gnostic Mary was understood to have been Mary of Nazareth, prompting the changes that occurred in the early Syrian gospel traditions. Therefore, however one choses to relate these two traditions, their combination suggests the possibility of the gnostic Mary's identity with Mary of Nazareth in early Christianity.

MARY OF NAZARETH AND THE GNOSTIC MARY TRADITIONS

Murray's discussion of these two traditions is particularly revealing, not just because it suggests the gnostic Mary's ambiguous identity, but because he uses the *Gospel according to Philip* specifically to make this point. Scholars favoring the gnostic Mary's simple identity with Mary of Magdala have long looked to the *Gospel according to Philip* as unassailable evidence that these two women are identical.[47] Admittedly, on the surface there is much that could suggest this. For instance, on several occasions, the *Gospel according to Philip* identifies Mary Magdalene as

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passage, see H. J. Klauck, "Die dreifache Maria: Zur Rezeption von Joh 19.25 in EvPhil 32," in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck*, ed. F. van Segbroeck et al., 3 vols. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 3:2343–58, esp. 2356–58.

45. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 333.

46. Ibid., 333–34.

47. E.g., Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 95; Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 34–39; de Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, 81.

having been an especially close companion of the Savior.[48] But as Murray and a handful of other scholars have recognized, the *Gospel according to Philip* is not so decisive, since, under more careful examination, this gospel is clearly seen to conflate the different Marys into a single figure.[49] Jorunn Jacobson Buckley articulates this conflation rather well in her insightful article "'The Holy Spirit' Is a Double Name," noting at the outset that "the three Marys comprise Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus' mother's sister, but the three sometimes blur into interchangeable personalities."[50] So apparent is the merging of these women's identities that even Marjanen concedes this point in his discussion of the *Gospel according to Philip* 59.6–11. He concludes:

> [I]t is evident that here the author of the text does not merely list all the Maries [*sic*] who belonged to Jesus' most immediate company. Rather, he discloses that there is a Mary who plays three different roles in the life of the Savior. She is his sister, his mother, and his companion. Who, then, is this Mary and how can she assume all these roles? The triple function of Mary shows that no historical person is meant. She is to be seen as a mythical figure who actually belongs to the transcendent realm but who manifests herself in the women accompanying the earthly Jesus.[51]

In a solution very similar to one adopted by Elaine Pagels,[52] Marjanen explains this Marian trinity as three distinct manifestations of a single spiritual reality, Christ's spiritual *syzygos*, thus accounting for the language of unity here.

48. *Gospel according to Philip* 59.6–11 and 63.33–64.9 (Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7*, 158–59 and 166–68).

49. C. Trautman similarly asserts that this Mary is a single figure, but for her it is the Magdalene, who is (somehow?) mother, sister, and companion of the Lord: C. Trautman, "La parenté dans *l'Évangile selon Philippe*," in *Colloque international sur les Textes de Nag Hammadi (Québec, 22–25 août 1978)*, ed. B. Barc, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section "Études," 1 (Louvain: Peeters, 1981), 273.

50. Jorunn Jacobson Buckley, "'The Holy Spirit' Is a Double Name," in *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 105. An abridged version of this article has been published as Jorunn Jacobson Buckley, "'The Holy Spirit is a Double Name': Holy Spirit, Mary, and Sophia in the *Gospel of Philip*," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

51. Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 160–61.

52. Elaine Pagels identifies the three Marys as different manifestations of "Christ's spiritual syzygos," thereby unifying the three separate historical figures in one spiritual reality: Elaine H. Pagels, "Pursuing the Spiritual Eve: Imagery and Hermeneutics in the Hypostasis of the Archons and the Gospel of Philip," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, 202.

While it may in fact be true that these three women bear some relation to Christ's *syzygos,* I propose that the text also is important for identifying the "historical" gnostic Mary: that is, which historical figure, or figures, early Christians or modern interpreters might see in this woman. The clear indication of this passage is that we are likely to be mistaken if we look for only one. The collapse of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Nazareth into a single identity here strongly suggests that the gnostic Mary is in fact not a single historical figure; rather, as Marvin Meyer writes of Mariam in the *Gospel according to Thomas*, "the safest conclusion is that a 'universal Mary' is in mind, and that specific historical Marys are no longer clearly distinguished."[53] A few other scholars have also begun to move in this direction. Anne Pasquier, for instance, in her edition of the *Gospel according to Mary,* identified the gnostic Mary with the Magdalene, but now she has apparently determined that this Mary represents a "corporate personality."[54] Likewise, Deirdre Good, with whose voice this article began, has expressed a willingness to recognize Mary's "composite identity" in the *Pistis Sophia*. Nevertheless, for some unspecified reason Good does not extend this "composite identity" to include Mary of Nazareth, despite the fact that she is a very prominent and important character in this text; Good focuses instead on Mary of Bethany and "other women in the Gospels."[55] Such a composite identity is undoubtedly also present in the *Gospel according to Philip*, where conflation of the various historical Marys suggests that the ancient Christians who produced these texts did not always distinguish as carefully between the different historical Marys as have modern scholars.

The *Gospel according to Philip* then not only fails to offer the sort of decisive resolution in favor of the gnostic Mary's identification with the Magdalene that some have sought, but instead it undermines this identification by demonstrating that the identities of the historical Marys have been collapsed into a composite figure. Moreover, this very passage (59.6–11), by identifying Mary of Nazareth as a prominent participant in Christ's public ministry, further opens the door to see Christ's mother in the gnostic Mary. This possibility is strengthened by another passage from the *Gospel according to Philip* (55.24–36), which discusses Mary of

53. Marvin W. Meyer, "Making Mary Male: The Categories 'Male' and 'Female' in the Gospel of Thomas," *NTS* 31 (1985): 554–70, 562. The passage in question is in *Gospel according to Thomas* 114 (Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7*, 1:92–93), where Jesus speaks of "making Mary male."

54. Coyle, "Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?" 42 n. 20.

55. Good, "Pistis Sophia," 696, 703–4.

Nazareth's conception and describes the Virgin Mary as "a great anathema to the Hebrews, who are the apostles and the apostolic men."[56] Although the exact meaning of this passage is somewhat elliptic, it clearly refers to some sort of strife between Mary of Nazareth and the apostles, an image that resonates with depictions elsewhere of the gnostic Mary's conflict with Peter and the other apostles. Thus this representation contradicts Marjanen's (among others') allegation that Mary of Nazareth is never represented as being in tension with the disciples:[57] to the contrary, this passage provides positive evidence that Mary of Nazareth was at least occasionally imagined in this role, a portrait that is elsewhere confirmed by the *Pistis Sophia*.

The *Pistis Sophia* twice describes such hostility between the disciples, represented in Peter, and a "Mary," whose identity is otherwise unspecified. Following Schmidt's lead, scholars have repeatedly identified this Mary as the Magdalene. But if one's interpretation is not controlled by Schmidt's baseless assumption that all unspecified Marys are to be identified with the Magdalene, a more careful reading reveals that the Mary who speaks in these passages is in fact Mary of Nazareth, whom the text elsewhere explicitly identifies as a participant in the dialogue. "Mary's" first appearance in the *Pistis Sophia* comes after a lengthy revelation by Christ, when she explains for the others the meaning of the hidden mysteries that have just been revealed. Following her interpretation, Jesus congratulates her, saying, "Well said, Maria. You are blessed among all women on earth."[58] Previous interpreters have inexplicably ignored this Lukan epithet, which clearly brings to mind Mary of Nazareth, whom the Holy Spirit inspired Elizabeth to name "blessed among women."[59] This same Mary continues to converse with the Savior, asking him several questions, with nothing to suggest that the Mary who speaks is anyone other than she who is "blessed among women," namely, Mary of Nazareth. After answering these questions, the Savior reveals "the song of praise which the Pistis Sophia spoke in the first repentance, as she repented her sin," which Mary then interprets. When she has finished, the Savior addresses her, "Well said, Mariam, thou blessed one, thou pleroma or

56. *Gospel according to Philip*, 55.24–36 (Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7*, 150–51).

57. "[T]he mother of Jesus does not turn up in situations where some kind of tension between the disciples and her is presented" (Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 95).

58. ⲡⲉϫⲁϥ ϫⲉ ⲉⲩⲧⲉ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ: ϫⲉ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲟⲩⲙⲁⲕⲁⲣⲓⲟⲥ ⲛⲧⲟ ⲡⲁⲣⲁ ϩⲓⲛⲉ ⲛⲓⲙ ⲉⲧϩⲓ̅ⲏ̅ ⲡⲕⲁϩ· *Pistis Sophia* 19 (Schmidt and MacDermot, *Pistis Sophia*, 28); my translation.

59. Luke 1.42.

thou all-blessed pleroma, who will be called blessed by all generations."[60] Here again, reference to Mary of Nazareth's words in Luke, "all generations will call me blessed,"[61] cannot fail to suggest to the reader (or hearer) that the Mary who has just spoken is to be identified with the mother of Jesus, and not the Magdalene. Such language indisputably aligns this gnostic Mary's identity at least partially, if not completely, with Mary of Nazareth.

Jesus continues the revelation dialogue, explaining "the second repentance" of Pistis Sophia, and, when he is finished, he asks his disciples if they have understood. In lieu of an answer, "Peter leapt forward and said to Jesus: 'My Lord, we are not able to suffer this woman who takes the opportunity from us and does not allow anyone of us to speak, but she speaks many times.'"[62] Undoubtedly this "insufferable" woman is the Mary who has only recently completed her explanation of the "first repentance of Pistis Sophia." As we have seen, references to this Mary as being "blessed among women" and "called blessed by all generations," the only indications of her identity, signal that she is Mary of Nazareth. The text presents no evidence to the contrary: no other woman has yet appeared in the dialogue, and, while nothing in the preceding dialogue indicates the presence of the Magdalene, the repeated Lukan epithets strongly suggest the Virgin's presence.

This same Mary continues to speak throughout the remainder of the first book, being the Savior's primary interlocutor. Nothing in their conversations contradicts her identification with Mary of Nazareth, nor are there any hints that she might be the Magdalene. Eventually, toward the end of the *Pistis Sophia*'s first book, this Mary's identity with Mary of Nazareth is made unmistakable. Here, as Mary offers yet another interpretation of "the words which the Pistis Sophia said," she is at last unambiguously identified as "the mother of Jesus."[63] One might rightly ask why Mary's identity is specified only at this point in the narrative: it would seem that this is done to prepare reader for the subsequent introduction of another Mary in the dialogue, whom the text names "the other Mary," without further clarification.[64] Since Mary of Nazareth has just

60. ⲡⲉϫⲁϥ ⲛⲁⲥ ϫⲉ ⲉⲩⲧⲉ ⲛⲁⲣⲓϩⲁⲛ ⲧⲛⲁⲕⲁⲣⲓⲁ· ⲧⲉⲡⲗⲏⲣⲱⲙⲁ ⲏ ⲧⲡⲁⲛⲛⲁⲕⲁⲣⲓⲟⲥ ⲙ̄ⲡⲗⲏⲣⲱⲙⲁ· ⲧⲁⲓ ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲛⲁⲛⲁⲕⲁⲣⲓⲍⲉ ⲙ̄ⲙⲟⲥ ϩ̄ⲛ̄ ⲅⲉⲛⲉⲁ ⲛⲓⲙ· (Schmidt and MacDermot, *Pistis Sophia*, 56); my translation.

61. Luke 1.48.

62. *Pistis Sophia* 36 (Schmidt and MacDermot, *Pistis Sophia*, 58), translation slightly modified.

63. Ibid. 59 (ibid., 116).

64. Ibid. 59; 62 (ibid., 117, 123).

been explicitly identified, this must be a different Mary, and among the various possibilities, the most likely is Mary of Magdala, whom the dialogue later names specifically. Nevertheless, her introduction here as the "other" Mary confirms that the Mary who has spoken thus far in the dialogue is to be identified with the mother of Jesus.

Despite the prominence of both Marys at the close of book one, they are strangely absent from the conversations in the first part of book two. Eventually "Mary" explains this silence, complaining to Christ, "my mind is understanding at all times that I should come forward at any time and give the interpretation of the words which she [Pistis Sophia] spoke, but I am afraid of Peter, for he threatens me and he hates our race."[65] Although this Mary is not further identified, it is logical to assume that this is the same Mary who figured prominently throughout the conversations of the first book and consequently drew Peter's ire. As already noted, the Savior's references to this Mary in the first book as "blessed among women" and the one who "will be called blessed by all generations" strongly indicate that the Mary who came into conflict with the disciples, and notably with Peter, is the mother of Christ, and not the Magdalene. Thus it seems probable that the Mary who here fears Peter is the same one whom he attacked in the first book, namely, Mary of Nazareth.

In the second half of book two "Mary" reappears, and here she is explicitly named the Magdalene.[66] This Mary is the Savior's primary interlocutor for the remainder of book two, and her identity as Mary of Magdala is repeatedly asserted. A "Mary" also appears in books three and four, and while book three twice specifies the presence of the Magdalene,[67] the remainder of the text otherwise fails to indicate which of the two Marys is speaking. Given Mary of Nazareth's prominence in book one and the simultaneous appearance of both Marys at the end of this book, it does not seem wise follow Schmidt (and others) in identifying every unspecified Mary with the Magdalene. It is far more plausible to attribute the confused state of the text to the variety of different sources that it embodies, some of which understood "Mary" predominantly as the Virgin (book one especially) and others that saw in her the Magdalene (the second part of book two especially).[68] Such a view of the

65. Ibid. 72 (ibid., 162).

66. Ibid. 83 (ibid., 184). Book 2 explicitly names her Magdalene on the following pages: 185, 189, 199, 201, 203, 218, 233, 237, 244.

67. Ibid. 127, 132 (ibid., 319, 338).

68. The difficulties posed by the different Marys is one of the main reasons given by the text's most recent translator for viewing the different books as compiliations from various earlier sources: ibid., xiv.

text strongly supports the understanding of the gnostic Mary as a "composite figure," who combines the identities of both the Magdalene and the mother of Jesus. In any case, the *Pistis Sophia* offers indisputable evidence that Christians of the third century did on occasion imagine Christ's mother discussing the hidden secrets of the universe and showing herself a learned student of the gnostic mysteries in the presence of the apostles.

Similar portrayals of Mary of Nazareth exist elsewhere in early Christian literature. An example contemporary with the *Pistis Sophia* appears in the third-century *Gospel (Questions) of Bartholomew*. Although perhaps not a properly "gnostic" text, scholars have long recognized certain "gnosticizing" tendencies in this revelation dialogue, including many gnostic ideas and parallels to more decidedly gnostic gospels.[69] Moreover, its relevance to the present matter despite its only "quasignostic" character is affirmed by the *Gospel according to Thomas* and the *Gospel according to Mary*, both of which preserve "gnostic" Mary traditions but fall somewhere outside the traditional boundaries of "gnosticism."[70] In the course of the *Gospel (Questions) of Bartholomew*'s discourse, Mary begins to expound certain cosmic mysteries to the apostles, only to be interrupted suddenly by her son, who forces her to stop, lest "today my whole creation will come to an end."[71] Thus despite some theological distance between the *Gospel (Questions) of Bartholomew* and "gnosticism proper" this depiction of the Virgin Mary as an expert in the cosmic mysteries who instructs the apostles compares favorably with the gnostic Mary.

Other, more complicated but equally revealing parallels are found in certain of the earliest narratives of the Virgin Mary's Dormition. These traditions are first attested only by several Syriac fragments of the late fifth century, although they are clearly more ancient, even if we cannot be

69. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:538. Nevertheless, see Douglas M. Parrott, "Gnostic and Orthodox Disciples in the Second and Third Centuries," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. C. W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, Jr. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 211. Admittedly, the text's identification of the Father as creator situates the text squarely outside of "gnosticism."

70. For instance, both lack any reference to such standard features as the Demiurge and the Sophia myth. For further discussion, see especially Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 33–37 (*Gospel according to Thomas*) and 94 n. 1 (*Gospel according to Mary*).

71. *Ev. Barth*. 2.1–22 (Vassiliev, *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina*, 11–14; Wilmart and Tisserant, "Fragments grecs," 321–25). See also ibid. 4.1–6 (Vassiliev, *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina*, 14–15; Wilmart and Tisserant, "Fragments grecs," 327–28).

exactly certain how much more.[72] Some of the strongest evidence for their earlier existence comes in the form of certain "gnosticizing" themes which link these narratives more with the various heterodox groups of the second and third centuries than with the emergent orthodoxies of the late fifth century. Among these parallels, which I have discussed elsewhere,[73] is the portrayal of the Virgin Mary as one learned in the cosmic mysteries, who communicates these secrets to the apostles. For instance, in many of the earliest texts, just before her death, Mary presents the apostles with a book, given to her by her son, telling John, "Father John, take this book in which is the mystery. For when he was five years old the teacher revealed all the things of creation, and he also put you, the twelve in it."[74] Along with the book, she reveals certain cosmic mysteries,[75] the primary content of which is a secret prayer.[76] This prayer is to be recited as one

72. See Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Mary and the Discourse of Orthodoxy: Early Christian Identity and the Ancient Dormition Legends" (Ph.D., Duke University, 1997), 13–55 and Shoemaker, *Death and the Maiden*. Several efforts to assign these traditions a very early date are discussed in Shoemaker, "Mary and the Discourse of Orthodoxy," 70–94 and Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions,* ch. 4.

73. See the discussion in Shoemaker, "Mary and the Discourse of Orthodoxy," 170–219 and Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions,* ch. 4. Particularly important in aligning the earliest Dormition traditoins with gnostic Christianity is the description of a demiurgic myth in the earliest narrative, as discussed in Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions,* ch. 4. See also the translation of the *Liber Requiei* in the appendices of this volume, at section 17.

74. καὶ ἐξενέγκασα γλωσσόκομον ἐν ᾗν χαρτίον εἶπεν· Πάτερ Ἰωάννη, λαβὲ τοῦτο τὸ βιβλίον ἐν ᾧ ἦν τὸ μυστήριον. Ὅτε γὰρ ἦν πενταετὴς ὁ διδάσκαλος ἐγνώρισεν πάντα τὰ τῆς κτίσεως καὶ ἔθετο καὶ ὑμᾶς τοὺς δώδεκα ἐν τούτῳ. Antoine Wenger, *L'Assomption de la T. S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du VIe au Xe siècle; études et documents*, Archives de l'Orient chrétien 5 (Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 1955), 220–21. The same is also expressed in the Ethiopic *Liber Requiei*, which likely preserves the earliest and most complete version of the early Dormition traditions: Ibid. 44 (Victor Arras, *De transitu Mariae apocrypha aethiopice*, 2 vols., CSCO 343, 352, Scriptores Aethiopici 67, 69 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1973), 1:27 [Eth] and 17–18 [Lat]).

75. Most clearly expressed in the Georgian fragments: და მოვივლინე შენდა გულისხმისყოფად რაჲთა უთხრა შენ მოციქულთა საიდუმლოჲ ("I have been sent to reveal to you, so that you will tell the mystery to the apostles.") Michel van Esbroeck, "Apocryphes géorgiens de la Dormition," *AB* 92 (1973): 55–75, 73 (Geor) and 75 (Lat), but also similarly in the Ethiopic: *Liber Requiei* 11 (Arras, *De transitu*, 1:6–7 [Eth] and 4 [Lat]) and the Greek: καὶ ἅπερ σοι λέγω μετάδος τοῖς ἀποστόλοις ὅτι καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔρχονται, Wenger, *Assomption*, 214–15.

76. καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ τὴν προσευχὴν τὴν δοθεῖσαν αὐτῇ ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγγέλου. Wenger, *Assomption*, 220–21. Also found in the early Ethiopic version: *Liber Requiei*, 44 (Arras, *De transitu*, 1:27 [Eth] and 17 [Lat]).

goes forth from her body,[77] since "it is not possible ascend without this prayer,"[78] and "you must observe it with every world . . . for it is not possible to pass by the monsters, so as to pass through every world."[79] This secret prayer is akin to the various passwords of late ancient gnostic literature, which allow the soul to pass through various "worlds" guarded by the Demiurge and his minions on its ascent to the Pleroma.[80] Thus, despite the problems posed by their dating, one can see that the Dormition traditions of late antiquity describe an image of Mary of Nazareth that resembles that of the gnostic Mary.

One final witness remains to be considered, and its voice is particularly authoritative, since it is the only ancient gnostic tradition to have survived until the present day: the Mandean tradition. The Mandeans also revere a certain "Mary," as did the other ancient gnostics; known as Miriai in the Mandean tradition, this figure has been strangely ignored by many scholars in their studies of the gnostic Mary traditions. Perhaps this is the case, however, because this modern gnostic tradition weighs in very strongly in favor of identifying the gnostic Mary with Mary of Nazareth, rather than with the Magdalene.

In the Mandean tradition, Miriai stands as "the ideal Gnostic," much as Mary functions in the Christian gnostic texts.[81] The fullest account of

77. προσευχὴν ἐδεξάμην παρὰ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐρχόμενος πρὸς σὲ καί νῦν λέγω σοι αὐτὴν ἵνα εἴπῃς ἐξερζομένη ἐκ τοῦ σώματος ἀνατέλλοντος τοῦ ἡλίου, οὕτως γὰρ ἀναπέμπεται. Wenger, *Assomption*, 214–15. The Ethiopic parallel is rather nonsensical, but seems to center around the same idea: *Liber Requiei* 13 (Arras, *De transitu*, 1:7 [Eth] and 5 [Lat]); see also the commentary on this passage in "Appendix II de *Libro Requiei*," Arras, *De transitu*, 1:79–81 (Lat).

78. *Liber Requiei* 14 (Arras, *De transitu*, 1:7–8 [Eth] and 5 [Lat]).

79. Ibid. 15 (ibid., 1:8 [Eth] and 5 [Lat]).

80. This interpretation is also suggested by ibid., 1:81 (Lat). For other examples of such passwords, see, e.g., *The (First) Apocalypse of James* 32.28–35.9 (Douglas M. Parrott, *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4*, NHS 11 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979], 84–89); *The Books of Jeu* 33–38, 49–52 (Carl Schmidt and Violet MacDermot, *The Books of Jeû and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, NHS 13 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978], 83–88, 116–38). For a general discussion, see Kurt Rudolf, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism,* tr. Robert McLachlan Wilson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 172–80, 244. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.21.5 (Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon: Contre les hérésies*, 9 vols., SC 100, 152–53, 210–11, 263–64, 293–94 [Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1969–82], 2:304–8).

81. An excellent study of Miriai's role in the Mandean tradition has been made by Jorunn Jacobson Buckley, "The Mandean Appropriation of Jesus' Mother, Miriai," *NT* 35 (1993): 181–96; regarding the gnostic Mary's function in this role, see Good, "Pistis Sophia," 704.

Miriai's life is recorded in the Mandean *Book of John*,[82] an eighth-century collection of much earlier sources,[83] although portions of her story are also preserved elsewhere in Mandean literature, including the third- or fourth-century *Canonical Prayerbook*[84] as well as in contemporary Mandean lore.[85] These traditions identify Miriai as the Jewish daughter of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (himself also Jewish),[86] who dwelt in Jerusalem at the time when the Mandeans were still living in Palestine.[87] The outline of her story is as follows. One day while walking through the city, Miriai stumbled upon a Mandean house of worship, and, entering, she converted to the Mandean faith.[88] When her father learned of this and confronted her, he accused her of being a whore and demanded that she return to Judaism, but she refused to renounce her new faith and bitterly

82. *The Mandean Book of John* (Mark Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* [Giessen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann, 1915], 127–43 [Mandean] and 126–38 [Germ]).

83. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 345–46; Kurt Rudolph, "Der mandäismus in der neueren Gnosisforschung," in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, ed. B. Aland (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978), 272. On the problems of dating specific traditions from the *Book of John*, see E. S. Drower, *The Mandeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), 21.

84. *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandeans* (Mark Lidzbarski, *Mandäische Liturgien*, Abh Göttingen, Phil-hist Kl, Neue Folge, 17.1 [Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1920], 210–11; E. S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandeans* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959], 173; Drower's translation is on 130). The text and a translation are also found in Lidzbarski, *Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, 123–25. Concerning the date, see Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 346; Sinasi Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life: The Origins and the Early History of the Mandeans and Their Relation to the Sabians of the Qur'an and to the Harranians*, Journal of Semitic Studies, Supplement 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 55–62; Rudolf Macuch, *Handbook of Classical and Modern Mandaic* (Berlin: Walter de Bruyter, 1965), lxv. Key to this determination has been Torgny Säve-Söderbergh's demonstration that a number of the Coptic Manichean Psalms are actually translations of earlier Mandean liturgical texts: Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, *Studies in the Coptic Manichaean Psalm-Book: Prosody and Mandaean Parallels*, Arbeten utgivna med understod av Vilhelm Ekmand universitetsfond Uppsala 55 (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1949), esp. 156–66.

85. Recorded in the early twentieth century by Drower, *Mandeans of Iraq and Iran*, 282–86.

86. See ibid., 287 n. 1, where she explains the Mandean tradition that the Jews and "Chaldeans" (i.e., Babylonians) were believed to be one people.

87. *The Mandean Book of John* 34 (Lidzbarski, *Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, 127 [Mandean] and 126 [Germ]). On the origin of Mandeism in late ancient Palestinian Judaism, see Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 363–64.

88. *The Mandean Book of John* (Lidzbarski, *Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, 128 [Mandean] and 127 [Germ]).

rejected Judaism.[89] She fled, and the Jews pursued her, hoping to force her to return to the Jewish faith. When they eventually found her, an eagle appeared and punished the Jews for harassing Mary, burying them beneath the "stinking mud" of the Euphrates and destroying both their temple and the city of Jerusalem.[90]

These and other similar traditions portray Miriai as a "founding mother" of the Mandean faith, who represents its moment of origin, when it separated itself from its Jewish source.[91] Although in some later traditions Miriai is identified as having been a follower of John the Baptist, it is clear that this was not a part of her original story,[92] but was added sometime after the Mandeans identified John the Baptist as their founder during the early Islamic period.[93] Thus Miriai functions in the role of a "protoconvert" to Mandeism, a position in which the Mandean tradition never, strangely enough, portrays John the Baptist.[94] Moreover, the *Book of John* explicitly joins Miriai's identity with certain female beings of the Lightworld and, even more remarkably, depicts Miriai as a priest, in what is, according to Jorunn Jacobson Buckley, "the only *mythological* story that raises the issue of female priests."[95]

The parallels between this figure and the gnostic Mary are considerable. The gnostic Mary is, like Miriai, a "protoconvert" to a new religion, who can rightly be viewed as one of its "founding mothers." She also must defend the truth of her newfound faith in the face of opposition from important male leaders. Moreover, many modern interpreters have proposed that the gnostic Mary's depiction in early Christian literature is either an historical or mythological representation of women's leadership

89. Ibid. (ibid., 129–31 [Mandean] and 127–29 [Germ]).

90. Ibid. (ibid., 141–42 [Mandean] and 137–38 [Germ]).

91. Buckley, "Mandean Appropriation," 189.

92. Ibid., 194.

93. According to Mandean tradition, John the Baptist was the prophet who founded their religion. This is, however, probably a fiction created under Islamic rule in order to ensure toleration by the ruling authorities. Only those religious traditions founded by a prophet of God were permitted to exist alongside of Islam, and John was a conveniently unclaimed Qur'anic prophet who was then written into the Mandean tradition to ensure their protection. Alternatively, however, it is possible that John was incorporated at a slightly earlier point in order to justify their baptismal practices in Christian eyes. In any case, it is clear from the Mandean sources that John the Baptist was not originally linked with their movement, but was added as a later development. See Kurt Rudolph, *Die Mandäer*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 1:66–80, esp. 70–71.

94. Buckley, "Mandean Appropriation," 194.

95. Ibid., 187–89, esp. 187; emphasis in the original.

roles in the early Christian communities,[96] a leadership role paralleled in Miriai's depiction as a priest. The gnostic Mary is even occasionally identified with female beings of the "Lightworld," particularly with the "Virgin of Light" in the *Pistis Sophia*.[97] Consequently, it seems rather likely that the Mandean Miriai bears some historical relation to the Mary of the Christian gnostic tradition, as Kurt Rudolph has suggested.[98]

What then can be said of Miriai's relation to the different Marys of the early Christian tradition? Although the Mandeans clearly distinguish Miriai from the mother of Jesus, whom they name "Miriam," scholars of Mandeism are unanimously agreed that this Mandean "Mary" in fact emanates from the Christian tradition and finds her origin in the mother of Jesus.[99] This is particularly clear from Miriai's close association in the Mandean texts with Elizabeth,[100] who, in addition to being the mother of John the Baptist, the traditional "founder" of Mandeism, was a close kinswoman of the Virgin Mary.[101] This, together with other features of Miriai's depiction, suggests the origin of this Mandean figure in certain early Christian traditions concerning the Virgin Mary.[102] Thus, this living gnostic tradition also attests to late ancient Christian traditions that understood Mary of Nazareth as both a model gnostic initiate and as a "founding mother" in conflict with male religious leaders, roles that favor her identification with the gnostic Mary of early Christian literature.

In the remaining gnostic Mary traditions, this character is known only as "Mary," and the texts themselves provide nothing that would enable us to distinguish which particular Mary is view. Appeals are often made to the form of the name "Mary" that is used (i.e., Maria or Mariam), but

96. Among others see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 304–7, 332–33 and King, "Gospel of Mary Magdalene," 618–19.

97. *Pistis Sophia* 59 (Schmidt and MacDermot, *Pistis Sophia*, 116–17). See also below, where a similar identification occurs in the Manichean Psalm-book.

98. Rudolph, *Mandäer*, 1:97.

99. E.g., Buckley, "Mandean Appropriation"; Lidzbarski, *Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, 71–72, 125; Edmondo Lupieri, *I Mandei: Gli ultimi gnostici* (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1993), 248; William Bousset, "Die Religion der Mandäer," *Theologische Rundschau* 20 (1917): 188–203; Geo Widengren, "Die Mandäer," in *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, Erste Abt., Die Nahe und der Mittlere Osten, Achter Band, Religion, Zweiter Abschnitt, Religionsgeschichte des Orients in der Zeit der Weltreligionen (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961).

100. Lidzbarski in *Mandean Book of John* (Lidzbarski, *Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, 71–72).

101. See Luke 1.36.

102. Particularly her role as an anti-Jewish figure; see Shoemaker, "Mary and the Discourse of Orthodoxy," 319–23.

as demonstrated elsewhere,[103] this is in no way a reliable means of distinguishing between Mary of Magdala and Mary of Nazareth. Other scholars have instead (or in addition) argued that this Mary is to be identified with the Magdalene on the basis of Mary Magdalene's prominence in the canonical gospels, the *Gospel according to Philip*, and the *Pistis Sophia*. These interpreters maintain that since Mary of Magdala is an important figure in each of these writings, we may assume (following Schmidt) that this otherwise unidentified Mary is the Magdalene and not the Virgin. These writings then establish precedent for identifying this woman elsewhere with the Magdalene, they allege, while similar precedent is absent for Mary of Nazareth, making it highly improbable that she is related to the gnostic Mary.

These arguments, however, are not very persuasive. There are, despite claims to the contrary, significant traditions attesting that early Christians also imagined Mary of Nazareth in roles that scholarship has long reserved for the Magdalene exclusively. Moreover, the frequent appeal to onomastic evidence is baseless, and Mary of Nazareth can easily rival the Magdalene's prominence in the New Testament writings. Even the Magdalene's significant role as *apostola apostolorum* cannot decide the matter, since, if we accept the proposed origin of these traditions in Syria, we find that early Syrian Christianity largely identified Mary of Nazareth, and not the Magdalene, as the first witness to Christ's resurrection. Furthermore, in each of the gnostic Mary traditions where the Magdalene is specifically named, we have seen that Mary of Nazareth also appears in similar roles, suggesting the blurred identity of these two figures. Finally, in both the *Gospel according to Philip* and the *Pistis Sophia*, we find evidence of Mary of Nazareth's conflict with "the apostles," and the latter text, along with various other early Christian traditions, unambiguously identifies Mary of Nazareth as a privileged interlocutor of the risen Christ, who interprets the cosmic mysteries for the apostles. When all of this is taken together with the Mandean Miriai traditions, a strong argument emerges for identifying Mary of Nazareth with the gnostic Mary, in light of which we may now begin to reconsider the remaining gnostic Mary traditions of late antiquity.

The most important of these traditions is undoubtedly the second-century *Gospel according to Mary*,[104] in which Mary, who is otherwise unidentified, is the central character. As the extant fragments begin, the

103. Shoemaker, "Case of Mistaken Identity?"

104. Concerning the date and the different manuscript witnesses, see the discussion in Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 96–98.

risen Christ is in the midst of concluding a dialogue with Mary and the apostles. After his departure, Peter says to Mary, "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember—which you know but we do not, nor have we heard them."[105] Mary consents to reveal "what is hidden," and in a lengthy monologue she reports all that the Savior had told her. The strangeness of what she reveals, however, disturbs several of the apostles. Andrew is the first to object, saying, "I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas."[106] Likewise Peter asks, "Did he [the Savior] really speak with a woman without our knowledge (and) not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"[107] In her own defense, Mary responds, "Do you think that I thought this up myself in my own heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?"[108] At this, some of the apostles take her side, notably Levi, who reminds Peter of his "hot-temper" and urges the disciples to believe what Mary has revealed.[109]

In their efforts to identify this Mary with the Magdalene, scholars have often appealed to many of the criteria mentioned above. For instance, many have sought refuge in the forms of the name "Mary" used in the extant fragments:[110] ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁⲙ in Coptic fragments and Μαριάμμη in the third-century Greek papyrus fragments.[111] As I have demonstrated elsewhere,[112] however, the particular form of the name is in no way decisive, and if anything, the use of the name Μαριάμμη in the Greek would seem to indicate Mary of Nazareth, rather than the Magdalene. Such is the suggestion, at least, of the third-century papyrus of the *Protevangelium of James*, which, like the fragments of the *Gospel according to Mary*, was found in Egypt. The fact that this apocryphal narrative, of similar age and provenance, repeatedly uses the name Mariamme in reference to the Virgin Mary is a fair indication that in the Greek apocryphal literature of second- and third-century Egypt, which would include both the *Gospel*

105. *The Gospel according to Mary* 10 (Parrott, *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5*, 460–61).

106. *The Gospel according to Mary* 17 (ibid., 466–67).

107. Ibid.

108. Ibid. (Parrott, *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5*, 468–69).

109. Ibid.

110. See the examples listed in n. 12 above.

111. On the date of the papyrus, see Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 96–98; and Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:392.

112. Shoemaker, "Case of Mistaken Identity?"

according to Mary and the *Pistis Sophia*, Mary of Nazareth was occasionally known as Mariamme.[113] Other scholars have relied more on Mary Magdalene's importance in the New Testament and her explicit appearances in the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Gospel according to Philip* to confirm that the Magdalene is the central figure of the *Gospel according to Mary*.[114] But as already argued, in each of these instances there is equal evidence to support this Mary's identification with Mary of Nazareth.

Occasionally appeal is also made to the writings of the church fathers, who supposedly offer secondhand evidence of Mary Magdalene's importance in the writings of the early Christian gnostics.[115] Nevertheless, explicit references to the Magdalene in the early Christian period are very rare, and she is mentioned just six times in the writings of only three second- and third-century fathers.[116] Consequently, much is made of several references to a woman named Mariamme, who is otherwise unidentified. The most important of these are Celsus' mention of a Christian group named after an unidentified Mariamme[117] and Hippolytus' reference to the "Nassenes," whose teachings were supposedly passed down from James the brother of the Lord through a woman named Mariamne.[118] To these some would add the *Acts of Philip* and Epiphanius' claim to knowledge of a gnostic work entitled the *Great Questions of Mary*.[119] None of these witnesses, however, can bear the weight that is placed on them.

Epiphanius' testimony is particularly problematic, since many scholars dispute the general accuracy of his report, judging it the unreliable slan-

113. Michel Testuz, *Papyrus Bodmer V: Nativité de Marie* (Genève: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1958), 23–26.

114. Notably Karen King: see n. 11 above.

115. King, "Gospel of Mary Magdalene," 619.

116. Origen (three times); Tertullian (twice); and Irenaeus (once). Ibid., 632 n. 52, citing an unpublished manuscript by Kathleen Corley, entitled "'Noli me tangere': Mary Magdalene in the Patristic Literature."

117. Origen, *Cels*. 5.62 (Marcel Borret, *Origène: Contre Celse*, 5 vols., SC 132, 136, 147, 150, 227 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967–76], 2:168–69).

118. Hippolytus, *haer*. 5.7.1 and 10.9.3 (Miroslav Marcovich, *Hippolytus: Refutatio omnium haeresium*, Patristische Texte und Studien, 25 [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986], 142 and 384).

119. Epiphanius, *haer.* 26.8.1–9.5 (Karl Holl and Jürgen Dummer, *Epiphanius*, 2nd ed, 3 vols, GCS 25, 31, 37 [Leipzig; Berlin: J. C. Hinrichs; Akademie-Verlag, 1915, 1980, 1985], 1:284–86). This work is especially prominent in Schmidt's discussion of the *Pistis Sophia*: Schmidt, *Gnostische Schriften,* 563–98. King, "Gospel of Mary Magdalene," 619 and Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 189–202 also treat it as a part of the gnostic Mary tradition.

der of a prejudiced opponent.[120] But even if we were to grant that at the very least Epiphanius witnesses to a tradition of a woman named Mary whom the gnostics esteemed, the attribution of this work to "Mary" cannot be said to indicate the Magdalene, since it is equally possible that the Mary in question may have been Mary of Nazareth. The same holds true for the "evidence" of Celsus/Origen: since this figure is known only as "Mariamme," it is quite possible that these Christians took their name from Mary of Nazareth, rather than from the Magdalene. We are slightly more informed concerning Mariamne in the *Acts of Philip* and Hippolytus' *Refutatio*. The *Acts of Philip*, for instance, informs us that Mariamne is Philip's sister, which does not seem to identify her with either of our Marys.[121] Nevertheless, soon after she appears, the Savior identifies this Mariamne as "blessed among women," again a Lukan epithet that seems to identify her with Mary of Nazareth, as does reference to Mariamne's having "escaped the poverty of Eve, so as to enrich herself." The later point resonates especially with Mary's identity in late antiquity as the "new Eve," whose actions remove the curse of the "old" Eve. This Mariamne's identity is obviously much more complex than this might suggest, however, since she is also Philip's sister, and there also seems to be an attempt to connect her with the Mary of "Mary and Martha" fame. The *Acts of Philip* then do not support the gnostic Mary's identity with the Magdalene, but they do instead suggest that this Mary is a complex figure, whose identity cannot simply be reduced to a single historical figure.

120. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 164–88 presents an evenhanded and sympathetic survey of the problems surrounding existence of the so-called libertine gnostics. More negative assessments of Epiphanius' report and such charges of immorality in general can be found in Robert M. Grant, "Charges of 'Immorality' against Various Groups in Antiquity," in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, ed. R. van der Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981); Klaus Korschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), esp. 123–24; Burton L. Visotzky, "Overturning the Lamp," *JJS* 38 (1987): 72–80.

121. *Acta Philippi* (François Bovon, Bertrand Bouvier, and Frédéric Amsler, *Acta Philippi*, 2 vols., CCA 11–12 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1999], esp. 1:240–47). Scholars have generally assumed that this woman should be connected with the gnostic Mary, with which I am in agreement. On this basis, it is further assumed that this Mariamne is Mary of Magdala, with which I do not agree. The only arguments for the second assumption are references to the various texts of the gnostic Mary traditions, all of which I have shown to be problematic in themselves, and thus do not resolve this Mary's identity. See Bovon, Bouvier, and Amsler, *Acta Philippi*, 2:312–17; and Bovon, "Privilège pascal," esp. 57–58.

Hippolytus also includes some details that would suggest Mariamne's identity, reporting a Nassene claim that their teachings were passed down from James the brother of the Lord through this Mariamne. Again, the name in itself tells us nothing, referring potentially to either Mary of Nazareth or the Magdalene. Mariamne's relationship with James the brother of the Lord, however, offers some tantalizing clues for interpretation, particularly if we assume with most scholars that James was in fact Jesus' biological brother and, consequently, the son of Mary of Nazareth.[122] This possible relationship lends a certain logic to this Mariamne's identification with Mary of Nazareth, since James' relationship with his mother would form the basis for her transmission of his teachings. There is, however, no similar association between the Magdalene and the brothers of Jesus that would support the identification of this Mariamne with Mary of Magdala.[123] Moreover, the Mandean Miriai traditions also suggest this Mariamne's identification with Mary of Nazareth, since, as Jorunn Jacobson Buckley notes, the Mandean traditions explicitly connect Miriai with both James the brother of Jesus and a certain "Benjamin," whose name also appears in Hippolytus' account of the Nassenes.[124] Since the Mandean Miriai had her historical origin in the Christian Mary of Nazareth, this Mandean tradition would favor identifying Hippolytus' Mariamne with the mother of Christ, rather than the Magdalene. Thus, not only do the patristic witnesses fail to confirm Mary Magdalene as the central character of the *Gospel according to Mary*, but, on the contrary, if anything they seem to suggest, in the case of Hippolytus' *Refutatio*, the gnostic Mary's identification with Mary of Nazareth.

The remaining gnostic Mary traditions also fail to identify this character with Mary of Magdala. The *Gospel according to Thomas*, as we have already noted, names this woman only as "Mariam," and, in light of the preceding discussions,[125] arguments that both the form of the name and her conflict with Peter suggest the Magdalene are not persuasive.[126] Similarly, a character known only as "Mariam" or "Mariamme" also appears

122. See the joint Roman Catholic/Lutheran discussion of this issue in Raymond E. Brown et al., *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 65–72.

123. See Albertz, "Über die Christophanie der Mutter Jesu," 505, where he states this in his interpretation of John 20.

124. Buckley, "Mandean Appropriation," 190–91.

125. See n. 53 above.

126. The are the arguments advanced by Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 39.

in the *Dialogue of the Savior*,[127] the *First Apocalypse of James*,[128] and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*,[129] but again, in each of these instances the arguments favoring this character's identity with the Magdalene rest only on the form of the name or a comparison with other texts that have already been discussed.[130]

Finally, we must briefly consider some possible evidence afforded by the Manichean tradition. The Manichean tradition also reveres a woman named "Maria," whom the Manichean psalms praise almost unfailingly in their doxologies.[131] Although some scholars have speculated that this Mary was probably an early martyr of the Manichean mission to Egypt,[132] this figure's close association with Mani and the other early leaders of the community suggests that perhaps this Mary was revered as a "founding mother" of the Manichean religion.[133] If this were true, it would not necessarily exclude the possibility that Mary of Nazareth might lurk behind this figure. Manicheism embraced both Christ and a variety of Christian traditions in formulating its teaching: indeed, Mani was believed to be the "Paraclete" whom Christ had prophesied.[134] Thus it is conceivable that the Manicheans imported a Christian figure named Mary, along with certain other Christian traditions, such as "the Twelve" and "the Seventy-two," traditions with which this figure is occasionally asso-

127. *Dialogue of the Savior passim* (Stephen Emmel, *Nag Hammadi Codex III, 5: The Dialogue of the Savior*, NHS 26 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984]).

128. *First Apocalypse of James*, 40.25 (Parrott, *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5*, 98).

129. *Sophia of Jesus Christ* 98.9–11/89.20–90.1 and 114.8–12/117.12–16 (Douglas M. Parrott, *Nag Hammadi Codices III, 3–4 and V, 1*, NHS 27 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991], 69 and 169).

130. See the discussions in Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 63–64 (*Sophia of Jesus Christ*); 78–80 (*Dialogue of the Savior*); 131–32 (*First Apocalypse of James*). Note, however, that in the case of *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, Marjanen additionally discusses the importance of the "Philip group," as identified by Parrott, "Gnostic and Orthodox Disciples." As Marjanen rightly notes (Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 65–70), Parrott's thesis is problematic. More importantly, however, whether right or wrong, Parrott's observation that "Mariam" often appears in the company of certain disciples in no way decides her identity: Parrott simply presumes that this Mariam is the Magdalene, without offering any reason why (Parrott, "Gnostic and Orthodox Disciples," 197).

131. *Manichean Psalm-Book* (C. R. C. Allberry, *A Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II*, Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection 2 [Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1938], *passim*).

132. Discussed by Coyle, "Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?" 51.

133. See, for instance, the doxology of Psalm 227: *Manichean Psalm-Book* (Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II*, 22).

134. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 334–35.

ciated.[135] If this Mary were to have some relation to the gnostic Mary of the Christian tradition, her identification with Mary of Nazareth would be just as likely as the Magdalene.

A certain "Mariamme" also appears in several of the fourth-century Manichean Psalms, one of which describes her participation in the events of John 20.[136] In light of this fact, many have identified this Mariamme with Mary Magdalene, as John's gospel would seem to demand. Yet given the origin of Manicheism in the Syrian East, where Tatian's *Diatessaron* held sway, perhaps we should not be so quick to adopt this resolution. In fact, it is increasingly apparent that, like the Christians of this region, the Manicheans relied on Tatian's harmony as their primary source for the gospel traditions.[137] Therefore, it seems likely that the Manichean tradition would have been influenced by the *Diatessaron* and other early Syrian Christian traditions to understand the mother of Christ, rather than the Magdalene, in this role. Admittedly, we cannot be certain that the Manichean tradition made such an interpretive move, but given the origin of Manicheism in the context of early Syriac Christianity,[138] this seems a likely possibility. This is further suggested by the appearance of material from the earliest Mandean liturgical traditions among the Manichean Psalms. These Mandean liturgies form the earliest witness to the "gnostic Miriai" traditions, and it is possible that through the medium of Mandeism, Mary of Nazareth, in the guise of Miriai, entered into the Manichean traditions together with other Mandean traditions.[139] Moreover, one of these Psalms links this Mariamme with the "Spirit of Wisdom,"[140] a celestial figure whom Manicheism frequently identifies with the "Virgin of Light."[141] This too could seem to suggest that this Mary is the mother of Christ, since the *Pistis Sophia* explicitly associates the heavenly Virgin of Light with the earthly Virgin Mary.[142] Neverthe-

135. *Manichean Psalm-Book* (Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II*, 22).

136. *Manichean Psalm-Book* (ibid., 187–88, 192, 194). See also Coyle, "Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?"

137. See the brief discussion by Petersen, "Text of the New Testament," 88–89, along with the extensive bibliography signaled in the footnotes.

138. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 326–30; for further detail, see also A. Henrichs, "Mani and the Babylonian Baptists: A Historical Confrontation," *HSCP* 77 (1973): 23–59.

139. See Säve-Söderbergh's demonstration that a number of the Coptic Manichean Psalms are actually translations of earlier Mandean liturgical texts: Säve-Söderbergh, *Studies in the Coptic Manichaean Psalm-Book*, 156–66.

140. *Manichean Psalm-Book* (Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II*, 194.19).

141. Coyle, "Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?" 47.

142. See n. 97 above.

less, this same passage from the *Pistis Sophia* also links the "other Mary," the Magdalene, with the Virgin of Light, noting that she, like the mother of Christ, has received the likeness of the Virgin of Light. Yet again, the two Marys are merged, reminding us that in light of the gnostic Mary's composite identity, we may never be too sure just who she "really" was.

In summary then, the gnostic Mary's identity is by no means a simple matter, nor is her identification with Mary of Magdala as certain as it is frequently asserted in modern scholarship. The particular spelling of the name Mary is in no way a reliable criterion distinguishing the two women, even though this is the most frequently advanced argument in favor of the gnostic Mary's identity with Mary of Magdala. If anything, the spellings Mariam and Mariamme appear to favor an identification with Mary of Nazareth, as I have demonstrated elsewhere. Likewise, the writings of the New Testament fail to resolve this problem, since they show both Marys to have equally been important figures in early Christian memory. Even the Magdalene's role as *apostola apostolorum* in the fourth gospel does not tip the balance in her favor, since in early Christian Syria, where it seems most likely that the gnostic Mary traditions first developed, it was believed that Christ first appeared to his mother, Mary of Nazareth, commissioning her with a revelation to deliver to his followers.

Moreover, despite frequent assertions to the contrary, there is significant evidence that early Christians occasionally imagined Mary of Nazareth in situations similar to those in which the gnostic Mary is found: she converses with her risen son, expounds on the cosmic mysteries, and reveals her son's secret teachings to the apostles, with whom she is occasionally seen to be in strife. Such is especially evident in the *Pistis Sophia*, a text whose interpretation has been tightly controlled by the last century's interpretive dogmas. Both this text and the *Gospel according to Philip* make clear that the gnostic Mary traditions do not have only a single Mary in view. Although many will no doubt continue to take refuge in the *Gospel according to Philip*'s description of Mary Magdalene as the Savior's favorite, we should not forget that the New Testament identifies Mary of Nazareth as the "favored one," who has "found favor with God."[143] Finally, the only "gnostic" tradition to have survived into the present, the Mandean faith, adds its voice in favor of Mary of Nazareth, who survives in the Mandean traditions as the "gnostic Miriai." The force of this evidence makes for a very distinct possibility of seeing Mary of Nazareth

143. Luke 1.28; 30.

in the figure of the gnostic Mary, both for ancient and modern interpreters alike. It does not, to be sure, exclude the possibility of seeing the Magdalene in this figure as well, nor is it intended to do so. Rather, it is my hope that future scholarship will be more attentive to the ambiguities of this intriguing figure, and willing to further explore aspects of her relation to Mary of Nazareth.

CONCLUSIONS: MARIAN POLITICS AND THE GNOSTIC MARY

Returning to Deirdre Good's quotation, with which this article began, we recall that once the polysemy of textual material is recognized, the "politics of knowledge," or of interpretation, immediately comes to the fore. Once one acknowledges the lack of fixed meaning, the decision to supply one meaning rather than another itself becomes an object of scrutiny, open to interpretation. We can then question the set of cultural and political assumptions that predisposes a given interpreter to formulate his or her explanation, and likewise we must question our own. I have argued here that the gnostic Mary is an ambiguous symbol, whose identity is not fixed, despite the claims of the interpretive tradition. Her identity must be supplied from one or a combination of at least two possibilities, Mary of Nazareth or Mary of Magdala. In conclusion, I will briefly consider some possible reasons why scholarship has for so long chosen to identify the gnostic Mary exclusively with the Magdalene, and I will additionally identify some of the motivations that lie behind my own efforts to argue for a possible connection between the gnostic Mary and Mary of Nazareth.

One of the main cultural forces inclining many modern interpreters to identify the gnostic Mary with the Magdalene is no doubt the influence of Protestantism and its historic "resistance to talk about Mary [of Nazareth]."[144] This influence, however, is not so much the result of confessed

144. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, Studies on Personalities of the New Testament (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 19. Although one runs the risk of generalizing here, Gaventa, herself a Protestant, notes, "Although diversity of viewpoints among Protestants is virtually axiomatic, Protestant reflection on Mary (or the lack of Protestant reflection) does have certain regular features," including, she continues, "a reluctance to affirm more about Mary than can be found in the New Testament." Gaventa, *Mary*, 16. For more on the differences in Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic views of Mary, see Gaventa, *Mary*, 11–19; Heikki Räisänen, *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament*, 2 ed. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemis, 1989), 9–16; and Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the*

faith as it is symptomatic of the lasting impact that Protestant ideas have had on New Testament and early Christian studies. Indeed, the early decision to identify this figure with the Magdalene rather than the Virgin was made in the context of nineteenth-century German biblical scholarship, whose Protestant leanings, voiced and unvoiced, are well known.[145] Such Protestant-oriented scholarship and its lingering influence have impacted the study of early Christianity with a tendency to minimize the strong devotion to Mary of Nazareth evident in the ancient church.[146] This is true, for instance, of Hans von Campenhausen's study of *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church*, a work which, despite its many strengths, "is marked by a tendency to minimize and trivialize any early mention of [Mary] so as to reduce its import for mariology."[147] This is in fact the work's stated purpose, as von Campenhausen explains in his Introduction:

> The aim of the present work is to open up a path through this scholastic wilderness, the so-called "Mariology" of the early Church. It cannot be seriously disputed that the early Church, at any rate during its first few centuries, knew no real Marian doctrine, that is, no thematic theological concern with Mary's person and her significance in the scheme of Salvation. Nevertheless the flood of publications relating to the subject is now beyond computation, and under the pressure of present Catholic dogmatic interest it is still rising.[148]

Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 7–21, 153–63, 201–13.

145. See, for instance, the extensive discussion of this influence in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 14 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

146. See Philip Sellew's forthcoming article on the *Protevangelium*, "Heroic Biography, Continent Marriage, and the *Protevangelium Jacobi*," where he discusses this point with reference to the modern interpretation of the *Protevangelium*. See also Willem S. Vorster, "The Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus in the Protevangelium of James," in *A South African Perspective on the New Testament*, ed. J. H. Petzer and P. J. Hartin (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 39–40, cited by Sellew. See also Gaventa, *Mary*, 16.

147. Sellew, "Heroic Biography," n. 73. Sellew also cites as an example Oscar Cullmann's curious judgment that "Tertullian and Origen have 'more unbiased views' of the virgin birth and its implications for mariological dogma" than did the author of the *Protevangelium*. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:425.

148. Hans von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church*, tr. Frank Clarke, Studies in Historical Theology 2 (London: SCM Press, 1964), 7.

The prejudice of this passage hardly needs comment. Nor is this tendency completely a thing of the past: in the preface to her recent book on Mary in early Christianity, Beverly Roberts Gaventa identifies different understandings of Mary (of Nazareth) as one of the few remaining distinctions between Protestant and Roman Catholic biblical scholarship.[149] The lingering (if often unvoiced) imprint of Protestantism has perhaps engendered a reluctance to imagine Mary of Nazareth in the position of leadership and authority that gnostic Mary is shown to possess.

Interestingly enough, much of the dissent to the dominant hermeneutic has come from Roman Catholic scholarship. Ernest Renan, whose Roman Catholic pedigree is well known,[150] initiated discussion of the gnostic Mary by identifying her with the mother of Jesus, and not the Magdalene. Robert Murray, a Jesuit, has not gone so far as Renan, but has presented a thoughtful consideration of the gnostic Mary's ambiguity, particularly in light of the early Syrian tradition of Mary of Nazareth's Christophany. Although Murray is somewhat cautiously agnostic, his doubts are sobering in comparison with the certainties of much scholarship. Enzo Lucchesi, on the other hand, has in his recent objections raised an argument for identifying Mary of Nazareth with the gnostic Mary that is even more forceful than Renan's initial proposal. Although Lucchesi's religious background is unknown to me, it is no doubt telling that the venue for his dissent was *Analecta Bollandiana*, the journal of the Société des Bollandistes, a select group of Jesuits dedicated to the study of Christian hagiography for over 350 years.

What might account for this tendency, especially given a heightened Roman Catholic concern for the Virgin's purity, dogmatic as well as physical? Perhaps the answer may lie in a greater willingness by some Roman Catholic scholars to ascribe to Mary of Nazareth a more significant role in early Christianity. We have already noted a Protestant reluctance to ascribe much importance to the mother of Jesus in formative Christianity, while Roman Catholic scholars as diverse as Loisy[151] and, more recently, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza[152] have taken steps that emphasize Mary of Nazareth's importance in earliest Christianity. Thus,

149. Gaventa, *Mary*, ix.

150. See, e.g., Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, tr. W. Montgomery, 2nd ed. (London: A & C Black, Ltd., 1931), 180–81.

151. At least in his commentary on John, as discussed above: see n. 36.

152. See, e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 307–9; and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 163–90.

whereas Mary of Nazareth is somewhat removed from view for many Protestant interpreters, when Roman Catholic commentators have encountered this "Mary" who figures so prominently in the early Christian movement, there is perhaps a certain "naturalness" in looking toward Mary of Nazareth, who stands very much at the center of their tradition.

In addition to such "confessional" concerns, we may identify additional cultural forces that have likely influenced the gnostic Mary's identification with the Magdalene, among which stand the efforts of feminist scholars to disrupt the oppressive, patriarchal formation of normative Christianity. These have successfully focused on the gnostic Mary's portrayal as a powerful, intelligent leader who opposes the restrictive voices of "orthodoxy" within the early Christian tradition. Nevertheless, this emphasis is not the source of the gnostic Mary's identification with the Magdalene; the origin seems to lie instead in Mary Magdalene's traditional identification as a victim of patriarchy, on the one hand, and Mary of Nazareth's use as an instrument of patriarchal victimization of women, on the other. The Christian tradition identifies Mary of Magdala as having been a prostitute, and despite this tradition's well-known inaccuracy, it continues to hold sway over the Magdalene's image in Christian culture. Upon her acceptance of the Christian faith, she was delivered from the patriarchal oppression that she endured as a prostitute, making her an ideal figure for reinventing the Christian tradition as a faith of liberation. Mary of Nazareth, however, is frequently reviled as an oppressive instrument of Christian patriarchy (which she undeniably has been). For Mary of Nazareth, Christianity only brought patriarchal control over her archetypal body (at the Annunciation), and, consequently, over the bodies and lives of countless Christian women across the ages, for whom Mary was identified as a role model. The inversion of the traditional Madonna/whore dichotomy, while sometimes left implicit, is on occasion explicitly identified as a hermeneutic principle: the patriarchal binary is inverted so that Mary of Magdala is identified as a feminist antitype of Mary of Nazareth, the former representing the essence of feminist liberation and the latter the essence of patriarchal oppression.[153]

On occasion one also senses a concern to recover the history of formative Christianity "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist," another strong legacy of the nineteenth-century German intellectual milieu in which early Christian studies, and the figure of the gnostic Mary, developed.[154] It must be

153. See, e.g., Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 386–94; Mary R. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala: Apostle and Leader* (New York: Paulist, 1995), 126–27.

154. The famous quote is from Leopold von Ranke, the nineteenth-century founder of modern, "critical" history. For more on Ranke and his significance for

admitted that from an "historical-critical" vantage, Mary of Nazareth is unlikely to have actually been the gnostic Mary. That is, if we accept the historical existence of a real gnostic Mary, who was a leader in the earliest Christian community, then it is somewhat improbable that this woman would have been Mary of Nazareth. The conflict between Christ and his family in Mark 3.20–35 suggests that Mary of Nazareth was not involved in Christ's public ministry, and was in some sense against it. One could conceivably argue Mary of Nazareth somehow eventually "came around," as implied by her presence at Cana, at the foot of the Cross, and in the "upper room." Nevertheless, this seems somewhat unlikely: it is hard to imagine that the earliest community would have preserved the episode in Mark 3.20–35 if Christ's mother had in fact been a driving force in the earliest community. It seems more likely that traditions of Mary of Nazareth's involvement in her son's ministry and the early church reflect a growing esteem for her, which was clearly gathering strength by the second century.[155]

This point is not, however, especially important for the matter at hand. The aim here is not so much to determine who this woman *really* was, if in fact she actually existed, which is by no means any more certain than Mary of Nazareth's presence at Cana or Pentecost. Indeed, if there once was a memory of Mary of Nazareth's opposition to her son's ministry, by the second century it was certainly ignored, if not effectively forgotten. The present goal is instead to understand how this gnostic Mary might have been understood by Christians of the second and later centuries, the time when the gnostic Mary traditions are first evident. In this sense the approach of this study is perhaps quite different from that of many previous interpreters. One often senses among these an almost Protestant-like will to recover the "truth" of origins, with the intention of using this knowledge to advance reform: if one can show that Christianity was, at its genesis, a movement of liberation for women as well as others who are oppressed, then one can perhaps compel the "deviant" modern traditions to return to the truth of origins. Although this effort to remythologize the origins of Christianity is admirable, its orientation is different from my own, which is focused not on origins but on tradition.

Also at work, I suspect, are different approaches to the historical study of women or "gender." Such attempts to identify the "historical gnostic

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modern history, see Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 163–90, esp. 163–64.

155. See Brown et al., *Mary in the New Testament*, 241–82, esp. 42.

Mary" are undoubtedly tied to efforts to restore the faces and voices of real women to history, identifying in the cracks of history various "great women" who can rival and challenge the "great men" of the canonical histories.[156] My approach is not so much opposed to this worthy cause as it is decidedly different in its aims. It is a less "object-oriented" and more "reader-oriented" approach to the question of the gnostic Mary, seeking not so much to know who she "really" was, but how she may have been understood by those early Christians who came into contact with and preserved these traditions. In this sense it is more aligned with the cultural study of gender, that is, the investigation of how men and women are historically represented in culture, rather than with efforts to recover the "facts" of women's historical existence and experience.[157]

It is nevertheless hoped that this point of view will contribute to the challenge that such scholarship has posed to Christianity's patriarchal formation by exploring a new alternative and enlarging the potential that is present in the symbol of the gnostic Mary. Consequently, the argument presented here is not at all intended to challenge or disrupt the gnostic Mary's antipatriarchal, antinormative force: this feature clearly remains a part of the figure no matter whom we should choose to see in her. Rather than deploying the gnostic Mary to invert the Christian tradition's Madonna/whore dualism, or to reinvent the myth of origins (both worthwhile endeavors), I propose the use of this symbol to subvert directly Mary of Nazareth's repressive representation in the Christian tradition. It is, on the one hand, admittedly useful to identify a point of resistance in the "gnostic" Mary Magdalene, seeing in her a woman who can represent a gender-inclusive Christian "origin," and yet who stands outside of the repressive patriarchy that ensued and openly challenges it. Nevertheless, compared to the Virgin Mary, the Magdalene is a rather minor figure in the Christian tradition, in light of which it might make sense to develop the gnostic Mary as an instrument capable of directly subverting Mary of Nazareth's oppressive representation in the Christian tradition, and forming a new, more empowering image of Mary of Nazareth. Although many feminist theologians consider Mary's representation so completely repres-

156. See Joan W. Scott, "Women in History: The Modern Period," *Past and Present* 101 (1983): 141–57; reprinted as Joan W. Scott, "Women's History," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and (with regard to early Christian studies in particular) Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *CH* 67 (1998): 1–31.

157. See Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History*; Clark, "Lady Vanishes."

sive as to be unsalvageable, I sympathize with the numerous others who are, in the words of Dorothy Soelle, "not ready to surrender Mary to our opponents."[158] In non-Protestant traditions, Mary is a symbol too potent simply to be let go: even if we do not run to embrace her, her repressive representation still must be somehow subverted, or it will continue to function.

Therefore, while the reclamation of the Magdalene as an important leader of the early Christian movement is perhaps effective in a Protestant context, in which the Virgin Mary is a somewhat marginal figure, I propose that a different strategy may prove useful in non-Protestant contexts. In these traditions, the gnostic Mary could be employed to challenge and transform traditional representations of the Virgin Mary. Rather than simply inverting the Christian tradition's essentialism by embracing the Magdalene and demonizing the Virgin, one might nurture a new image of Mary of Nazareth as a prominent and respected leader of the early church, who resisted the limitations placed on her by the male leaders of the church. Imagining Mary of Nazareth, rather than the Magdalene, in this way may be more effective in non-Protestant contexts for challenging the repression that these traditions have heaped on women for centuries, calling these traditions to recognize that, "it is the women disciples, as well as Mary [of Nazareth], who are among those filled with the Spirit at Pentecost, designated as sharing in the renewed prophetic spirit."[159]

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158. See the discussion in Maurice Hamington, *Hail Mary?: The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 157–79, where the author argues against such withdrawl and in favor of an attempt to recast Marian imagery. The quotation occurs at p. 164, and is from Dorothy Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 47.

159. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Is Feminism the End of Christianity? A Critique of Daphne Hampson's *Theology and Feminism*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 391; cited in Hamington, *Hail Mary?*, 179.