

Review

“Who are you to reject her?” Looking for the Historical Mary Magdalene

The author of this article hopes to provoke thought about and pave the way for meaningful discussion of the character of Mary Magdalene and of her role in the early church. Pointing out the importance of Mary Magdalene’s role in the canonical gospels—as is well known, she is present in all four resurrection accounts, and according to those sources, she, along with other disciples who were women, was one of the first to witness Jesus’ empty tomb—the author wishes to examine the post-Easter silence concerning Mary Magdalene more closely. Why is her role restricted to the last few chapters of the gospels? Why do we not hear of her in the early church? Essentially, the author is asking, Has the church historically misunderstood the true nature of Mary Magdalene, and rejected her as a result?

The author argues for consideration of the possibility, due to the silence of canonical sources and evidence in some extrabiblical sources, that the reason for Mary Magdalene's absence after Easter is “an early church conspiracy to wrench her from her place as a church leader.”¹ The author traces the origin of such strife in the early church to a theoretical conflict between Mary Magdalene and early church leaders, and points to passages in the extrabiblical *Gospel of Mary* which seem to posit the authority of Mary Magdalene as a church leader, given to her by Jesus himself. One example of this is the *Gospel of Mary* 5.5-7:

Peter said to Mary, Sister we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of woman. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember which you know, but we do not, nor have we heard them. Mary answered and said, What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you.²

With this in mind, the author asks: “Could it be that Mary Magdalene lost this war for church authority to Peter, and that is the reason for her obscurity?...there certainly seems enough evidence to make it a possibility.”³

This idea of Mary Magdalene as a church leader who was rejected in favor of Peter is an interesting thought for consideration, but it must be examined more closely. An argument from silence requires substantial and compelling evidence to be convincing. The author cites the existence of earlier pro-Mary Magdalene and later pro-Peter “camps” in several extrabiblical sources, stating that “the pro-Peter camp is shown in later translations and editions of those...early church texts.”⁴ It would be helpful if at this point the author provided an example of an older, pro-Mary version of

¹ “Who Are You To Reject Her?': Looking for the Historical Mary Magdalene,” *The Heretic* 1, no.1 (April 2020): 1.

² “The Gospel According To Mary Magdalene,” The Gnostic Society Library, accessed 25 April 2020, <http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm>.

³ “Who Are You?”, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

an early church text and compared it with a later, pro-Peter version. This would help the reader to see how this hypothesized split between Mary and Peter manifested itself in these sources.

If the obscurity of Mary Magdalene's role in church history stems from a conspiracy in the early church, then the burden of proof is on the one who postulates the conspiracy. The author needs to be able to answer questions such as, 'How did this come about?' and, 'If the voice of Mary Magdalene has been forcibly silenced, why did this happen?' If we are to dig deeply into the history of the person of Mary Magdalene, we must take pains to make sure that our discourse is rooted in fact and not based on speculation.

All this having been said, though, this theory of Mary Magdalene as forgotten church leader is put forward as just that: a theory, an idea. The author's goal in this article is not to systematically and incontrovertibly prove the truth of this theory, but to invite the reader to consider it, and the author has been successful in this respect. This theory should provoke consideration and thoughtful, academically responsible discourse concerning the person of Mary Magdalene.

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Bibliography:

The Gnostic Society Library. "The Gospel According To Mary Magdalene." Accessed 25 April 2020.
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