

Mary Magdalene and the Markan Appendix

by

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The multiple personae of Mary Magdalene in early Christian literature create conflicting portraits of this enigmatic follower of Jesus. These divergent treatments of the textual Mary Magdalene produce what is perhaps the most intriguing follower of Jesus in early Christianity. She appears in canonical literature as a witness to the death (Mt 27:56, Mk 15:40-41, Lk 23:49, Jn 19:25), burial (Mt 27:61, Mk 15:47, Lk 23:55), and resurrection of Jesus (Mt 28:6, Mk 16:6, Lk 24:1-12, Jn 20:1). In Mk 16:9, Mt 26:9, and Jn 20:14-17 she is among the first to receive an appearance of the resurrected Jesus. In Mk 15:40-41 and Lk 8:2-3 she is said to be a patron and early follower of Jesus. She is said to have been a former possessed woman whose demons were expelled by Jesus (Lk 8:2, Mk 16:9). Not all of these New Testament accounts of Mary Magdalene agree with one another, and they certainly don't agree with her more prominent treatment in extracanonical texts. In the Gospel of Mary, she is a teacher to the other apostles, the sole visionary who understands the teachings of the resurrected Jesus. In other extracanonical literature, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Dialogue of the Savior, and the Pistis Sophia, Mary Magdalene is the preeminent student of Jesus and is recognized as such by the male disciples. Studies of Mary Magdalene's historical possibilities regarding her role in early Christianity have been the focus of many scholarly arguments in the last thirty years. Much like the primary evidence of canonical and extracanonical texts that scholars engage with, scholarly arguments concerning

Mary of Magdala are widely divergent. Scholarly treatments, to varying degrees, either reclaim Mary Magdalene's prominence in the early tradition or erase her from history. For example, Carolyn Osiek uses redaction criticism to argue that the persistent female presence in the empty tomb narratives of the New Testament is the fundamental predication that something historically significant happened among women at the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning.¹ In contrast, John Dominic Crossan's historical reconstruction of the events surrounding the death of Jesus argues against the historicity of any Christian witnesses to the passion narratives, stating that the stories are "prophecy historicized and not history memorized."² As a result, Mary Magdalene is effectively removed from any historical role she may have played.³ Whether such studies focus primarily on Mary Magdalene or address her tangentially as a portion of separate argument, the Markan Appendix is generally only given minor consideration. The Markan Appendix doesn't present any new information about Mary Magdalene but depends on earlier texts for its characterization of her. Because of its lateness and dependence on earlier texts, scholars aren't much interested in new analysis of the passage that doesn't present any novel ideas. However, the Markan Appendix is a unique and revealing document. While it may not offer much as a primary or independent piece of evidence on Mary Magdalene, it does offer remarkable insight into the formation of early Christianity and the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in a developing

¹ Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?" Osiek argues that the empty tomb stories were preserved in women's circles. The roles of the women at the tomb were later marginalized in their incorporation in the androcentric tradition.

² Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 171.

³ Crossan later conceded that it was possible that women witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus in *The Birth of Christianity*, 559.

trajectory of literary tradition that would eventually become known as the New Testament.

The first literary evidence of Mary Magdalene comes from Mk 15:40-41.⁴ Here Mary Magdalene is first on a list of women who are distant witnesses to the death of Jesus. There is no mention of any outstanding character aspects such as demonic possession. Instead, the author of Mark simply claims that she was one of several women from Galilee who followed and provided for Jesus. In Mk 15:47, she is also the first on the list of women who see where Jesus is buried. Mk 16:1 again lists her first among the women who returned after the Sabbath to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. Upon their approach, they find the stone rolled back and the tomb empty, save for an angel who tells them to report the resurrection to Jesus' disciples. Mary and the others flee in fear, failing to deliver the message.

Prior to the introduction of Mary Magdalene and other women in the death narrative of Jesus, the female presence in the Gospel of Mark is minimal, limited to a few passing encounters with Jesus. Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever in Mk 1:30-31. In Mk 5:25-33, a woman is healed of her hemorrhages by touching the clothes of Jesus. Jesus raises a girl from death in Mk 5:39-42 and casts out a demon from another young girl in Mk 7:25-30. Jesus' mother shows up with his siblings in Mk 3:31-35, which prompts Jesus' dismissive response to their presence with the proclamation that all of his followers are his family. Jesus defends a woman who anoints him in Mk 14:3-9. Women are minor characters in the Gospel of Mark; they appear as a means to

⁴ The Gospel of Mark is the earliest literary evidence of Mary Magdalene. There is a scholarly consensus that dates the composition to sometime between 66-73 C.E, some thirty-five to forty plus years after the death of Jesus.

illustrate the healing powers and teachings of Jesus. There is no mention that groups of women were close followers of Jesus prior to his death narrative.

The first mention of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Mark as a witness to the events surrounding the death of Jesus raises a question: If women were not given prominent roles in the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, why are they (Mary Magdalene especially) given such important roles in the death narrative? Using archaeological evidence (or the general lack thereof) of crucifixions and anthropological studies of 1st century Mediterranean culture, Crossan contends that there likely were no Christian witnesses to the death and burial of Jesus.⁵ The passion narratives in their literary form were a later construction, created through an “intense search of the scriptures [in which the authors] discovered verses and images each of which could be applied to the passion as a whole but not, of course, to its individual details, for no such details existed in their memories.”⁶ The followers of Jesus took what scant historical facts they knew about his death and systematically developed a *prophetic passion* narrative using multiple biblical allusions. For Crossan, the passion narratives are prophecy historicized. The female witnesses to the death narrative of Jesus are part of this later construction.

Crossan’s argument seemingly explains the sudden introduction of Mary Magdalene as a witness to the events surrounding Jesus’ death. She is not mentioned earlier in the gospel because, for Crossan, the author of Mark relied on earlier texts to create his account of passion events, namely the *Cross Gospel* (embedded in the

⁵ In the *Birth of Christianity*, p. 559, Crossan concedes that there may have been women who witnessed the death of Jesus, but that would have been the extent of their historical role. In his reconstruction, there is no burial for Jesus (if anything there may have been a shallow grave dug by Romans), hence no tomb that could be found empty. The women disappear with the empty tomb.

⁶ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 375.

Gospel of Peter) and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*.⁷ The author of Mark gave the name *Mary Magdalene* to one of the triad of unnamed women at the empty tomb in *Secret Mark*. Crossan's argument against the historicity of the passion does not, however, adequately account for the presence of female witnesses when a male's credibility as a witness would be stronger.

Osiek argues that the presence of Mary Magdalene as a witness to the empty tomb is evidence that the narrative is early. The development of the empty tomb stories in orthodox circles is late because the narratives were first preserved in women's groups. They were women's stories, late insertions into androcentric narratives that diminished the role of women as witnesses. "The empty tomb narratives mean that the least significant members of the community were entrusted with the first Easter account and the first mandate to proclaim it."⁸ The introduction of Mary Magdalene in the passion narrative in the Gospel of Mark can be argued as one part of a larger narrative of historicized mythology or as a granule of primary women's history later integrated into orthodoxy. Crossan argues that Mary Magdalene's importance increases as the evidence moves further away from history; Osiek argues that she is challenged and diminished, evidence that her prominence and participation is early tradition preserved in women's groups. Neither argument diminishes the author's portrayal of her role and function in the narrative of the Gospel of Mark.

⁷ Crossan's argument for chronological stratification of the texts in *The Historical Jesus* places the *Cross Gospel* in the first stratum, composed in the 50's C.E. (although there is no scholarly consensus), and the *Secret Gospel of Mark* as the earliest text in the second stratum, composed in the early 70's C.E. Crossan argues that both texts were composed prior to Mark, who relied on both as sources for his passion narrative. The authenticity of the *Secret Gospel of Mark* is strongly suspect; see P. Jeffery's *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*.

⁸ Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?" 106.

The presence of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Mark serves an important function in the story of the death of Jesus. The male disciples are no longer part of the story. At the arrest of Jesus in Gethsemane, Mark explains that “all of them deserted him and fled” (Mk 14:50).⁹ Peter remains in the background to fulfill Jesus’ prophecy of denial in Mk 14:66-72, but the author doesn’t place him as an actual witness of the trial and death. Instead, Mary Magdalene and several women are introduced to witness the death, burial, and empty tomb of Jesus. They are the Christian witnesses to the death of Jesus and his post-death activities. Jesus’ post-death activities are brief in the Gospel of Mark. An angel at the empty tomb reports, “He has been raised,” (Mk 16:6) but the women fail to deliver the message of the angel to the disciples and Peter.

When read against the other three gospels, the original ending of Mark seems incomplete. There are no resurrection appearances or clear continuation of Jesus’ ministry. The Gospel of Mark simply ends in minor chaos; the male disciples have long fled and the women followers flee in fear. This abrupt ending to the Gospel of Mark has caused many to argue that it had been cut short unintentionally, that a longer ending surely had at one point accompanied this sudden and seemingly incomplete story.¹⁰ But as R.M. Price notes in his argument of Mary Magdalene’s diminishing role beneath the New Testament texts, “The empty tomb by itself would have been recognized by an ancient Jewish or pagan reader as a fitting notice that Jesus had risen from the dead

⁹ All New Testament quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version translation in *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (2006).

¹⁰ J. Kelhoffer, *Mission and Miracle*. 7-8. Tracing the history of scholarship of the Markan Appendix, Kelhoffer notes arguments from J.J. Griesbach in 1803 that the original ending to the Gospel of Mark was “accidentally lost” and must have integrated elements of Matthew 28:9-20 in which Jesus appears in Galilee. Balancing evidence of what patristic writers knew, Kelhoffer’s history of scholarship refutes early arguments that Mark 16:8 is not the original ending.

and been exalted to heaven.”¹¹ While there is now a general scholarly consensus that the original Gospel of Mark ends at 16:8 with the women fleeing from the tomb, the developing literary tradition of the 1st and 2nd century felt its ending at 16:8 was inadequate in light of other accounts of Jesus’ post-death activities. Enter Mk 16:9-20, referred to here as the Markan Appendix.¹²

James Kelhoffer’s study of the literary dependence of the Markan Appendix reaches several persuasive and important conclusions:

- It was composed as an intentional addition to Mark, not as an independently written fragment
- It was composed with knowledge and use of the four gospels and probably Acts
- It was composed between 120-150 C.E.
- It is the earliest evidence that these texts were used in a collection

While it is generally accepted in scholarly circles that Mk 16:9-20 was composed as an intentional appendage to the original gospel, the literary dependence of the Markan Appendix on the four gospels is important. Kelhoffer’s textual analysis of the writing style of the Markan Appendix finds that the author “did not intend to create a novel account, but wrote in conscious imitation of traditions which he, for whatever reason, esteemed.”¹³ The intentional imitation by the Markan Appendix of all four gospels is the basis for understanding Mary Magdalene’s reintroduction in the first verse of the additional ending to the Gospel of Mark.

¹¹ R.M. Price, “Mary Magdalene: gnostic Apostle?” 70. Price relies on the study by C.H. Talhbert in which the disappearance of bodies in ancient stories is adequate evidence of ascension while unaccompanied by resurrection appearances.

¹² J.D. Crossan argues in *The Historical Jesus* (p. 411-416) that the *Secret Gospel of Mark* exposes the original ending of Mark to be 15:39, but the Secret Gospel is likely a hoax perpetrated by M. Smith as argued by P. Jeffery in *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*.

¹³ J. Kelhoffer, *Mission and Miracle*, 121.

Mk 16:9 *Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons.*

When read against the Gospel of Mark, the reintroduction of Mary Magdalene in the Markan Appendix seems awkward. The juxtaposition of Mary Magdalene receiving a resurrection appearance while simultaneously being referred to as a former demoniac is striking. There is no mention of this biographical information in the original Gospel of Mark. Instead, the author of the Markan Appendix draws on Luke's description of several women followers who had been cured of various spiritual ailments. Among them is "Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out" (Lk 8:2). Aside from the Markan Appendix, which most certainly borrowed from Luke, the Lukan description of Mary Magdalene is the only place in early Christian literature that describes Mary as a possessed woman.

The description of Mary Magdalene as a former demoniac is possibly a Lukan construction. The previous passage in Lk 7:36-50 describes Jesus forgiving a sinful woman after she anoints his feet. The passage following the introduction of Mary Magdalene and other women marks the beginning of a series of parables. The insertion of the description of women in Lk 8:2-3 has a literary connection to Mk 15:40-41 but not to the surrounding narrative in Lk 7 and 8. Both groups of women provided for Jesus while he was in Galilee.¹⁴ Mary Magdalene is the only woman named in both. Absent from Mark's biographical account is the Lukan description of the women's infirmities. While Luke's gospel introduces Mary Magdalene earlier in the narrative than Mark, the

¹⁴ J. Schaberg agrees with L. Schottruff that the idea of wealthy female patrons is not a remnant of early tradition but likely a description of Gentile women's patronage in the early church. See Ch. 6 of *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*.

description of her has little to do with the surrounding passages. The severity of her seven demons is alluded to in a later description of “seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last stage of that person is worse than the first” (Lk 11:26). The Lukan description of the women followers distinguishes Mary Magdalene from the others. The others suffered from illnesses but Mary Magdalene suffered from a severe case of demonic possession.

Luke doesn't tack on the description to Mary's witness of a resurrection appearance. In fact, Luke doesn't have Mary Magdalene receiving an appearance of the resurrected Jesus. The Lukan description of Mary Magdalene resumes in Lk 23:49 and 23:55 where unnamed women from Galilee (Mary Magdalene is presumably among them based on her earlier introduction) witness the death and burial of Jesus. In Lk 24:1-12 Mary Magdalene (now explicitly named) and other women return to the tomb to anoint the body where they are greeted by two angels who proclaim the resurrection. They leave to tell the apostles, but are disbelieved until Peter sees the empty tomb for himself. Simon Peter is the first of the eleven disciples (Jesus appeared to two other males on the road) to receive a resurrection appearance. The Markan Appendix does not follow the Lukan account regarding the absence of a post resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene but instead resembles the narrative of Jn 20, in which Mary Magdalene alone is the first witness to an appearance of the resurrected Jesus.

The Johannine account of Mary Magdalene begins with her witness to the crucifixion in Jn 19:25. Mary is not mentioned as a witness to the burial, but she knows where he is buried and finds the stone removed from the entrance to the tomb. She tells Peter and another disciple that the body of Jesus was gone. Peter and another

disciple rush to the tomb to find it empty. Mary Magdalene reappears in Jn 20:11 weeping beside the tomb after Peter leaves. Two angels appear before she receives the first resurrection appearance. She does not recognize Jesus at first, but when she does she tells the other disciples what she had seen.

J. Schaberg suggests that Jn 20 evokes 2 Kings 2 as part of Jewish tradition concerned with prophetic succession.¹⁵ She sees in Jn 20 remnants of the claim that Mary Magdalene was the successor to Jesus.¹⁶ R. Price points to the first resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene as an “originally independent periscope preserved now in Jn 20:1, 11-18 [that] has no integral connection with the rest of the chapter in which it appears.”¹⁷ When read against the surrounding verses, Jn 20:1 and 11-18 seem to contradict what follows in the narrative. Mary Magdalene is given instructions to report the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the male disciples, who it seems are not going to receive a resurrection appearance. However, vv. 19 describes the first of several resurrection appearances witnessed by the male disciples. Mary Magdalene’s vision of a resurrection appearance is marginalized by the author of John through her initial non-recognition of Jesus (Jn 20:14-15), the silent reception to her report by the male disciples (Jn 20:18), and the subsequent appearances of Jesus to the other disciples.

In John, Mary is the recipient of protophany, but the meaning of which is diminished. In Luke, the former demoniac receives no resurrection appearance. Both of these Mary’s are found in the first verse of the Markan Appendix. The sources behind the contrasting portrayals of Mary Magdalene in Mk 16:9 continue to permeate

¹⁵ J. Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 304-344.

¹⁶ J. Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 349.

¹⁷ R. Price, “Mary Magdalene: gnostic Apostle?” 66.

and influence Mary Magdalene's actions that follow her protophany in the Markan Appendix.

Mk 16:10-11 ¹⁰*She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. ¹¹But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.*

Verse 10 of the Markan Appendix is similar to Mt 28:8-11, in which Mary Magdalene and her female companion receive the first resurrection appearance of Jesus while on their way to deliver the message of his resurrection. Prior to the resurrection in Matthew, Mary Magdalene is the first on a list of women who witness the death (Mt 27:56) and burial (Mt 27:61) of Jesus. In Mt 28:1-10, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb with another woman to find the stone rolled back. They are greeted by an angel who tells them they will see the resurrected Jesus in Galilee. They leave the tomb in exuberance to tell the disciples what they had seen. Before they deliver the message, they receive the first resurrection appearance of Jesus, who gives them the same message as the angel. There is no mention of Mary's actual report to the disciples or how it was initially received.

The disciples' unbelief of Mary's report in verse 11 of the Markan Appendix finds literary company in Lk 24:9-11 and Jn 20. In Luke, Mary and her female companions report the appearance and message of two angels who told them that Jesus had been raised. The eleven apostles and the rest do not believe them; Peter must see the empty tomb for himself. In Jn 20, the theme of unbelief is less explicit, but still subordinates the purpose of Mary as a mere messenger; Peter must again see the empty tomb for himself.

In all four gospels, Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus. In Mt, Jn, and the Markan Appendix, she is the first (or among the first) to receive a resurrection appearance. However, her role in the post-resurrection events is relegated to that of a messenger of the news. In the Lukan account, the former demoniac does not receive an appearance. The Markan Appendix retains the Lukan description while borrowing Mary Magdalene's protophany from John. Perhaps the best evidence of the explicit meaning and gravity placed on resurrection appearances within early Christian communities comes from their earliest preserved texts, the letters of Paul.

1 Cor 9:1 *Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?*¹⁸

"The claim to have received a resurrection appearance functioned in the early church to authenticate a person's claim to apostleship."¹⁹ Paul's explanation to his church in Corinth of his apostolic rights hinges on his vision of the resurrected Jesus. Paul's prophetic experience gave him apostolic authority. Paul's apostolic claim in 1 Cor 9:1 is evidence that the minimum criterion for authority in early Christianity was to have received an appearance of the resurrected Jesus. Paul's visionary experience was hardly confined to Christian understanding. Communication with deities and spirits through trances, possessions, and dreams was a widely held belief in ancient Mediterranean society.²⁰ By Paul's own definition of his apostleship, the canonical Mary Magdalene has apostolic claim. In 1 Cor 15:4-9, Paul explains that after Jesus was

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians was written around 54 C.E. This is Paul's first assertion in his letter to the Corinthians that as a recipient of a resurrection appearance, he has apostolic claim.

¹⁹ J. Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 221.

²⁰ K. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 64.

buried and resurrected, he appeared first to “Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve,” before appearing to a group of five hundred followers of mixed gender followed by appearances to James and the rest of the apostles. Curiously absent from Paul’s list of those who have received resurrection appearances is Mary Magdalene. Peter is the recipient of protophany, the most important on the list of the appearances. Paul’s is the earliest list of resurrection appearances, at least 25 years before the first literary evidence that Mary Magdalene received a resurrection appearance²¹ and between 65-95 years before the composition of the Markan Appendix. The absence of Mary Magdalene from Paul’s list suggests that Paul wasn’t aware of her vision of a resurrection appearance.

The absence of Mary from Paul’s list draws several explanations from scholars, two of which were initially explored earlier in this study pertaining to the roles of women in the Gospel of Mark before and within the passion narrative. The first explanation is that the appearance to Mary Magdalene is a later creation incorporated into the literary tradition. For Crossan, this is the result of prophecy being historicized. When Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians around 54 C.E., the passion narrative had not yet been solidified in the literary tradition, hence Paul’s narrative omission of Mary from his list of resurrection appearances. The resurrection appearances were one aspect around which later tradition built a story of the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene is then a “bridge between the empty tomb narrative and [resurrection accounts].”²² In three gospels, Mary Magdalene’s resurrection appearance is tied to empty tomb narratives. The explanation that the appearance to Mary Magdalene is tied to empty tomb stories

²¹ The Gospel of Matthew, composed between 80-90 C.E., is the first textual evidence that Mary Magdalene received a resurrection appearance.

²² J. Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 223.

and is secondary does not adequately explain why the author of Lk-Acts chose to include an empty tomb narrative in Luke but not in Acts. Osiek argues that Acts 2:25-31 and 13:34-37 presuppose the empty tomb narrative but “it is never made an explicit part of the resurrection witness.”²³ The other argument that the empty tomb narratives are secondary is that “resurrection faith from the very beginning was based not on the empty tomb but on testimony to the appearances of the risen Christ.”²⁴ Neither of these explanations can account for the persistence of women witnesses to the empty tomb.

Osiek points out that among the empty tomb narratives, only the Markan Appendix doesn't explicitly place Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb when describing her witness to the resurrected Jesus. Osiek argues that if the empty tomb narratives (about which Paul is silent) are later and secondary to the resurrection appearances, then the placement of women at the tomb is unnecessary.²⁵ Male witnesses would have been retrojected into the text. The credibility of women witnesses would have been contested in 1st century Judaism, evidence of which is preserved in the initial disbelief of the women's report of the resurrection by the male disciples in canonical texts. Paul's omission of Mary Magdalene from resurrection appearances can then be perceived as evidence of active repression of her role within the Petrine transmission of tradition.

Crossan perceives Paul's list of resurrection appearances as containing three parts: a *general community* made up of the five hundred, a *leadership group* “designated divergently as it accompanies a *specific leader*, either the Twelve with

²³ C. Osiek, “The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?” 105.

²⁴ C. Osiek, “The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?” 105.

²⁵ C. Osiek, “The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?” 105.

Cephas or the apostles with James.”²⁶ Paul's knowledge of early Christian stories comes from Peter, the leader of his own group and the first recipient of a resurrection appearance. Paul wouldn't know about a possible early appearance to Mary Magdalene because he wouldn't have been told. For Osiek, the resurrection appearance received by Mary Magdalene was first preserved in women's circles, within which her prominence remained free from disturbance. The importance of her witness to resurrection appearances was diminished through the incorporation of the early empty tomb narratives into developing orthodox texts.

R.M. Price argues that the empty tomb narratives are early because the absence of a body in the tomb is enough evidence by ancient standards to convincingly portray a resurrection. The resurrection appearances of Jesus to his followers are not accounted for in early Christian literature to provide evidence of his divinity, but rather to broker authority to his apostles. Mary Magdalene's apostolic claim is absent from Paul's and Luke's account but persists through the tradition to the Markan Appendix, where her Johannine protophany remains but is challenged again by the incorporation of the Lukan possession charge.

If receiving a resurrection appearance can be explained as an elevation of a person's status within a community that values such visions, then the appearances to Mary Magdalene would have enhanced her standing in the community. Canonical texts can be seen as subordinating her role to that of messenger of the appearance to more prominent followers of Jesus. While the report of a vision can enhance a person's status, a charge of demon possession can have an equally adverse effect.

²⁶ J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 398.

Across cultures, the accusation of demon possession can be perceived as a polemic reaction to authority claims. I.M. Lewis' cross-cultural study of ecstatic religions finds that if "possession is the means by which the underdog bids for attention, witchcraft accusations provide the countervailing strategy by which such demands are kept within bounds."²⁷ For Lewis, possession is a social phenomenon in which various phenomena are identified as evidence of the presence of spirits. The possessed transmit messages from the dead and have other mystical gifts. In the context of Mary Magdalene, the accusation of witchcraft becomes a charge of demonic possession, a retaliatory action against her transcendent visions of Jesus. R.M. Price argues that "it is hard to see how being tagged with the reputation of sevenfold demon-possession would not seriously undermine one's credibility as an apostle."²⁸ This demon possession charge, which occurs only in Luke's most unsympathetic portrayal of Mary Magdalene prior to its use in the Markan Appendix, contains remnants of polemics against her apostolic claim.

In the context of ecstatic experiences, claims of visions and charges of possession serve competing interests. Visions represent a claim to authority; possession charges challenge authority. Visions advance status; possession charges seek to reduce status. Visionary experiences are regulated by the authorizing forces within a community. It is not enough simply to claim one had an inspirational vision. The vision must be accepted and approved by existing authorities. New religions that begin with a "flourish of ecstatic effervescence" also find that such "inspiration then

²⁷ I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 109.

²⁸ R.M. Price, "Mary Magdalene: gnostic Apostle?" 74.

becomes an institutionalized property of the religious establishment.”²⁹ The institutionalized nature of an inspirational movement then dictates the regulation of any claims to authority through its hierarchy of power. If a vision falls outside the acceptable bounds established by the community, it may not be regarded as authentic. Numerous reasons may be given for this; the vision may contradict existing ideologies, challenge authority figures, or be mediated by the wrong person. That is, the credibility of the mediator may be in question. One way to challenge this perceived threat is to undermine the credibility of the visionary through charges of witchcraft.

The charge of witchcraft is leveled against Jesus in Mk 3:20-23. Jewish scribes accuse him of channeling “Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons” (Mk 3:22). The accusation of demonic possession is a direct challenge to Jesus’ growing influence and attraction of crowds in the Markan narrative.

The charge of demonic possession in the Markan Appendix is then a direct challenge to apostolic claim produced by Mary Magdalene’s vision of the resurrected Jesus. However, this polemic against Mary Magdalene’s apostolic claim seems like overkill when examined against her already subordinated role as a messenger in Luke and the Markan Appendix. One must look outside the New Testament canon for the possible motive beneath Luke’s charge of demon possession.

The depiction of Mary Magdalene in what is now known as the extracanonical texts is incredibly divergent from her subordinated role in New Testament literature. Here she is prominent among the male disciples. She is a visionary and teacher. In many texts, her understanding of Jesus’ teachings is far advanced from that of her male counterparts.

²⁹ I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 118.

J. Schaberg illustrates a character profile of Mary Magdalene in the extracanonicals with nine points of commonality, with each text containing at least four points (all nine are found in the Gospel of Mary).³⁰ The nine profile points include Mary's elevated prominence amongst the male disciples, evident in her bold speech, leadership role, visionary experiences, exceptional understanding, and her intimacy with Jesus. She is challenged by some disciples, defended by Jesus and other disciples.

Mary Magdalene experiences visions of the resurrected Jesus in the Gospel of Mary (early 2nd century C.E.)³¹, the Dialogue of the Savior (2nd or 3rd century C.E.), the Epistula Apostolorum (2nd C.E.), and the Pistis Sophia (2nd to 3rd century C.E.). In these texts Mary Magdalene's apostolic claim is not diminished, but enhanced. Her visionary experiences solidify her as a prominent disciple. In the Gospel of Mary, the male disciples recognize her intimate relationship with Jesus and ask her to share any teaching that he may have kept from them but told to her. Mary then begins an account of what she learned in a vision of the resurrected Jesus. Whereas Paul's explanation of apostolic claim from 1 Corinthians is based on a vision of the resurrected Jesus, here a vision is not enough. The Gospel of Mary reports that Mary Magdalene not only had a vision of the resurrected Jesus, but that he had shared advanced teachings with her which she understood. When Peter can't understand the teaching Mary received from her vision, he openly challenges her. She is defended by Levi, who implores everyone to stop arguing and carry on their mission.

Mary Magdalene's visions are accompanied by important messages. No longer is she the messenger, but the teacher. Her apostolic claim is based not solely on her

³⁰ See Chapter 4 of Schaberg's *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*.

³¹ Translation by K. King in *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*.

visions of the resurrected Jesus, but by her understanding of him. In the Gospel of Thomas (100-200 C.E.)³², the Dialogue of the Savior, the Pistis Sophia, and the Gospel of Mary, it is Mary Magdalene's advanced understanding of Jesus' teachings that gives her prominence among the male disciples. As in the canonical texts, she does not go unchallenged. In the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Thomas, she is challenged using her gender as the point of contention, not demonic possession. The challenges are also defended by another male disciple or Jesus himself.

The character pattern of Mary Magdalene in extracanonical literature is in contrast with her treatment in canonical texts. While the resurrection appearances to her weave through both sets of texts, the extracanonical portrayals significantly raise her prominence among the followers of Jesus. They do this through her visionary experiences and her understanding of the message presented in them. She understands Jesus' teaching while others remain confused. Simply receiving a resurrection of Jesus is not enough, but understanding the teachings is the key to advanced discipleship. But these positive enhancements of her character and place among Jesus' followers don't fully explain the divergent treatment of her in the New Testament.

"The theology of the Gospel of Mary shows almost no ties to Judaism since it developed out of the thought world of Gentile philosophy."³³ The Gospel of Mary and other extracanonical texts do not focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus as the essential elements of Christian belief. Instead, Jesus is the divine mediator and the separation of the spiritual from the material is obtained through understanding his

³² Translation from J.K. Elliott's *The Apocryphal New Testament*

³³ K. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 39.

teachings. It is this separation through understanding that allows the believer to enter into eternal life. The portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prominent apostle in the so-called Gnostic texts exposes the literary license that the canonical and extracanonical texts take in their divergent treatment of an early Christian figurehead.

The use of Mary Magdalene as a literary vehicle reveals the widely dispersed nature of early Christian communities. In the early 2nd century C.E., Christian communities around the Mediterranean Sea were relatively isolated from one another. Some had Jewish backgrounds, others had Gentile backgrounds. Most could not read, instead they relied mostly on oral traditions. “Partly as a consequence of their independent development and differing situations these churches sometimes diverged widely in their perspectives on essential elements of Christian belief and practice.”³⁴

Prior to the systematic selection and canonization of New Testament texts, oral and literary traditions of Jesus circulated independent of one another. The ideas presented in the Gospel of Mary likely would have confused a Christian who only knew the Gospel of Mark previously. K. King's intertextual examination of The Gospel of Mary with canonical texts finds that the former developed parallel but independent of the latter.³⁵ King's exegesis of the Gospel of Mary suggests that the author was certainly aware of earlier traditions that the developing canonicals also drew upon, but that its consistent dissimilarities are evidence of its literary independence.

While knowledge of underlying oral and written traditions may explain the broad similarities of Mary Magdalene's treatment in early Christian literature, the Markan Appendix is the first evidence of an author consciously selecting and using written

³⁴ K. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 6.

³⁵ King demonstrates that the certain elements of the Gospel of Mary are in dialogue with canonical texts, but there is no literary dependence. See Chapter 10 of *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*.

material from all four gospels that would eventually become part of the canonized tradition. J.A. Kelhoffer convincingly argues that there are no distinct similarities between the Markan Appendix and extracanonical texts that are not already present in New Testament Gospels.³⁶ But he concedes that certain similarities between the Markan Appendix and extracanonical texts may point to a common underlying oral tradition. This suggestion allows for the possibility that the author of the Markan Appendix knew of traditions that would not come to be canonized. The argument that the author of the Markan Appendix had access to and used the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as early as 120 C.E. reveals that the impending canonization of the literary tradition was already being evaluated and allows for the possibility that certain texts (or their underlying traditions) were known and deliberately not selected for incorporation.

Kelhoffer states that the author of the Markan Appendix borrowed the Lukan description of Mary Magdalene's demonic possession simply because it was "perhaps too interesting to pass up"³⁷ and that it is merely a device to establish the connection that he writes of the same Mary in the Lukan and Johannine accounts. The motive of the author may very well have been to simply establish a connection between the Mary of the Markan Appendix to that of John and Luke's narratives using a tantalizing biographical description borrowed from Luke. But in light of the possibilities of what the author of the Markan Appendix could have known about developing traditions, it is more likely that he chose to incorporate the Lukan polemic as a deliberate continuation to challenge the apostolic claim of Mary Magdalene and those communities that used her

³⁶ J.A. Kelhoffer, *Mission and Miracle*, 53.

³⁷ J. Kelhoffer, *Mission and Miracle*, 181.

namesake for their own claims to authority. By the time the Markan Appendix was composed, her persistent influence in the tradition was too strong to ignore, so it continued to be simultaneously acknowledged and challenged.

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