

Digital Commons  
@ LMU and LLS

Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School  
Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount  
University and Loyola Law School

---

LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations

---

Spring May 2008

# Re-Claiming Sacred Scripture: Retrieving Female Models of Discipleship in the Gospels

Jill Origer Tabit

*Loyola Marymount University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd>

---

## Recommended Citation

Tabit, Jill Origer, "Re-Claiming Sacred Scripture: Retrieving Female Models of Discipleship in the Gospels" (2008). *LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations*. 137.

<http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/137>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Re-Claiming Sacred Scripture:  
Retrieving Female Models of Discipleship in the Gospels

by

Jill Origer Tabit

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the Department of Theological Studies,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

2008

*Special thanks to my advisors  
Charlotte Radler and Jeffrey Siker  
I am eternally grateful for your  
advice, encouragement and support*

*~ Jill Origer Tabit  
May 2008*

## Table of Contents

Introduction..... 3

### Part I. Scripture

Chapter 1: The Nature of Scripture..... 5

### Part II. Models of Discipleship

Chapter 2: The Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42)..... 20

- A. Samaria
- B. Interpretations
- C. Belief
- D. Symbolism

Chapter 3: Mary the Mother of Jesus.....38

- A. Annunciation
- B. The Magnificat
- C. Wedding at Cana
- D. Foot of the Cross

Chapter 4: Mary Magdalene.....57

- A. New Testament Gospels
- B. Gospel of Mary
- C. Conflict with Peter
- D. The Conflation

### Part III. Conclusion

Chapter 5: Moving Forward.....78

Bibliography.....87

## *Introduction*

The interpretation of Scripture, particularly the gospels<sup>1</sup>, has not historically been favorable to women. It is necessary for the validation and valuation of women that Scripture be re-interpreted to reflect their integrity. This is an attempt to discover the pearls of wisdom and inspiration for women hidden through generations of interpretation from a male perspective. In the gospels three feminine figures in particular have been distorted through skewed, culturally influenced scriptural analysis. The re-appropriation of the texts that surround these figures will dispel any unfounded myths, and reveal them to be ideal models of discipleship for not only women, but all Christians today.

The topic of women in the gospels necessarily involves a great deal of wading and searching through an ocean of patriarchal influences. The reconstruction of biblical texts by feminists has been undertaken extensively, and has contributed to the work I now feel compelled to approach. Models of discipleship have traditionally been centered around male figures. It is my intention to retrieve female models of discipleship in the gospels that have been buried by centuries of interpretation and conclusions drawn from a male perspective. I presuppose in this endeavor an understanding of the patriarchal context of first century Palestine and the effect it would have had on male-female relationships. I stand upon the foundation of work accomplished by such trailblazers as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sandra Schneiders

---

<sup>1</sup> Following Sandra Schneiders' example, I will use lower case "g" in gospel in reference to particular gospels, and an upper case "G" in Gospel when referring to the mystery of salvific revelation in Jesus. See Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 1999, p. 6.

and the many others who have opened the door for women in questioning and critiquing the way that biblical scholarship has been approached. They have shined the light of hope and validation for the future of women in Christianity.

I propose to first discuss the nature of Scripture itself, and the fluid nature of its interpretation. Contemporary society demands that Scripture be constantly re-evaluated to discern its messages in an evolving world context. Particularly in light of women's struggle for equality and validation, reinterpretation of the gospels is called for to dismiss any patriarchal bias. Use of Scripture to perpetuate a patriarchal structure in society has mistreated its source and done an injustice to the Christian message. The text itself needs to be stripped of cultural transference that over time has been assigned to it erroneously.

Next, I will highlight three women who have significant roles in the gospels and demonstrate their eligibility for the designation of "disciple". Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42) are all women who have reached far beyond their environment to become the epitome of Christian discipleship. Each of them has been exposed to interpretation that over the course of history have had a detrimental impact on them in their roles as model Christians.

In my conclusion, it will become apparent that woman, in addition to men, exist as models of discipleship and can serve as inspiration for all Christians, regardless of gender. They will serve as examples of female inspiration and leadership to guide the future of the Church.

## **Part I: Scripture**

### *Chapter 1: The Nature of Scripture*

*“Scripture, along with all other expressions of church tradition, occupies the category of human words about God’s Word. They attempt to express God’s Word within their finite cultural contexts, but they remain finite and historical.”*

-Rosemary Radford Ruether

*“Like a musical score...the text does not contain meaning but provides a normative possibility for making meaning which can be realized by a competent reader.”*

-Sandra M. Schneiders

What is Scripture? In order to accurately study and interpret Scripture, it is imperative that one comprehends the complexities of what Scripture in the broad sense really reveals. Whether referring to the Torah, the New Testament, or the Qur’an, the term ‘Scripture’ conveys an image of the transcendent communicating through words of a text. A general definition might be “the written and authoritative word of God”.<sup>2</sup> The gospels of the New Testament are considered to be inspired by God. They consist of four separate accounts of witnessing to the words and actions of Jesus Christ, also known as the “Word of God” (Jn 1:1).

Of course it is crucial that one understands the term “word of God” strictly as a metaphor.<sup>3</sup> This metaphor conveys meaning that transcends a reality that can be articulated through human language. As Rosemary Radford Ruether notes above,

---

<sup>2</sup> McBrien, Richard P., ed., *The Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1989, p. 1171.

<sup>3</sup> Schneiders, Sandra M. *Beyond Patching(revised edition)*, New York: Paulist Press, 2004, p. 43.

scripture is merely humanity's attempt to express God's communication through the finite words of humanity's limited intelligence.<sup>4</sup> Human language could never fully reveal the totality of God's essence, therefore any literal interpretation of Scripture as the word of God would be false. Additionally, words change meaning over time. The meanings derived from these texts have never been static. Exegesis over the course of many centuries has taken various forms and generated many diverse interpretations. Christians have long speculated about the discrepancies between the various Gospel accounts and as a result, clashing interpretations have emerged. Scripture *is* and *has been* so much to so many people across time and place that "What is Scripture?" is undoubtedly a complicated and elusive question.

Sandra Schneiders advocates a fourfold approach to interpretation of scripture. It includes historical, literary, theological and spiritual interface with the text.<sup>5</sup> Another way of describing these components is the "world behind the text, in the text, and in front of the text" with the added element of a spiritual, transformative approach. They are all integral elements in legitimate appropriation of the text. It is in the fusion of horizons of the world of the text and the world of the reader that the eventual experience of meaning and possibly transformation occurs.<sup>6</sup> Approaching the text with a hermeneutics of suspicion flushes out those elements that are distortions biased by the writings of the "historical winners" inherent in the text.<sup>7</sup> Recognition that the text does not come from a

---

<sup>4</sup> Ruether, Rosemary Radford, as cited in Sikers, Jeffrey S., *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> Schneiders, Sandra M. *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2003, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 1999, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.



neutral position but one imbedded with the perspective of the writers and the interpreters results in a more accurate appropriation of the text.

According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the Western scholarly tendency in the past has been to scrutinize sacred texts by breaking them down and analyzing the sum of their parts through the scientific method.<sup>8</sup> This one-dimensional approach is inadequate, he claims, because it does not integrate the entire picture.<sup>9</sup> The context of both the construction of the text itself and the individual or society interpreting the text are intricately woven into its derived meaning. Literary and theological interpretation analyzes the text as it stands, both in what it is saying and how it is being communicated. Additionally, literary techniques and tools are identified as methods utilized in communicating the content of scripture. Being open to the spiritual element of a text invites the reader through his or her faith to become immersed in the potentially transformative component of the text.

The world from which a text emerges sets the stage for its intended meaning. The cultural context of that world must be understood in order to comprehend the perspective that produced the text. Identifying the issues and audiences that a particular text addresses as well as the location from which it is produced (e.g., first century Palestine) is crucial to interpreting it properly. Extracting meaning from a sacred text involves conscientious considerations, however. Taking a text and interpreting it in a verse-by-verse methodology such as in a strictly historical-critical method alone completely isolates it from its thematic structure and coherence. Classical methods that examine sections of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Wilfred Cantwell, *What is Scripture: A Comparative Approach*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

text independent of the whole have yielded the patriarchal readings that have frustrated women for years. Attempts to extract meaning by removing a portion of text from its context often have been the source of erroneous justification for a cause. Recognition of this fact can deconstruct and explain inaccurate interpretations. Ideally, it will lead to more holistic exegesis, and produce interpretations that are more egalitarian in nature. The spirit of the gospels points to this type of reading.

Another consideration in interpreting texts, and one that I will be focusing on here, is the examination of the context in which the interpreter is immersed, or the world in front of the text. Every individual brings with himself or herself their accumulated experiences and perspectives into the appropriation of a text. Presuppositions about what the text reveals colors the way that an individual interprets its contents. Consequently, there cannot be the exact same interpretation from person to person, much less across time and place. Valid interpretation of Scripture cannot happen independently of the cultural context in which it has been understood; the context of the interpreter. Perceived meaning will change inevitably as the particulars of societies evolve. Scripture, according to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, is not a static, constant entity. Rather, Scripture must always be understood as a particular interpretation of texts existing in a specific place and time. There is no one “true meaning” of the New Testament. “The true meaning of Scripture is the solid historical reality of the continuum of actual meanings over the centuries to actual people.”<sup>10</sup> The meaning that has been appropriated from sacred Scripture discloses a lot about the people attempting to interpret it. It reflects the issues that have been central to various societies throughout history, and the particular worldviews dominant

---

<sup>10</sup> Smith, p. 89.

during those time periods. Generally speaking, the meaning of Scripture can only be documented in terms of specific meanings for specific persons. A broad sweeping claim to “know” what the Bible means would be insufficient, problematic, and more specifically, inaccurate.

Inevitably, there exists a discrepancy between what God communicates through the medium of Scripture and what constitutes interpretation of those sayings. An understanding that has been appropriated primarily by men in a patriarchal environment has resulted in a common and dominant patriarchal reading of scripture. Asma Barlas asserts that the methods for discerning meaning from Scripture must be critiqued and re-examined in order to recover the egalitarian voice of religious tradition that has been suppressed.<sup>11</sup> Although she is referring to the holy text of Islam, the Qur’an, Barlas’ observations are applicable to any religious tradition’s sacred Scripture. One method she advocates in an attempt to accomplish this task is the examination of the communities that have facilitated the patriarchal interpretations of Scripture. They have helped shape the religious authority that has perpetuated an inaccurate understanding of the essence of the text. Barlas quotes Amina Wadud in her explanation of the challenges egalitarian Scriptural interpretation faces.

The fact that the Qur’an “happens against a long background of patriarchal precedent” may also explain why its exegesis, the work entirely of men, has been influenced by their own needs and experiences while either excluding or interpreting, “through the male vision, perspective, desire, or needs,” women’s experiences. The resulting absence of women’s voices from “the basic paradigms through which we examine and discuss the Qur’an and Qur’anic interpretation,” argues Wadud, is mistaken “with voicelessness in the text itself”; and it is this silence that both explains and

---

<sup>11</sup> Barlas, Asma, *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002, p. 19.

allow the striking consensus on women's issues among Muslims in spite of interpretive differences among them.<sup>12</sup>

Historically there has been a tendency to read meaning into Scripture, resulting in the cultivation and propagation of practices and norms that have no real basis in the Gospels, such as patriarchy. This could be corrected through legitimate, holistic, egalitarian re-interpretation of the New Testament.

As new issues emerge in our current society we must be challenged to discover deeper, hidden meanings of Scripture that could not be discerned in the past. For example, the advent of the equal rights movement has brought to the forefront language, customs and ideas that have been marginalizing to women. Issues that challenge and subvert marginalizing beliefs and praxis in the secular sphere of our society will eventually spill over into the religious sphere, resulting in a constant demand for reinterpretation of our worldview. The sacred texts that reveal divine intention, likewise, must be re-appropriated to reflect a more balanced understanding of the spirit of the divine. Suspicious and incoherent interpretations of our sacred texts must be re-examined and possibly be debunked. While the interpretation of a text itself can never be static, the essence of the message should remain relatively constant, reflecting the true intentions of the goodness of the Divine. Amina Wadud expresses this idea beautifully:

The goal of interpretation is to unveil the meanings that reflect the spirit of the very idea that Allah, the Ultimate, Who is ultimately unknowable, intends for human agents to *apply* the meanings they are able to unveil in a manner most reflective of the principles of the message.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Wadud, Amina, as cited in Barlas, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Wadud, Amina, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 204.

Arguably, the Gospels need to be re-interpreted from a woman's perspective in order to arrive at exegesis that is more comprehensive and well researched in light of the relevant and prevalent issues in our twenty-first century. An appreciation of past methods of interpretations can help distinguish proper exegesis from socially motivated ones.

How can the true intention of God's message in Scripture be discerned? An interpreter must not disturb the integrity of a text as the social conditions continue to evolve. The challenge of determining an accurate self-disclosure of God is one that must be addressed in deciphering God's message. Rosemary Radford Ruether has identified what she calls the critical principle of feminist theology.<sup>14</sup> "Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine."<sup>15</sup> Ruether speaks of a critical prophetic tradition in scripture that continually strives to correct the "sacred canopy" or status quo of destructive institution inherent in the narrative of the Bible.<sup>16</sup> A feminist hermeneutical approach is, according to Ruether, merely another means of critiquing the institutions that have been marginalizing to women.

Barlas suggests that three principles are present in God's authentic self-disclosure. Divine Unity, Justness, and Incomparability ensure an egalitarian interpretation of Scripture. Divine Unity implies that God has sovereignty over all, and no intermediary (such as a man over a woman) can come between an

---

<sup>14</sup> Siker, Jeffrey S., *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 195.

<sup>15</sup> Ruether, Rosemary Radford, as cited in Siker, p. 195.

<sup>16</sup> Siker, p. 174.

individual and their relationship with God. The next principle, Justness, represents the idea that God's word could never do injustice to an individual, therefore prohibiting the devaluation of women. Finally, the principle of Incomparability rejects the application of the divine representation in gender related imagery. God simply cannot be likened to anything we can comprehend, so obviously any designation of male attributes to God is inaccurate. Reification of gender imagery amounts to idolatry since God is incomparable. These principles, when used in conjunction with a holistic interpretation can yield meanings that adhere to the integrity inherent in the text itself.<sup>17</sup>

The Catholic community has long recognized the multiplicity of meanings imbedded in Scripture. The meaning intended by the author of a text represents simply one level of understanding and the meaning appropriated by its readers is not limited by it, assuming authorial intent could even be determined. The concept of *sensus plenior* involves the idea of a "surplus of meaning" that Paul Ricoeur describes in his theory of hermeneutics, which scholars have been utilizing in recent decades.<sup>18</sup> Scripture in this understanding is no longer viewed as a container of meaning, but rather as a mediator of meaning, often revealed through a spiritual avenue. With that being said, the meanings extracted from Scripture are not limitless; they are limited necessarily by the text itself. Historical criticism is helpful in defining what possible meaning can truly be derived from a scriptural text.

---

<sup>17</sup> Barlas, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Gula, Richard M., "Using Scripture in Prayer and Spiritual Direction," *Spirituality Today*, Vol. 36, No. 4 ;Winter, 1984, p. 298.

The social environment of today is vastly different from any other in history. It is my intention to explore what Scripture, in particular the New Testament Gospels, can mean for women today. The integrity of Scripture as the revealed word of God surely must have something that speaks to humanity in our current context. What revelation can be uncovered that will speak to the issues that women are dealing with in the twenty-first century? I intend to identify meanings that the texts carry that may not have been recognized previously. By remaining true to the spirit of the texts, new perspectives may be uncovered in light of emerging issues in our modern world.

I propose to employ Gospels from the Christian tradition in an effort to recover meanings that may have been overlooked due to an outmoded and limited hermeneutical paradigm. Women as ideal models of discipleship exist in the text of the Gospels. Skewed images of particular New Testament figures have evolved that are far from the parameters set by the text itself. These figures have been suppressed or altered as a result of limited socio-cultural interpretive frameworks. Our evolving conception of the equality of humanity necessitates a contemporary reading of Scripture to reclaim the integrity of its female leaders. I will address models of discipleship in the gospels from a female perspective. The restoration of these figures must reflect both an egalitarian hermeneutics and textual integrity.

I will explore what these narratives about female pioneers in Christianity can represent to women today. The common quest for validation in their respective traditions is one that women of many religions share. Historically women have been the double losers in that they have been at the bottom of every oppressed group (e.g. black women have been

marginalized in the past by being both black *and* women).<sup>19</sup> Having endured centuries of oppressive patriarchal scriptural exegesis, women from many religious backgrounds have a similar struggle. They yearn to have a voice that is heard in their own tradition. Within the sacred Scriptures of the Gospels are visions of inspiration that can speak to women of the twenty-first century. In particular, the models of female discipleship can empower the female population universally if the religious texts and traditions are stripped of the unsubstantiated marginalizing myths, and are interpreted in a modern day context. The message exists; it is just waiting to be revealed.

---

<sup>19</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, p. 182.



## **Part II: Models of Discipleship**

*“Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” (Mk 14:9)*

*“And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.” (Matt 14:2)*

*Discipleship: the following of Jesus by women and men of faith. Discipleship is the whole matrix of activities and values that derive from close association with Jesus.*

-Encyclopedia of Catholicism, p. 420

In the gospel of Mark it is reported that Jesus proclaimed that “she” would be remembered wherever the good news was told because of her actions.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, either through intention or neglect, this woman that impressed Jesus so much has been forgotten. What she has done has not been valued in those places where the good news is proclaimed. Ironically, we do not even know who “she” was. She does not even have a name. It is a disservice to the Christian tradition that the identity and action of this woman has been lost. How many other voices and deeds of women have been lost, forgotten, or skewed over the past centuries? I suppose we will never know.

Women were not even counted as persons back in first century Palestine, as illustrated in the comment from Matthew’s Gospel above. They clearly represented the marginalized in their society. In light of this situation, the regard and respect that Jesus exhibited toward women in the gospel accounts of the New Testament is truly remarkable. The Kingdom of God that Jesus envisioned involved a reversal of the

---

<sup>20</sup> For further discussion of a feminist reconstructive framework for interpretation, see Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*.

current social structures and a new vision of who would qualify as members of this family (Mk 3:35, Matt 12:49-50, Lk 8:21).

It is our duty as Christians to honor the memory of all of those who have served as model disciples of Christ. We are called not to simply remember them, but remember them with integrity and accuracy to the best of our capabilities. The woman who anointed Jesus in Mark's gospel may forever remain nameless, but other courageous and faithful women of the gospels deserve to have their names, voices, and honor protected. I have taken it upon myself to retrieve the voices of these women who can no longer speak for themselves.

The word "disciple" has traditionally been associated with exclusively male figures, and often with the number twelve. I challenge the belief that only men were and are disciples of Christ. Multiple examples of women as disciples exist in the gospels, and through close examination of the texts involving them, their authentic value and contributions will become apparent. I will highlight three women as models of discipleship whose stories have sometimes been interpreted in ways that have stifled their potential as role models and leaders of Christianity.

Female models of discipleship emerge from figures whose scriptural integrity have been compromised through cultural influences and the perpetuation of inaccurate images. The misrepresentation of these women has occurred either intentionally or neglectfully to the detriment of the recognition of their true contribution to early Christianity. The Samaritan woman, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, are three women who present themselves as exemplary models of discipleship of Christ. What the three have in common is that their respective "character" has often been tainted by social and

cultural (mis)interpretation and eisegesis. Centuries of biblical interpretation by men have resulted in interpretations lacking in female perspective.

First century Palestinian culture may not have been prepared to accept fully its women as leaders and disciples. Now in the twenty-first century, as women have gained ground in most spheres of society, we are compelled to go back and retrieve the Christian models that have been ignored, overlooked, or misrepresented. Female voices that have been suppressed or silenced must be heard, which will allow for a more balanced analysis of the Gospels.

The figures of the Samaritan woman at the well, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene are all well known by most Christians. Yet, what exactly do most Christians know about them? Where has that knowledge come from? And how grounded are these images in the text of the New Testament Gospels? The Samaritan woman is frequently viewed as the sinful woman who changed her immoral ways when Jesus revealed that he knew of her illicit actions. Mary of Nazareth is often revered as the model of perfection, untouched by humanity's challenges. Mary Magdalene has been universally portrayed as a repentant prostitute. These popular images of these three women are not embedded in Scripture. They have been contrived through societal construction and imagination. They reflect the society's world-view over the course of many centuries. Their images have ebbed and flowed accordingly, sometimes in favorable ways, sometimes in derogatory ways. The bottom line is that their images have superseded the text of the New Testament. Meanings have been read into the text based on presuppositions of the individuals interpreting them.

Close examination of the biblical texts that describe these figures will reveal that they each have much, much more to offer modern women when they are stripped of the popular myths surrounding them. The Samaritan woman needs to be acknowledged for her exemplary discipleship, and not as merely a repentant sinner; the image of Mary needs to evolve from the idea of her as a passive vessel of purity to a conscientious human participant in the ministry of Jesus; and the perception of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute must be deconstructed as she is recognized as an apostle to the apostles.

I argue that the process of retrieving these women as models of discipleship necessitates two steps: first, one must deconstruct the cultural and social constructions of these women in order for the integrity of their images, as represented in the Gospels, to emerge. Secondly, one must re-appropriate them through the lens of a woman's perspective, retrieving meaning that may have been overlooked from the previous patriarchal hermeneutics. It will become apparent that the Samaritan woman at the well, Mary of Nazareth, and Mary Magdalene are represented in the New Testament gospels as exemplary models of discipleship for their belief, their actions and their loyalty in the face of many challenges. Christianity needs to recognize them for these accomplishments and the Church to identify them as representatives of ideal Christian discipleship. The inspiration they offer to women in the future of the Church is immense.

## *Chapter 2: The Samaritan Woman at the Well*

Recently when I was at church, the pericope of John 4:1-42 constituted the designated Gospel reading. A visiting priest from abroad (and not one of our usual presiders) subsequently based his homily on the passage. The sermon that ensued focused on the Samaritan woman at the well and her encounter with Jesus. As the monologue proceeded, I became very uncomfortable and gradually felt my blood rising and coloring my face. The plight of this “promiscuous and sinful” woman was being described, and emphasis placed on the need for her redemption. She eventually turned away from her wayward lifestyle and was offered forgiveness. Just wait a minute, I thought! Nowhere in this text is it mentioned that the Samaritan woman suffered from moral ineptitude. The story in John 4 does not concern itself with judgment of this particular woman’s history. Instead, the gist of the dialogue between Jesus and the woman at the well in Samaria revolves around the concept of coming to belief and evangelization of Christ’s message. The frustration I felt was a result of my reaction to what amounted to a misreading of the pericope about the Samaritan woman and an inadequate interpretation of the meaning of her interlude with Jesus.

I feel compelled to debunk such irresponsible and facile interpretations. This passage is commonly understood in a superficial manner universally. Like Mary Magdalene’s image as “prostitute”, the Samaritan woman’s image of a sinful woman in need of redemption is not validated in Scripture itself. Cultural presuppositions have colored analyses of the story of the Samaritan woman. As Christians, we are constantly called to examine the foundation upon which interpretations of Scripture are based and re-evaluate them when deemed necessary. Layers of misguided or skewed assumptions often mask

the integrity of figures whose stories have circulated for generations. Even though every person reads from her or his respective location and brings along their presuppositions to the text, the narrative about the Samaritan woman deserves to be properly situated within its historical-cultural context and narrative context. Such a reading proves the Samaritan woman to be a powerful model of women's discipleship.

In the gospel of John, there is much emphasis placed on the act of "believing". The Fourth Evangelist sums up his purpose in composing the Gospel when he states: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (Jn 20:30-31) This proclamation is directed toward the readers of the Gospel, however, the author illustrates its importance by highlighting the phenomenon of individuals coming to belief in Christ in the text itself. Transformation takes place when one evolves from a position of ignorance to a position of comprehending the identity of Jesus and *believing*. This transformation moves one step forward through the evangelization of Christ's message, which is a significant component of discipleship. The Samaritan woman at the well constitutes an important example of dramatic transformation and subsequent discipleship that unfolds in the gospel of John, chapter 4:1-42. The Samaritan woman is remarkable for her willingness to listen to Jesus (Jn 4:13-15), converse with him on theological issues (Jn 4:20), accept his message with faith (Jn 4:25), then eagerly proceed to spread the news with and among her fellow Samaritans (Jn 4:28-28).

An historical and literary analysis of the text allows for an authentic message to emerge. The traditional emphasis on the Samaritan woman at the well as a sinful woman

in need of redemption will be replaced by the crucial recognition of this woman's true contribution as a model disciple. The actions of this woman alone will support the argument that she is worthy to be called a disciple of Jesus and a model for Christian leadership. Her contribution as a model disciple of Christ will become apparent when the story of the woman at the well is reinterpreted from a perspective that retains the integrity of the text.

### ***Samaria***

Sandra Schneiders suggests that this story that takes place in Samaria was actually constructed after Samaritans had become involved in the Christian movement.<sup>21</sup> If that is the case, then the story is not likely to be historically accurate. Even though Luke makes references to the Samaritans in his Gospel (Lk 10:29-37; 17:11-19), there is no evidence that Jesus had personally exercised any ministry in Samaria.<sup>22</sup> The gospel of Matthew even goes so far as to prohibit travel to Samaria: "These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans"(Matt 10:5,6).<sup>23</sup> Why did the Fourth Evangelist include this story in his gospel? Very possibly, the Johannine community constructed the story about the Samaritan woman in order to present Samaritans as first hand witnesses to Christ. The spread of Christianity into the geographic local of Samaria after the death and resurrection of Jesus may have prompted the inclusion of the narrative of John 4:1-42 in

---

<sup>21</sup> Schneiders, Sandra. *Written That You May Believe*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999, p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Lockwood, Peter F. "The Woman at the Well: Does the Traditional Reading Still Hold Water?" *Lutheran Theological Journal*. Adelaide: May 2002. Vol. 36, Iss. 1;p. 4.

the fourth gospel, according to Schneiders.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the conversion of the “half-pagan”<sup>25</sup> Samaritans and their willingness to welcome Jesus to stay with them contrasts with the often inadequate faith of the people of Jerusalem and their reliance on miracles for belief. The Samaritans come to faith in a way that supersedes any fear of scandal that interaction with a Jew would incite. This story presented an opportunity as well for the author of John’s Gospel to bring up the theme of liturgical worship and the importance of place of worship. Jesus confirms that the nature of true worship of God is in truth and Spirit (Jn 4:24). Finally, the transformation of the foreign Samaritans offers a chance for Jesus to be declared the Savior of the world, moving beyond the understanding of him as Messiah for the Jews.<sup>26</sup> The story of the Samaritan woman constitutes a reflection of the theological objectives of the author as well as the Johannine community.

Considered by Sandra Schneiders as a representative figure, the Samaritan woman may be symbolic of the Samaritans who come to Jesus through the witness of the Johannine community.<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that she is never addressed by a proper name, but only referenced through her designation as a woman of Samaria. She is known only as a foreigner and “other” through her identification as a woman and a non-Jewish “outsider”. Jesus’ acceptance of this excluded group through the story of the woman at the well demonstrates the valid claim of the Samaritans to be witnesses to Christ, and God’s acceptance of everyone as witnesses, despite their gender, nationality, or social status.

---

<sup>24</sup> Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, p. 134.

<sup>25</sup> Schnackenburg, Rudolf. *The Gospel According to St. John: Volume 1*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1968. p. 419.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, p. 189.



The Fourth Evangelist employs artistic literary techniques in his account of the revelation of God through the person of Jesus Christ. According to Schneiders: “Into the spare outline of the Johannine Jesus, the Fourth Evangelist has poured the entire revelation of the Word of God experienced in the words and deeds of the earthly Jesus.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, John has done his best to represent the essence of Jesus Christ and the transcendent nature of the Word of God through the liberal use of symbolism. A symbol contains what Schneiders calls a surplus of meaning; it carries more meaning than its superficiality communicates and mediates an encounter with a deeper reality.<sup>29</sup> While the story of the Samaritan woman may not be based on a factual account, it is a reflection of the Fourth Evangelist’s conviction that it is a valid representation of the nature of the historical Jesus. Regardless of its facticity, the story has much potential for rich meaning.

### ***Interpretations***

Interpretation of the story of the Samaritan woman at the well has taken many forms. The medieval portrait of the Samaritan woman was established primarily by the early Christian theologians John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo.<sup>30</sup> Her words are viewed as sincere and respectful, and her marital situation a tool to demonstrate her evolving enlightenment.<sup>31</sup> John Chrysostom emphasizes the patience and respect that the woman exhibited toward Jesus, a strange foreign man. He stresses that even though she understood Jesus at first simply on a literal level, she listened to him with kind

---

<sup>28</sup> Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> Farmer, Craig S. “Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman in Early Reformed Commentaries on John.” *Church History* 65.03. 2006, p. 366.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

indulgence despite the noonday heat. Chrysostom explains that Jesus calls for the woman's husband in order to disclose his own divine identity. That intention was realized in her recognition of who this man really was. John Chrysostom commends the Samaritan woman for initiating a religious conversation with Jesus. Augustine, as well, praises the evangelism of the Samaritan woman and offers her as an example for others preaching the gospel. His focus revolves around the woman as a symbol of Gentile inclusion in Christianity and her illumination of Jesus' identity. Her marital history is highlighted to illustrate the transformation she makes from carnal knowledge to spiritual insight.<sup>32</sup>

Over the centuries, the image of the Samaritan woman evolved, as seen in interpretations that have presented this woman as lacking in moral character; one whose life was filled with sinful actions.<sup>33</sup> I argue that there is no basis in Scripture to reach such a conclusion. Any negative portrayal of the woman at the well is purely a result of the interpreters' prejudice. Craig Farmer draws from examples of five early Reformed theologians to illustrate the negative focus placed on the morality of the Samaritan woman.<sup>34</sup> For example, he quotes Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) as saying a great consolation is found...in the fact that "a sinful woman, who had been the cause of ruin to many, was now made an apostle and preacher."<sup>35</sup> The focus on the rehabilitation of a promiscuous woman was the basis for her praise in the Reformation commentators' interpretation John 4:1-42.<sup>36</sup> They emphasized the grace and salvation offered by God to

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 366-368.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 366.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 374.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

her, rather than her own decision to believe in Jesus and initiate discipleship. Although the nature of her multiple relationships is opaque, there is no evidence to conclude that she was indeed a woman of inferior morals. Regardless of her private life, what matters most in the story of the Samaritan woman is her coming to belief and spreading the Word of God to her townspeople.

I call for a vindication of all the unjustly ostracized women in the gospels; those who have been sentenced to an eternity of social shame and marginalization through inappropriate interpretation. Both Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman belong to this category. Contrary to those who would condemn them, Jesus treated these women with the utmost respect and admiration; he did not place any negative moral judgments on the women. His example demands to be emulated. Instead, history has concerned itself with the projected details of their personal affairs, often overlooking the substantial contribution they made as witnesses to Christ.

Schneiders considers the character of the Samaritan woman to be "...a textbook case of the trivialization, marginalization, and even sexual demonization of biblical women, which reflects and promotes the parallel treatment of real women in the church."<sup>37</sup> There is no evidence of sexual promiscuity on the part of the Samaritan woman. As readers of the gospel, we are not informed of the reason behind her multiple marriages. The text does not say that she had been divorced five times, only that she has had five husbands, as Gail O'Day points out.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps her five husbands in turn each died, leaving her widowed multiple times. Possibly she found herself in a similar situation as Tamar, who

---

<sup>37</sup> Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, p. 137.

<sup>38</sup> Newsom, Carol A. and Ringe, Sharon H. editors. *Women's Bible Commentary*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p. 384.

in Genesis 38 was widowed various times by brothers, then shunned by the youngest brother in the family for fear of a similar fate.<sup>39</sup> The Samaritan woman, likewise, may have been a victim of the levirate marriage customs, with the last male in the family line refusing to marry her after his older siblings had died while being married to her. Jesus offers no judgment upon the Samaritan woman in regard to her multiple marriages. Recent scholars have referred to this woman as both a five-time loser and a tramp.<sup>40</sup> The prejudices of interpreters have been reflected back into the story, yet--importantly--unfavorable judgments are not inherent to the text itself. It is by pure speculation that this character's reputation has been tarnished throughout the years.

### ***Belief***

The core message of this encounter revolves around Jesus' trust in the woman at the well and in her openness, loyalty, and leadership in the face of his remarkable revelation. This is where the focus of this passage needs to be anchored. The Samaritan woman proves her value as an evangelical witness to the Word of God and deserves to be recognized for her discipleship aside from any condescending labels applied to her erroneously. Her coming to belief is consistent with the whole of the Fourth Gospel and validates the integrity of her transformation. In order to comprehend the full and rich meaning behind this story, an interpretative undertaking must remove itself from socially motivated biases and approach the text with an egalitarian perspective. The story of the Samaritan woman merits acceptance for what her actions truly reveal her to be: a model

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 384.

for discipleship of Christ. She is someone who offers inspiration to all people, regardless of gender, nationality, or social status.

The evolution of the Samaritan woman's transformation is evident in the way she addresses Jesus. When first approached by him for water, she addresses him curtly as a Jew (Jn 4:9). She is suspicious of his insinuation that he may be greater than the ancestor Jacob. She clearly was familiar with the history of that particular well and the significance of its continued supply of fresh water for the village. Initially the woman interprets this living water as something literal (Jn 4:11). After Jesus explains to her the nature of this living water, she gradually suspects it to be something much more (Jn 4:15). As Jesus begins to mysteriously divulge his identity and reveal what he knows about her, she calls him a prophet (Jn 4:19). The supernatural knowledge that he demonstrates informs her that he is not just an ordinary man. This inspires her to question him regarding the practice of worship (Jn 4:20). Finally, when she admits that she is waiting for the Christ and suspects he might be the awaited Messiah, Jesus echoes the divine proclamation, "I am He" (Jn 4:26). The transformation is realized at this point, and the woman (moving from surface to depth) abandons her water jar and goes to tell the villagers the good news (Jn 4:28-29). She is a reliable evangelist because the Samaritans believed in Jesus on the basis of the woman's testimony (Jn 4:39). They eventually mature in their faith in Jesus through hearing him themselves, which is consistent with the development of coming to belief in the Fourth Gospel (Jn 4:42).<sup>41</sup> She accomplishes what a true disciple aspires to: facilitating the transformation of others.

---

<sup>41</sup> Newsom, p. 385.

Jesus was invited to abide with them, and was soon recognized as the “Savior of the World” (Jn 4 :42).

Within the narrative itself, the placement of this story is meaningful. The meeting that Jesus had with the Samaritan woman provides a stark contrast to the meeting that Jesus had in the previous chapter with Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-10). She was an outsider; a woman no less, from a community despised by the Jews, while Nicodemus was a man of high ranking; a respected Jewish official (Jn 3:1). The meeting at the well occurred at high noon in plain view at a spot frequented regularly by villagers (Jn 4:6). Conversely, Nicodemus secretly met with Jesus during the cover of nighttime, fearful of being discovered (Jn 3:2). Followers such as he became known as “secret believers” because they believed in Jesus, but were not willing to risk the consequences involved with public announcement of it.<sup>42</sup> The Samaritan woman steadfastly grew in her faith in Jesus, and was loyal to his word by sharing the truth he revealed to her. She was so excited about her encounter that she spread the news of her visitor to the townspeople of Samaria (Jn 4:28-29). In comparison to the half-hearted commitment of Nicodemus, the solid belief exhibited by the woman at the well is remarkable. The presentation of such an apparent unlikely candidate for discipleship is evidence that the discipleship of Christ is made available to *everyone*.

Jesus reveals himself to this woman as the awaited Messiah, and in response, the Samaritan woman immediately leaves her water jar, echoing the apostles Simon Peter and Andrew in following the command of Jesus to leave their fishing nets, and spreads the word of God (Matthew 4:18-20). In a certain sense, she surpasses the apostles

---

<sup>42</sup> Culpepper, R. Alan. *The Gospel and Letters of John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 135.

because she voluntarily abandons her water jar, while the apostles drop their nets only when asked to by Jesus.<sup>43</sup> She apparently no longer needed to quench her thirst with water from the well, since she now had “living water” from Jesus (Jn 4:13-15). I find it ironic that while the Samaritan woman had abandoned her water jar and was spreading the news of Jesus as the living water, the male disciples were busy concerning themselves with physical nourishment. She was willing to forego reliance upon her physical needs once she learned of the eternal gift of life that Jesus offered her. The male disciples, on the other hand, through their preoccupation with bodily hunger seemed to lack the true conviction that Jesus would provide for their every need. Even when Jesus informs them that he has food that they do not know about, they only understand him on a superficial level, oblivious to the meaning of mission that Jesus intended.

The male disciples were shocked at the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, more so because she was a *woman* than even a resident of Samaria. Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies due to the disagreement they had regarding the correct place of worship. Samaritans worshipped at their shrine on Mount Gerizim, while the Jews worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem. The break between the Jews and Samaritans is first noted in 2 Kings chapter 17:24-34:<sup>44</sup> “The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities...So they worshipped the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. To this day they continue to practice their former customs.”

---

<sup>43</sup> Farmer, p. 367.

<sup>44</sup> Newsom, p 383.

Given the low regard the Jews had for Samaritans, the male disciples viewed this woman with abhorrence. They seemed horrified that a woman would receive such attention and consideration from Jesus (Jn 4:27). The contrast between the Samaritan woman's behavior and that of the male disciples is striking in this passage. It subverts conventional expectations and presents a scenario that is remarkable for its first century context. It serves to reinforce the welcoming and inclusive attitude that Jesus modeled for all. The unvoiced objections of the disciples concerning Jesus' encounter with a woman may even suggest that they suspected inappropriate intentions on the part of their leader. Once again, this suspicion illustrates their lack of faith and loyalty, particularly in contrast to the strength of character the woman at the well displays. She in no way attempted to rebuke the statement that the man she was living with was not her husband. She focused her attention on the remarkable knowledge that Jesus had of her life. Jey Kanagaraj writes: "Definitely the Fourth Evangelist exalts a despised Samaritan woman to the rank of a theologian, apostle and missionary, while he pictures the male disciples mostly as inactive, timid and slow in understanding."<sup>45</sup>

It was the knowledge of "everything she had ever done" that opened up the possibility to the woman that Jesus may very well be a prophet, or something even more (Jn 4:17-19). The self-revelation that Jesus graced the woman with, not the details of her questionable past constitutes the significant aspect of her encounter with Jesus at the well. Jesus reveals to the woman "everything she ever did" for the primary purpose of gaining

---

<sup>45</sup> Kanagaraj, Jey J. "The Profiles of Women in John: House-Bound or Christ-Bound?" *ERT* (2003) 27:1, 27-46, p. 35.



her trust and supporting his claim of his identity.<sup>46</sup> It was not for the purpose of judging or embarrassing her. First, it reveals that Jesus has the ability to know all things. Secondly, it offers a way for the woman to grow in her recognition of who this man really was; hence, her labeling him as “prophet”.<sup>47</sup> Her conversation with Jesus is from the very first moment theologically loaded. She makes no effort to distract Jesus from questioning her dubious sex life, but rather engages him in a conversation regarding Jewish practices and tradition (Jn 4:12). After recognizing the importance of this man Jesus, the Samaritan woman inquires about the location where true worship occurs, i.e., the inflamed point of contention between Jews and Samaritans (Jn 4:20). This woman was intelligently seeking to verify the identity of Jesus in this discussion and get his perspective on an important theological issue. The ensuing conversation proved that the woman is a suitable disciple since she grasps the identity and mission of Christ. He deemed her worthy enough to engage her in a conversation so meaningful that it inspired a transformation. Jey Kanagoaraj asserts: “The woman did in advance what the apostles will do after Jesus’ departure. Thus John gives the Samaritan woman apostolic status”.<sup>48</sup> In true apostolic fashion, the woman at the well *listened, believed, and shared* the amazing message she received from the Messiah. The rewards of the harvest (the transformation of the villagers) were sown by the Samaritan woman with her proclamation of the identity of Jesus and paved the way for the future mission of the

---

<sup>46</sup> Kysar, Robert. *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: John*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> Newsom, p. 384.

<sup>48</sup> Kanagaraj, p. 34.

apostles.<sup>49</sup> The fourth evangelist clearly felt comfortable presenting a woman so favorably, perhaps reflecting female discipleship in the Johannine community.

The biblical scholar Jerome Neyrey maintains that it is necessary as we look at the scene at the well to ask ourselves, “What is wrong with this picture?”<sup>50</sup> Women and men had certain cultural expectations in their gender-divided world, as we do today. The ancient ordering of the world into the public and private spheres was overtly recognized, then broken down intentionally by the author of John 4, according to Neyrey.<sup>51</sup> The shock of a man and women meeting in a public space in broad daylight would have resulted in a response of disbelief. The interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well represents a complete reversal of expectations and values in its context. The act of conversing in which Jesus engages the woman was scandalous. Jewish rabbis did not normally speak with women in public.<sup>52</sup> The woman herself draws attention to the inappropriateness of Jesus’ request by her comment, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jn 4:9) The custom that women were expected to be silent in public adds to the inappropriateness of the conversation between the woman at the well and Jesus, and the ensuing dialogue she had with the men of the village.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, since Jesus had no bucket, he would have had to use the vessel of the Samaritan. This would have been a shocking thing to do.<sup>54</sup> The male disciples confirm the scandalous action of Jesus conversing with a Samaritan woman in their silent

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Neyrey, Jerome. "What's Wrong With This Picture? John 4, Cultural Stereotypes of Women, and Public and Private Space." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 (1994).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 1.2.

<sup>52</sup> Newsom, p. 383.

<sup>53</sup> Neyrey, p. 2.4.

<sup>54</sup> Newsom, p. 383.

astonishment (Jn 4:27). Jesus' actions exhibit his principle that salvation holds no boundaries. He crosses many social boundaries in his public discourse with a woman from Samaria. Social conventions of the day, thus, did not come between an individual and the grace of God.

### ***Symbolism***

The well was at the center of the lives of the ancient Israelites.<sup>55</sup> The water it provided meant life for the villagers and travelers alike, and its location was a gathering place for townspeople. Jesus and the Samaritan women met not only at a well, but at Jacob's well (Jn 4:6). The identification of this particular well as being that of the highly revered ancestor Jacob serves to add emphasis to the symbolic meaning of Jesus' meeting with the woman from Samaria. The significance of this meeting place cannot be overlooked. The image of two individuals, a man and a woman, meeting at a well has come to be known as a "type scene."<sup>56</sup> It is a scene that has occurred over and over again with a specific pattern, and has become symbolic in nature. Isaac, Jacob and Moses all meet their future wives at a well.<sup>57</sup> Their meeting at the famous well where Jacob and Rachel first met foreshadows the future that awaits them. The fact that Jesus is a man and the Samaritan is a woman is overtly emphasized. An impending bride and bridegroom analogy is suggested by this location, unveiled through a symbolic interpretation of this passage.

---

<sup>55</sup> Dumm, Demetrius R. *A Mystical Portrait of Jesus*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001, p. 106

<sup>56</sup> Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, p. 135.

<sup>57</sup> Conway, Colleen M. *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999, p. 103.

Sandra Schneiders has offered an interpretation of this scene that reveals Jesus as the true bridegroom and the Samaritan woman as his bride.<sup>58</sup> As the new “Israel” Jesus has come to take his bride Samaria (represented by the woman) into union with the rest of the Christian community. Her five husbands are not meant to be understood literally, but in a symbolic way, according to Schneiders.<sup>59</sup> Each is meant to represent one of the five false gods that Samaria has worshipped. (2 Kings 17:24-34) The one that she lived with, that was identified as not being her husband, represents the incomplete relationship that the community had with God of the covenant.<sup>60</sup> It was a relationship lacking in integrity and not based on comprehensive knowledge. The marital challenges of the woman, therefore, parallel the turbulent colonial history of Samaria under the invading Assyrians and the false gods that they worshipped.<sup>61</sup> Appropriating the text in this regard eliminates any association of the Samaritan woman and illicit behavior. Her representation as the bride of Christ elevates her status and makes her analogous to the church of which all believers are a part.

Most Johannine commentators have preferred the interpretation of the five husbands as a strictly literal one, thus falling in the trap that the woman at the well fell into initially in her conversation with Jesus.<sup>62</sup> It reflects the initial simplistic level of their conversation and ignores the secondary dimensions that emerge with the Samaritan woman’s gradual insight into the meaning of Jesus’ message. Stephen Moore writes:

---

<sup>58</sup> Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, p. 141.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>60</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, p. 139-140.

<sup>61</sup> Lockwood, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Moore, Stephen D., “*Are There Impurities in the Living Water that the Johannine Jesus Dispenses? Deconstruction, Feminism, and the Samaritan Woman*”, *Biblical Interpretation* 1, 2 (1993), p. 212.

“The standard reading of 4:18 conceals a double standard, then. To interpret Jesus literally is a failing when the woman does it, but not when the commentators follow suit.”<sup>63</sup>

Both Moore and Schneiders have been accused of erring in the opposite direction of the literalists.<sup>64</sup> John’s consistent and deliberate use of ambiguity and double-entendres might be lost when one disregards the literal meaning of Jesus’ words and the historical significance of the story.<sup>65</sup> It is evident that the troubled political and religious past of Samaria is mirrored in the woman’s troubled marital history. Whether one accepts a symbolic interpretation of the five husbands or not, the focus of the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman clearly does not revolve around her marital situation. Instead, it centers on Jesus’ mission, the meaning of which is crystallized in Jesus’ self-revelation.

What can this reinterpreted message say to women today, in the twenty-first century? I believe that it supports the notion that women are and have been fully capable of egalitarian discipleship in the church. This passage validates women in a role that has been traditionally reserved for men. In his argument for the ordination of women, Peter Lockwood makes in the following astute observation:

It is frequently argued that the public ministry should be reserved for males because Jesus only called men to be his disciples. It is worth noting in John’s gospel how faintly the line of demarcation is drawn between the band of Twelve and the wider circle called to follow Jesus ... there is only one person

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Lockwood, “The Woman at the Well: Does the Traditional Reading Still Hold Water?” *Lutheran Theological Journal*. Adelaide: May 2002. Volume 36, Issue 1; pg. 12, 13 pgs., p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

– the Samaritan woman – through whose word a group of people is actually said to come to faith (4:39)... There is no room for any kind of arbitrary distinction.<sup>66</sup>

I believe that the Samaritan Woman provides a model for not only all women, but for all Christians. She represents the “other” that society rejects, but whom Jesus fully and unconditionally accepts. Re-evaluating her role in this passage is important because it validates women’s eligibility for the salvation that Jesus offers. She demonstrates the “believing” that John implores us to undertake and the initiative and enthusiasm for spreading Jesus’ good news. The leadership and loyalty of the Samaritan woman illustrate a solid example of Christian discipleship that can inspire modern readers of the Gospel. She epitomizes the transformative openness, belief, and action that Christ calls all of us to engage in, particularly through the words of the Fourth Evangelist.

---

<sup>66</sup> Lockwood, p. 7.

### ***Chapter 3: Mary the Mother of Jesus***

As the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene's image have been colored unfavorably by the remembrance of them as promiscuous and immoral women, the image of the other Mary, Mary of Nazareth and mother of Jesus, has experienced the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction. She may even be considered the antithesis of Mary Magdalene. The image of the Virgin Mary as Queen, regally situated in her throne high above the plane of ordinary people, surrounded by a glorious brilliant halo is one that many of us have encountered. She has been placed high upon a pedestal, and revered as the sinless mother of God by the masses of her humble servants over the centuries. As common as this portrait is of Mary, it does not tell the whole story about the actual woman that lived on this earth in the first century in Palestine and all that she endured as a result of her role as the mother of Jesus of Nazareth. The portrait of the poor, uneducated, young girl that first said "yes" to God has been eclipsed by the portrait of the post-resurrection glorified mother of God, far removed from the mundane existence of a struggling young mother in a society filled with political turmoil and persecution.

Many factors contributed to the evolution of Mary's image over the years. The emergence of Gnosticism in the second century influenced the trajectory that the image of Mary would take. This movement exalted the spiritual aspect of life and denigrated the attributes of the physical body. Although Gnosticism was eventually labeled heretical by the church fathers, many of its tenets were widely accepted in the manifestation of popular and "mainstream" piety. Virginity was touted as a superior lifestyle to the sexuality associated with married life. The monastic life became enthusiastically embraced. The development of ascetism affected Mariology in two ways. First, it strove

to remove any connection to sexuality from the birth of Jesus, and secondly, it exalted the virginity of Mary as a sign of the ideal calling of Christianity.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, when Christianity became established as the official church of the empire in the late fourth century, many of its new converts incorporated devotion to their “pagan” goddesses into their new religion. A commonly depicted portrait of the infant Jesus seated on his mother’s lap was possibly modeled after the image of the god-king Horus as a baby seated on the lap of his mother, the Egyptian goddess Isis.<sup>68</sup>

In addition, in the early centuries of the burgeoning church the true nature of Jesus was debated and developed in relationship to the emerging Christological formulations. The Christological formula that was agreed upon eventually would determine the way that Mary, his mother, would be referred to. The Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus in the year 431 resolved the debate over the title of Mary even though the terminology of Christ’s nature was still being developed.<sup>69</sup> As the mother of Jesus, Mary was afforded the title of *Theotokos*, or God-bearer. The alternate position held by Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, was that Mary should be called *Christotokos*, meaning the mother of Christ. That competing viewpoint limited the designation of Mary as mother of Christ’s humanity and not his divinity.

Gradually, the image of this woman as *Theotokos* elevated the memory of her, and before long the aura of her role as the mother of the divine along with visions of her as a goddess eclipsed the humanity of the poor young girl who was first identified in the

---

<sup>67</sup> Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Mary – The Feminine Face of the Church*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977, p. 54.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>69</sup> Fiorenza, Francis Schussler, and Galvin, John P. eds. *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, p. 267.



gospels as simply Mary the betrothed of Joseph from of Nazareth. Christian imagination, excessive emphasis on her chasteness as a virgin and the image of her as the passive vessel of the Messiah have overshadowed the memory of the struggle that Mary endured as an oppressed woman in her society and the active role she played in facilitating the reversal of her socio-political situation as the mother of Jesus. Out of this long-forgotten perspective a spark of inspiration emerges for the marginalized and oppressed.

It is my intention to reclaim the Mary that is portrayed in the Gospels by the evangelists, and invoke the memory of her as an active participant in salvation history and a model disciple for contemporary Christians. According to the evangelist Luke, a genuine disciple is identified as one who hears the word of God and acts upon it.<sup>70</sup> Mary is therefore recognized as a qualified candidate. I propose redefining Mary by looking past her image as a mere supernatural icon and vessel of purity so that a truer image of this woman will emerge. An investigation into the person of Mary of Nazareth, as presented in the New Testament gospels, will provide us with a rehabilitated Mary and a model of Christian discipleship to whom women in particular can aspire. Appropriating a more comprehensive portrait of Mary is called for, and will reflect the courageous, young girl that she was reported to be.

In the four Gospels of the New Testament, Mary is represented in thirteen scenes where she speaks, takes action, or is described as a central protagonist. In Mark's Gospel, she is referred to just briefly. Mary makes appearances in the gospel of Matthew, but he never gives her words to speak or her own point of view. Consequently, my focus will be

---

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, Elizabeth, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 248.

on the passages presented by the evangelists Luke and John who each present Mary in more substantial ways.<sup>71</sup>

The Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38) and the Song of Mary (or the Magnificat) (Lk 1:46-55) in the gospel of Luke, the Wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-11) and the scene at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:25-27) in the gospel of John provide beautiful insights into the person of Mary of Nazareth and will be the primary focus of my examination of her character.

### ***The Annunciation***

The text reveals that Mary was approached by Gabriel, an angel of God, to announce that she had found favor with God (Lk 1:26-28). Mary was not sure what this greeting meant, and she carefully thought about what the angel had said (Lk 1:29). She was reassured that she had nothing to fear and was told that she would conceive and bear a son whose name would be Jesus (Lk 1:30-31). He would not be just any ordinary child; he would be great, inheriting the throne of his ancestor David (Lk 1:32). In this passage, Mary is identified by the evangelist as being a virgin three times (Lk 1:27, 34). The designation of “virgin” served to affirm the conception of Jesus through God’s spirit and not through any physical relationship with a man. She was betrothed to a man named Joseph, but had not yet begun to live with him. The betrothal was actually the first stage of a legal marriage in which a young girl continued to live at home with her parents until the time of puberty when she was ready to move into the home of her husband and begin her conjugal duties. Mary questioned how she could possibly conceive a child since she was a virgin (Lk 1:34). The angel Gabriel explained that the Holy Spirit would come

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.210.

upon her and she would be overshadowed by the Most High. He then revealed that her child would be holy; he would be called the Son of God (Lk 1:35). An unbelievable event was about to occur; yet nothing was impossible with God (Lk 1:37). Mary accepted this gift bestowed upon her by God and consented to this awesome task. She faithfully replied, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1: 38).

Traditional interpretations assume that Mary’s virginity represented a message to women to abstain from sexual relationships. I propose that her virginity is meaningful only when viewed in relationship to the conception of Jesus. It cannot be construed as a favored state for women, or even men for that matter. Mary’s chasteness confirms that God alone was responsible for the child that she conceived. Rosemary Radford Ruether explains, “There is no suggestion in the New Testament that the virgin birth implies some special superiority of virginity over marriage or that sexual relations are evil. In other words, the virgin birth is a statement about Jesus, not about Mary.”<sup>72</sup>

In 1988 Pope John Paul II issued an encyclical addressing the dignity and vocation of women, specifically referencing Mary the Mother of God. In it he states, “the Blessed Virgin came first as an imminent and singular exemplar of both virginity and motherhood.”<sup>73</sup> The description that John Paul II gives the mother of Jesus nullifies any hope for Mary to serve as a role model for young women in the Church today. As the “Virgin Mother”, Mary floats high above humanity. The emphasis placed on her representation as the ideal woman creates a model that is unachievable for any woman.

---

<sup>72</sup> Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Mary – The Feminine Face of the Church*, Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977, p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> John Paul II, “Mulieris Dignitatem” (On the Vocation and Dignity of Women), August 15, 1988.

“As Ruether notes, the Mary of official church teaching has been Mary the docile and obedient virgin who in turn has become a patriarchal model that the androcentric church has extolled as embodying (or disembodiment) the highest calling for women, namely to be virgin, mother, and wife (preferably all three),” Jeffrey Siker points out.<sup>74</sup> The term “virgin mother” is an oxymoron, and one that contemporary women will never be able to emulate.

Yes, as Christians we believe that Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus. Yet the state of her virginity merely served to prove that no man was involved in the conception of Jesus. It was an event purely involving Mary and the Holy Spirit. The focus on Mary’s virginity in the gospels was for the purpose of illustrating that Jesus was indeed the offspring of God and that no human male was involved. If anything, her virginity speaks to women of the validity of being independent of any male superiority. The only relationship that ruled Mary’s life was that with God. Likewise, Mary’s obedience to God has been falsely utilized to justify patriarchal claims by fundamentalists that it represents the importance of a woman’s obedience to her husband. However, the only obedience modeled by Mary is her obedience to God. No male authority mediated her divine pact. Mary presents a model for both men and women to place a relationship with God above all human relationships.

A young girl, just barely betrothed, being asked to conceive and bear a child who would be called “Son of the Most High” and would ultimately have a kingdom with no end (Lk 1:33) is quite a tall order! It is very likely that Mary asked herself, “Why me?”

---

<sup>74</sup> Siker, Jeffrey S., *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 181.

and “How can this really happen?” By all appearances, this scenario must have seemed inconceivable to Mary. How would her husband and family respond to this news? It presented a responsibility that would require the utmost of faith and courage. Yet Mary took a deep breath... put all her faith in God...and said “Yes, I trust in you God, no matter what the outcome will be!” (Lk 1:38).

Luke presents Mary as an independent agent, partnering with God in redeeming humanity.<sup>75</sup> The empowerment this image provides supersedes the patriarchal supremacy that pervades the biblical era. A woman could be encouraged by Mary’s example to singularly trust in the voice of God and the unique relationship they have with each other. Elizabeth Johnson offers an inspiring perspective on this scene when she says, “The memory that this young woman’s decision is not a passive, timid reaction but a free and autonomous act encourages and endorses women’s efforts to take responsibility for their own lives.”<sup>76</sup> Rather than merely going along with instructions provided for her by a male authority figure, Mary was validated by given a choice to accept or not to accept the challenge presented to her by God. The message that this viewpoint provides is quite powerful. Johnson offers hope with her comment, “This picture of a young woman courageously committing herself in turn may provide an excellent means of conveying to girls that there is something in them that no man can touch; that belongs only to them, and to God.”<sup>77</sup>

According to Elizabeth Johnson, Luke artistically employs the convention of literary structure in illustrating Mary’s commission as a prophet by God. The literary structure of

---

<sup>75</sup> Ruether, *Mary – The Feminine Face of the Church*, p. 33.

<sup>76</sup> Johnson, Elizabeth, *Truly Our Sister*, p.257.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.257.

a birth announcement and the commissioning of a prophet both contain five standard elements. First, a messenger of God arrives with a greeting. Then, the individual responds with a fear to this unexpected visitor: consolation is provided with encouragement to not be afraid. Thirdly, God's intentions are announced, and fourthly, the message is questioned. Finally, divine reassurance is received. By revealing these elements in the birth announcement of Jesus, Johnson reveals a correlation between Mary and the whole history of Israel. Mary becomes grounded in this history, and therefore shares the same status as prophets such as Moses and Abraham. Johnson states, "Biblical scholars point out that in this scene she is engaged for a prophetic task, one in a long line of God-sent deliverers positioned at significant junctures in Israel's history." This extraordinary woman was chosen to reveal God's plan on earth.<sup>78</sup>

Mary can be viewed, therefore, not simply as the vessel that produced Jesus, but also in the exalted status as a prophet who was called to accomplish God's purposes for God's people and a model disciple. She heard the word of God and responded affirmatively. She was a poor young girl (a lowly and inconsequential position in this society), and was chosen none-the-less to become the mother of God! She represents the power of the divine over any socially constructed hierarchy. Mary can become, then, a model of hope for the exaltation of the marginalized in society.

The common image of Mary as the ever pious and subservient woman is one that has been retroactively reinserted into the understanding of Christian origins, since it resonated with the patriarchal objectives to preserve the status quo in terms of gender relations. One might argue that if Mary was the mother of God, then she must have been

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.248-249.

holy and perfect. God certainly would not have taken residence in an imperfect or impure human being. My response would be that, ironically, it was a lowly and ordinary person that God purposefully sought out to prove his intention of inclusion of the marginalized and salvation for all. The chosen mother of the Messiah was not royalty or a revered woman of prosperity and high ranking. Just as Jesus sought out the outcast members of society such as the poor, the sick, women, and tax collectors, God sought out an ordinary individual who was part of the lowest and oppressed rung on the social stratum to bear the Savior of the world. Mary's decision to accept the challenge offered to her as well as her active participation in God's plan elevated her status as a model disciple.

### ***Mary's Song***

Early on in his gospel, Luke sets the tone for his notion of salvation as reversal with The Song of Mary or the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). It reveals that "God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (Lk 1:48). The Song of Mary represents the longest passage to be voiced by a woman in the entire New Testament. It is a song of joy and praise, modeled after the canticle of Hannah in the book of Samuel.<sup>79</sup> In a complete reversal of expectations, God has invested his full and complete trust in a person who has the unfavorable attributes of being young, poor, unknown, and a woman. Mary has been graced as the chosen mother of God's son.

In first-century Palestine, Messianic expectations were high, partly in response to the untenable political situation. Jesus did not fit the image of royalty that was expected of

---

<sup>79</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 41.

the awaited Messiah. This new King was not born into riches and power, as many had anticipated, but unto a poor carpenter's wife in a stable with questions about his paternity looming large. Shepherds, not royalty, would revere his birth. As Mary proclaims in the Magnificat, "He has...lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53). In the Hellenistic period in which Luke's gospel was written, the division between the rich and the poor was great. "The elite regarded themselves as morally superior to the rest...those of lowly birth and status. The aristocracy continually reminded the others of their superior position, and the law discriminated positively in their favor," explains Philip Esler.<sup>80</sup>

Luke redefines what it means to be in God's favor with the Magnificat. One who is faithful, obedient, and hungry for mercy will be blessed with his salvation, while the people blind with wealth, power, and complacency, refusing to repent, would be sent away empty. On the lips of Mary, then, Luke places the canticle that will set the stage for the ministry of Jesus and the salvation that will be offered to all people, regardless of social status. Mary epitomizes the lowly ones who will be the recipients of God's grace. Mary becomes the messenger to all of the coming of God's kingdom with her proclamation of the Magnificat. This Song of Mary subversively reflects the socio-political sentiment of the day and offers hope to the marginalized. David Tiede sums it up succinctly when he states, "The social, economic, and political consequences of this impending birth are profound. No dimension of human life or culture will lie beyond the

---

<sup>80</sup> Esler, Philip Francis, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 172.



lordship of this Messiah.”<sup>81</sup> Through the words of the Magnificat Mary offers hope to the disenfranchised and stands as a model for all those who strive for a better existence.

In her song of praise and prophecy, Mary represents the personification of all of Israel.<sup>82</sup> The grace and mercy bestowed upon her symbolize the gifts that God has bestowed upon God’s people, Israel. As God protected and guided them, God will continue to reverse the status quo and exalt the lowly, this time through the person of Mary and her son Jesus. As spokesperson for the world of the marginalized, Mary is portrayed as prophet and model disciple, spreading the message of God’s intention to anyone who will listen. This portrait of Mary is not the dreamy, ethereal, quiet woman portrayed in the plethora of artistic renderings. The common image of Mary as a passive, vessel of purity is starkly challenged in Mary’s conscientious, championing for the disadvantaged in her proclamation of the Magnificat. Elizabeth Johnson implores us to take notice, “Mary appears in its strains no longer as the sweet mother of traditional piety. She is now made to speak in concert with the oppressed wives and the famished mothers of the world.”<sup>83</sup> Once again, in the Song of Mary, Mary of Nazareth has provided an example for Christians, inviting them follow her lead as one who has heard the word of God and acted upon it.

### ***The Wedding at Cana***

In the gospel of John, the designation of miracles as “signs” implies that the meaning they impart has to do with revealing the identity of Jesus, that is, they point to something

---

<sup>81</sup> Tiede, David L. *Augsberg Commentary on the New Testament: Luke*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, p. 56.

<sup>82</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy, *Sacra Pagina*, p. 43.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, Elizabeth, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 270.

much more than what is seen on the surface.<sup>84</sup> The sign at Cana (Jn 2:1-11) is the first miracle recounted in the gospel of John, and the event that initiates the ministry of Jesus and reveals his glory to all present. Jesus assures us that he is in charge of his fate, and nothing will occur until his hour has come. It also introduces the complex imagery of water and wine that pervades John's gospel. The role of Mary in the first miracle is significant in its implications for women by providing a model for faithful discipleship of Christ.

At face value alone the sign of Jesus turning water into wine is quite remarkable. Jesus was alerted to a situation (running out of wine) and then made arrangements to remedy the situation for the benefit of the bride, the groom and the wedding guests (Jn 2:3,2:7). Not only did Jesus make this transformation happen, but the wine that was produced was superior to the wine that was previously served (Jn 2:10). This miracle that Jesus performed was a sign to those present of Jesus' authentic authority as the "Word of God"(Jn 2:11).

An intriguing statement that Jesus makes in the first miracle story is one that is continually repeated throughout the fourth gospel. He says to his mother, "My hour has not yet come" (Jn 2:4). This statement makes reference to the understanding that Jesus is in control of the events that will unfold throughout his ministry. The evangelist through such statements demonstrates his conviction that Jesus is God's revelation. The authority that Jesus maintains serves to prove that his own identity is the identity of God simultaneously. A high Christology in the Fourth Gospel is illustrated.

---

<sup>84</sup> Countryman, *The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1994, p. 28.

The miracle at Cana has multiple layers of meaning. In *The Gospel and Letters of John*, R. Alan Culpepper argues that the miracle is clearly symbolic; it is the significance of the miracle that is meaningful, not just the sign itself.<sup>85</sup> On a deeper level, turning the water into wine symbolizes the bringing of abundance. It can be understood in terms of the conversion that takes place when Jesus comes into one's life. The wedding feast is an ideal representation of the celebration that one can be a part of when a personal conversion occurs.<sup>86</sup> The transformation of ordinary water into a fine and delicious wine suggests the fullness and depth of the banquet that God has prepared for his believers. The sacramental implications for this miracle are vast.

A secondary symbol that the wine represents is the blood of Jesus, associated with his suffering and death. The Eucharistic overtones are unmistakable. Joseph A. Grassi presents an interesting interpretation of the book of signs in the fourth gospel.<sup>87</sup> He proposes a chiasmic structure to the signs, placing emphasis on the connection between the first and the last; the wedding feast at Cana and the flow of blood and water upon the death of Jesus. He describes an intended parallel in these words, "For the gospel audience the wedding at Cana conveys this message: the choice wine of the new age in 2:10 can only be obtained in obedience to Jesus' words, just as the parallel blood/water/spirit from Jesus' side was only made possible by his acceptance of the imperfect, bitter "blood of the grape" on the cross in obedience to the Father".<sup>88</sup> The water and wine at Cana are echoed at the hour of Jesus' death in the miracle of blood and

---

<sup>85</sup> Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1998, p. 130.

<sup>86</sup> Dumm, *A Mystical Portrait of Jesus*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001, p. 96.

<sup>87</sup> Grassi, Joseph. "Eating Jesus' Flesh and Drinking His Blood: The Centrality and Meaning of John 6:51-58." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 17 (January 1987): 24-30.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

water emerging from the side of Jesus, according to Grassi.<sup>89</sup> Once again, this parallelism suggests sacramental implications.

The placement of this story immediately following the discipleship story of Nathaniel reflects a clever literary tool. The unwavering and total faith that Mary proves in Jesus at the wedding feast provides a stark contrast to the conditional and shallow faith that Nathaniel exhibits. Mary is the one who first points out to Jesus that there is no more wine (Jn 2:3). She merely makes the statement, without involving a direct request. Jesus rebuffs his mother by saying, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come” (Jn 2:4), yet Mary is not discouraged from putting the events in motion that will result in her son’s first miracle. The authoritative voice of Mary instructs the servants to “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5). Mary’s statement implies that she unequivocally believes that Jesus can indeed do something about this predicament. Her request emphasizes the importance of Jesus’ authority. Whatever it is that Jesus may possibly tell them, it is to be followed. With her explicit instructions to the servants, Mary diplomatically places the situation into Jesus’ hands. Like every conscientious mother of a young adult, Mary recognizes the importance of allowing her son to make his own decisions. She can set the stage in order to facilitate his response and communicate the faith that she has in him, but ultimately she needs to allow Jesus to initiate his ministry himself. Jesus chooses to perform the miracle of his own free will (in his hour), yet it is clear that Mary was involved in its instigation. Many people came to believe in Jesus as Messiah as a result of this sign at Cana. Mary can be credited with unilaterally making preparations for the sign to occur. Acknowledging the role that Mary plays in the

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

initiation of Jesus' ministry is crucial. It provides a model of strength, perseverance and unwavering faith for all women, validating the view of women as disciples of Christ.

The first miracle performed in the gospel of John offers seemingly infinite possible interpretations. It is a rich and powerful story that takes on even more meaning when considered in context of the gospel as a whole. At the very least, the miracle of the wedding at Cana provides the following: evidence that of Jesus was someone extraordinary (pointing to his divine identity), the importance of obedience and belief, the intricately symbolic imagery of water and wine, the rewards of conversion, and the bounty that will be ours if we obey the invitation of Jesus to "believe". Mary, the mother of Jesus was exemplary in her belief in what God would accomplish through their son Jesus. She was a leader by taking the initiative in a crisis situation that called for action. Her role in facilitating the ministry of Jesus and her faith in the power of God proved her to be a model disciple of Christ.

### ***The Foot of the Cross***

The presence of Mary at the foot of the cross illustrates the allegiance she demonstrates to Jesus and his mission from the announcement of his birth until his glorification at death on the cross. She suffered the ultimate tragedy that a parent could imagine: the death of her child. Yet Mary stood fast, witnessing the suffering that her son bore, as told through the evangelist John. Mary carried Jesus into this world with her pregnancy and childbirth, but her physical role is not what made her a loyal disciple. Mary stands as the persistent, continuous model of discipleship in her loyalty and support for Christ.

Throughout his gospel, John utilizes the metaphor of kinship to symbolize the disciples of Christ, now considered children of God.<sup>90</sup> Both the beloved disciple and the mother of Jesus remain nameless in John's gospel. They may be considered symbolic of the birth of the Church in the unity that Jesus proclaimed for them, "Woman, here is your son" (Jn 19:26). And, "Here is your mother" to the disciple (Jn 19:27). With the new family that he has identified to continue his mission, Jesus could now announce: "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). His spirit had a place to reside in this new community of believers that will be the future of the Church. It has been suggested that a woman and a man were singled out to represent the equality of all in the face of God.<sup>91</sup> Members of both sexes would play equal roles in the new family that Jesus instituted at the foot of the cross. The new definition of family in the early Christian community of includes those who would do the will of God. There are no fathers or husbands to be obeyed but instead God alone in an inclusive community.<sup>92</sup> Jesus' understanding of this family is illustrated in a passage in which "...a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' But he (Jesus) said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!'"(Lk 11: 27-28). Mary carries the unique distinction of being part of the family of God in both physical and eschatological way. She heard the word of God and acted upon it.

### ***Conclusion***

---

<sup>90</sup> Culpepper, p. 234.

<sup>91</sup> Kanagaraj, p. 31.

<sup>92</sup> Julian, Elizabeth. "Mary of Nazareth as a disciple: a developing biblical portrait." *Stimulus*, Volume 14, No 4 (November 2006): 26.

As a fully human woman, Mary would have experienced all of the rituals, trials and challenges that motherhood brings. As a young girl betrothed to be married, Mary was wrenched out of her ordinary existence when she was requested to partner with God in a seemingly outrageous proposition.<sup>93</sup> She would conceive a child who would be the Messiah. Far from living the perfect, idyllic life of holiness, it was reported that Mary's life in many ways involved the daily struggles that most parents face today. Mary was a practicing Jew following the laws and customs of Moses. When her son was eight days old, as Jewish custom required, Mary and her husband had Jesus circumcised and named (Lk 2:21.) Next, after the prescribed purification time had elapsed, they brought him to the temple for presentation and to make the appropriate sacrifice (Lk 2:22-24). Mary subsequently did what was necessary to facilitate the growth and education of a young child (Lk 2:40). Any parent knows the everyday sacrifices one makes for their children and what that may have entailed for Mary. When her son was a preadolescent, he wandered off for three days, seemingly oblivious to the worries and concerns of his parents (Lk 2:41-46). Mary was frantic to learn the whereabouts of her child, surely imagining all the things that may have happened to him outside of their care. When he was finally discovered, preaching in the temple, Mary chastised him as any mother would, questioning his lack of consideration for his accountability to his mother and father. (Lk 2:48) When the wine ran out at the wedding in Cana, it was Mary who approached Jesus with the implicit request to take action (Jn 2: 3-4). Despite his protests that it was not his concern, she was the catalyst that set in motion the first of his seven signs. Like a mother bird, she carefully nurtured her baby, preparing him as he grew

---

<sup>93</sup> Crist, Jessica. "Human Mary, Mother of God." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 8 no 6 D (1981): p. 348.

towards independence. Eventually, she gently nudged him out of the nest, despite his protests that he was not quite ready yet (Jn 2:4-5). She suffered with him as he was led to his horrendous death, standing close enough that she could hear him speak (Jn 19:26-27). The scene at the foot of the cross exhibits the continuation of Christ's mission through his new community of believers, of which his true disciple, Mary, would be the co-founder along with the beloved disciple.

Mary was faithful to her son from the moment she heard God's call to be his mother until the death of Jesus on the cross. She was a true and faithful disciple not simply because she bore him but because she heard his word and carried out the mission she was called to embark upon with conviction and assertiveness. The image of Mary as a passive vessel of purity, the sexless, perfect, virgin mother stands in contrast to the Mary that we have retrieved from the Gospels. When the symbol of Mary extends beyond and disconnects from the human Mary that lived on this earth, it loses its integrity. She has come to be understood much like a goddess and legend as a result of the cumulative Christian imagination and devotion over the centuries.<sup>94</sup> The homage given to her non-sexuality as a celibate mother has created much frustration for and oppression of women expected to emulate her projected character. By returning to the woman that the Gospels of the New Testament depict, her image is once again grounded in the person of Mary of Nazareth.

The retrieval of Mary of Nazareth reveals her to be a courageous, conscientious, very human woman, faithful to her son both as his mother and as a model disciple. When we recognize the call to Mary as one of human co-creatorship with God in the salvation of

---

<sup>94</sup> Schaberg, Jane. "Luke" in *Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p. 372.



humanity, we can likewise see our potential as partners in God's plan for building His kingdom on earth.

## ***Chapter 4: Mary Magdalene***

The name Mary Magdalene evokes a myriad of images. From the “repentant prostitute” to the “apostle to the apostles”, she has crossed all boundaries in her descriptions. She is femininity’s ultimate all encompassing representative. Ingrid Maisch goes as far to claim that “there is probably no other female figure in history whose image has been so strongly influenced by the culture and history of past European centuries, whether in literature, the theater, opera, or more recently in films.”<sup>95</sup> Who really was this woman who has been called both a sinner and a saint, and how can we know her? What was her role in the budding early Christian movement? These are difficult and complex questions to answer. However, I will endeavor to get at the heart of what little historical knowledge we have about Mary Magdalene. The primary sources for information about Mary of Magdala are the New Testament gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We also have the more recently discovered gospel of Mary that reveals her personal account of her discipleship with Jesus, and offers a controversial perspective of the diverse viewpoints in the early years of Christianity. Through the examination of these texts as well as secondary sources we will develop a better idea of who Mary Magdalene really was, the role that she played in the early days of Christianity, and the implications of her ministry for today.

By first examining Mary Magdalene in the New Testament gospel accounts a picture of Mary emerges that allows for the deconstruction of unfounded myths about her that have developed over the course of time. Next, the study of her representation in the gospel of Mary allows us to supplement our perspective of the figure of Mary

---

<sup>95</sup> Maisch, Ingrid. *Mary Magdalene: The Image of a Woman through the Centuries*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998.

Magdalene. and see the ramifications it has for understanding the environment of early Christianity. Other non-canonical texts present controversial images of Mary as well such as the gospel of Peter, the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Philip, and Pistis Sophia. Some of these suggest conflicting voices of authority between Mary and Peter. Their existence demonstrates the variety of Christian beliefs in the early centuries of the faith tradition. The conflation of the image of Mary Magdalene with other figures in the New Testament illustrates a source of the compromised projected image of her that has endured for centuries.

The search for the “real” Mary Magdalene is a challenging one in that what we can know about early Christianity is limited to the small percentage of texts that have survived throughout the centuries. It has been suggested that up to 85% of known Christian literature from the first two centuries has been lost.<sup>96</sup> Presumably, there have been many more writings that we have no knowledge of. Another difficulty in reconstructing history, particularly from this time period, is the fact that early Christian practices relied very little on written documentation.<sup>97</sup> Most people spread the gospel through word of mouth, for very few could read and write. It becomes impossible to suppose, therefore, that an entire accurate history could be recreated from what is known.

The emergence of Christianity was plagued by controversy, and varying opinions vied for authority to set the proper definition of this new faith. As Karen King says, “History, as we know, is written by the winners. In the case of early Christianity, this has

---

<sup>96</sup> King, Karen. *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>97</sup> King, p. 6.

meant that many voices in these debates were silenced through repression or neglect.”<sup>98</sup> Discovering Mary Magdalene and affirming her place in early Christianity is more than just about one particular woman. To discover Mary is to discover for all women the potential for their true role in Christianity and the Church.

### *The New Testament Gospels*

The New Testament is a familiar primary source for information regarding Mary Magdalene. This source, however, exposes only one small time period in her life. This is what it reveals: that she followed Jesus from the beginning of his ministry, was present at his death by crucifixion, witnessed his burial, and found his tomb empty three days later. The revelation of Christ was then made known to her.<sup>99</sup> There is not much material to work with! What we do have, however, is insight into her prominence in what has become known as the Jesus movement. There are some relevant points derived from examination of the New Testament gospels that merit mentioning.

First, this person is identified by name in all of the four gospels as Mary the Magdalene. A unique aspect of the identification of this woman is that it is not referenced through a relationship with a man. It was common in the era of early Christianity for a woman to be called by the name of a man, such as “daughter of...or wife of... or mother of...”<sup>100</sup> Instead, this Mary was called by the name of her hometown, Magdala. Her name literally means Mary, the woman from Magdala. Magdala was likely a fishing

---

<sup>98</sup> King, p. 7.

<sup>99</sup> De Boer, Esther. *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1996, p. 18.

<sup>100</sup> Maisch, p. 2.

village on the western shore of Gennesaret in Galilee.<sup>101</sup> The absence of mention of a man suggests that Mary had no partner when she became a follower of Jesus. It is possible that she was widowed or divorced at that time.<sup>102</sup> This unique way of referring to Mary Magdalene sets her apart from other women and men in the gospels. The other New Testament figure who is commonly known through his town of origin, coincidentally, is Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>103</sup>

Secondly, Mary Magdalene was also known as the woman who had seven demons dispelled (Lk 8:3; Mk 16:9). It is important to note that evil spirits and infirmities were afflictions to be healed, not sins to be forgiven.<sup>104</sup> Seven demons indicate the severity of afflictions. The identification of these demons may have contributed to the future mistaken understanding that she was a sinful woman. However, nowhere in the gospels does it mention that demonic possession was associated with sin.<sup>105</sup> It was the conflation of Mary Magdalene with other less virtuous women in the New Testament that would ultimately lead to her characterization as a repentant sinner and prostitute.<sup>106</sup>

Additionally, in every gospel account except for John's, whenever a group of women's names is presented, Mary Magdalene's name is always listed first. The names are often different in various lists, and the order is not consistent, with one exception. Mary Magdalene's name is always included, and it is always first. This alludes to her

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>104</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989, p. 1972.

<sup>105</sup> Haskins, Susan. *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1993, p. 12.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

leadership role amongst the women who were followers of Jesus.<sup>107</sup> Paralleling Mary's placement in these lists of names is that of Simon, known as Peter. He as well is consistently named first among the men following Jesus in various lists throughout the synoptic gospels, corresponding to the importance of his central role in the Christian movement.<sup>108</sup> The treatment of Mary by the evangelists themselves illustrates the high regard in which they and the early Christians held this woman. The intentional emphasis placed on both of these names reaffirms the important association they have with the Easter faith and continuation of the Christian community.<sup>109</sup>

Next, all three of the synoptic gospel writers allude to the faithfulness that Mary Magdalen exhibited when they first describe her and the role she played in the travels and preaching of Jesus. Matthew states "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them was Mary Magdalene..." (Matt 27:55-56). Mark similarly describes Mary and her companions by saying: "These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem" (Mk 15:41).<sup>110</sup> Luke's gospel as well describes the women that accompanied Jesus, including Mary Magdalene: "The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out.... who provided for them out of their resources" (Lk 8:1-3). The act of providing for Jesus had the connotation of serving or ministering.<sup>111</sup> These verses

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>108</sup> Haskins, p. 11.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>111</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible*. p. 1951.

tell the reader that Mary Magdalene and other women had been with Jesus all along. This “patronage” that Mary and the other women established suggests that these women were key in facilitating the ministry of Jesus. They would have been financially independent, and willing to sacrifice their own resources for the sake of the cause. In addition, the term “to follow” indicates that the women fully participated in the belief and activities of Jesus, as did their male counterparts.<sup>112</sup> Ingrid Maisch argues, “...The renunciation of possessions, sexuality, and security under the protection of an extended family for the sake of a higher goal, there men and women could assume the same roles.”<sup>113</sup> In that respect, the world of Jesus and his followers was very egalitarian, however unconventional and unique.

Finally, the importance that Mary plays in the Easter narrative is signaled in the emphasis on placement of Mary in the Gospels. With the exception of a brief mention by Luke early on, the evangelists first mention the character of Mary Magdalene immediately surrounding the death of Jesus. In Mark’s gospel, she, along with Mary the mother of James, and Salome are named as “women looking on from a distance” (Mk 15:40). In this particular gospel account, it is the women who are with Jesus at the cross, while not even one male disciple is mentioned as present!<sup>114</sup> This situation emphasizes the loyalty of Mary Magdalene and the rest of the women through their presence in the face of death and fear. The persistence of these women says a lot about their courage and resolve, especially in contrast to the absence of the male disciples.<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>112</sup> Haskins, p. 11.

<sup>113</sup> Maisch, p. 9.

<sup>114</sup> Maisch, p. 8.

<sup>115</sup> Haskins, p. 11.

Arguably the most important event that occurs for Mary Magdalene is her witness to the risen Christ. The four evangelists vary in the details of this event, although they all agree that Mary Magdalene was first witness to the revelation of the risen Lord. In the gospel of John, Mary Magdalene is the central figure in the discovery of the empty tomb and subsequent appearance of the Lord.<sup>116</sup> In this account she is the only one present when first witnessing the risen Lord. Mary Magdalene herself hears a new testimony from the risen Christ, and is portrayed as a disciple and apostle in John's gospel.<sup>117</sup> The presence of Mary Magdalene at this momentous event signifies her worthiness to first receive the revelation of the risen Lord. Like the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene was called to proclaim the good news of the identity of Christ. In the story of the Samaritan woman, the identity of Jesus as Messiah was revealed but in Mary's case the good news was the revelation of his identity as the risen Christ. Upon first seeing Jesus resurrected Mary was confused. She mistook him for the gardener, not realizing initially his true identity. When Jesus called her by name, "Mary," like the Samaritan woman, she recognized that Jesus knew who *she* really was in a very personal way. It was then that Mary saw through to the true identity of Jesus, calling him by the familiar name, "Rabbuoni" (Jn 20:16). She accepted her commission from Jesus and enthusiastically spread the news to her fellow disciples. It was Mary's message to the disciples that equipped them for their future role as apostolic witnesses.<sup>118</sup>

Mary Magdalene clearly holds a position of prominence in the New Testament gospels. Ingrid Maisch describes the importance of Mary Magdalene in the life, death and

---

<sup>116</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible*, p. 2052.

<sup>117</sup> DeBoer, p. 120.

<sup>118</sup> Kanagaraj, Jey J. "The Profiles of Women in John: House-Bound or Christ-Bound?" *ERT* (2003) 27:1, p. 42.



mission of Jesus. She says: “People who saw Jesus, who had died, as the Living One and proclaimed him thus to others are the ones we call “apostles”. From the point of view of time Mary is the first to whom this title is owed.”<sup>119</sup> Her label as apostle to the apostles is a justifiable one. She was present at his crucifixion, remained loyal through his death, and was (one of) the first witness and proclaimer of his good news. As the first one to be named among the women in the synoptic gospels, the her perseverance and loyalty to Jesus from Galilee to the time even after his death, and the primary role she held in being the first witness to his resurrection we can surmise that Mary indeed was a central figure in early Christianity and an exemplary model of discipleship according to the New Testaments gospels.

### ***The Gospel of Mary***

Another source of information we have about Mary Magdalene is the gospel of Mary. Karen King defines the term gospel as “the ‘good news’ of the kingdom; it indicated the message and promise of the Savior, not the genre of the work.”<sup>120</sup> The gospel of Mary fits this category. This gospel is classified as a Gnostic text. Gnosticism broadly refers to a category of religious beliefs that rely on inner enlightenment about God for salvation.<sup>121</sup> Recently surfacing in the late nineteenth century, this text was lost for almost fifteen hundred years.<sup>122</sup> It was written originally in Greek early in the second century CE,

---

<sup>119</sup> Maisch, p. 11.

<sup>120</sup> King, p. 30.

<sup>121</sup> McBrien, Richard P. (Editor), *The Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1989, p. 563.

<sup>122</sup> King, p. 3.

before the canon of the Church had been established.<sup>123</sup> The codex that contained the gospel of Mary was written in the ancient Egyptian language of Coptic, presumably translated from the original Greek.<sup>124</sup> To date, three ancient fragmentary copies have been found, strengthening the testament to their authenticity as early Christian documents.<sup>125</sup> What the gospel of Mary proves is that the beginning of Christianity was much more diverse than had ever been believed before.<sup>126</sup> It tells us that there were other oral or literary sources (lost to us now) that the gospel of Mary relied upon some relating the teaching of Jesus to the popular Platonic and Stoic understandings of the time.<sup>127</sup> The gospel is not lengthy, only consisting of eight pages. It is important to note that almost half of this gospel is missing, so the interpretation of the material will necessarily be incomplete.<sup>128</sup>

The text of the gospel of Mary offers some radically different ideas from the New Testament gospels regarding such central Christian issues as the content and meaning of the teaching of Jesus, the nature of sin, and the road to salvation. Its discovery reveals to us that in the first centuries of Christianity, there existed multiple theological perspectives on these central issues. The Church canon, as we know it today, was not yet determined and all Christian viewpoints were not consistent.

The gospel of Mary basically consists of two sections. The first part involves narrative between the risen Christ and the disciples concerning his teaching. Jesus

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>124</sup> Meyer, Martin, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*. New York: Harper One, 2007, p. 741.

<sup>125</sup> King, p. 11.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

explains to his disciples that salvation necessitates discovering the true spiritual nature within oneself, and overcoming the bodily passions that can be deceiving (GMary 8-11).<sup>129</sup> One's goal should be to seek the true child of Humanity<sup>130</sup> within themselves to achieve inner peace. When one loves the lower nature (in the material realm) instead of recognizing one's own spiritual nature, sin is the result (GMary 9:10). This teaching is radical for multiple reasons. First, it separates the body from the soul. Second, it encourages individual initiative to gain salvation, rejecting the necessity of an authoritative body (such as the Church). Also, it does not present a concept of original sin, and most importantly, it reveals that Mary is the only disciple who understood and interpreted Jesus' teaching correctly! All the other disciples had failed.<sup>131</sup>

When Jesus departs from the group, it is Mary who takes his place and preaches to the disciples, teaching them about the message of Jesus' mission (GMary 20-24). This contrasts with the canonical gospels in which it is Jesus who confirms the message that Mary had brought to the disciples regarding the resurrection. Even though the disciples do not believe her in the New Testament gospels, here in the gospel of Mary she is eventually met with acceptance.<sup>132</sup>

The second part of the gospel of Mary consists of a special revelation that Jesus shared with Mary Magdalene and her disclosure of that revelation to the disciples. It includes such topics as the nature of the soul's ascension to its final rest and the powers that provide distractions to the soul (GMary 33-38). Following this disclosure, Andrew and

---

<sup>129</sup> Gospel of Mary references are taken from *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, edited by Marvin Meyer, 2007.

<sup>130</sup> Karen King prefers to use the translation "child of true Humanity" as opposed to "Son of Man" due to its ideal in describing a non-gendered space, p. 33.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Peter challenge Mary's vision, arguing that these teachings seem strange, and that Jesus would not have imparted such knowledge to a woman (GMary 40,41). Levi then comes to Mary's defense, saying that Peter, in essence is a hot head (GMary 43).<sup>133</sup> The disciples consequently go out to teach and preach (GMary 45).

The gospel of Mary accomplishes many things. Whether one accepts its premises or not, it holds much value in opening up a hidden world to us, and giving us a perspective that had been lost for centuries. It reveals the diversity of thought present in the first centuries following the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and helps define the environment from which our current Church evolved. Additionally, it challenges us to reevaluate the apostolic authority of the Church. The text actually warns, "Do not lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it" (GMary 19). This appears to be directly at odds with the formation of the institution of the Church and its canon. The current criteria of the Church in teaching sin and salvation were not always regarded as the exclusive way. There existed several different perspectives that were either suppressed or forgotten. Discovery of this new perspective raises questions regarding the reasons for the direction that Christianity ultimately took.

The gospel of Mary also tells us something about Mary herself. Her teaching is valuable enough to warrant the construction of her own gospel. Mary Magdalene is the only historical woman who has a gospel named for her.<sup>134</sup> She is portrayed as a leader, one who is worthy of divine revelation from Jesus, capable of imparting this privileged information to others, and someone who had a special relationship with Jesus. Mary's

---

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

position of primacy says much about the validity of women in leadership positions within early Christianity.

### ***Conflict with Peter***

In her introduction to *The Gospel of Mary in The Nag Hammadi Library*, Karen King reports that the confrontation of Mary with Peter is a reflection of some of the conflicts that existed in second-century Christianity. She explains: “Peter and Andrew represent orthodox positions that deny the validity of esoteric revelation and reject the authority of women to teach. The gospel of Mary attacks both of these positions head-on through its portrayal of Mary Magdalene.”<sup>135</sup> Hostility toward Mary Magdalene from Peter has been detected in several other non-canonical writings as well. In the gospel of Peter, Mary Magdalene is presented as one who is timid and scared: “Now Mary Magdalene, a disciple of the Lord, had been afraid of the Jews, since they were inflamed with anger; and so she had not done at the Lord’s crypt the things that women customarily do for loved ones who die” (v.50).<sup>136</sup> The gospel of Thomas (attributed to Judas Thomas the twin and discovered among the Nag Hammadi texts) states, “Simon Peter said to them, “Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life” (v.114)<sup>137</sup>. In *Pistis Sophia* Peter complains about Mary Magdalene as well. It states: “Peter stepped forward and said to Jesus, “My master, we cannot endure this woman who gets in our way and does

---

<sup>135</sup> *The Nag Hammadi Library*. San Francisco: Harper, 1990, p. 524.

<sup>136</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 34.

<sup>137</sup> Meyer, Marvin. *The Gospels of Mary*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004, p. 35.

not let any of us speak, though she talks all the time” (36).<sup>138</sup> Jesus response was to praise Mary’s actions when he says, “Let anyone in whom the power of the spirit has arisen, so that the person understands what I say, come forward and speak.” Jesus encouraged Mary to speak, “Blessed Mary, you whom I shall complete with all the mysteries on high, speak openly, for you are one whose heart is set on heaven’s kingdom more than all your brothers” (18).<sup>139</sup> The gospel of Mary presents Peter as one who acknowledges the savior’s love for Mary (GMary 25). When Andrew protests that he does not believe that the savior would have revealed certain things to Mary, Peter chimes in: “Did he really speak with a woman in private, without our knowledge? Should we all turn and listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?” (GMary 41). Levi intervenes: “Now I see you (Peter) arguing against this woman like an adversary. If the savior made her worthy, who are you to reject her? Surely the savior knows her well. That is why he has loved her more than us” (GMary 43,44).

Peter clearly seems offended that Jesus would have selected to disclose his special revelations to Mary above Peter. The hostility Peter exhibits toward Mary raises suspicion regarding the cause of her subsequent tarnished image and the disappearance of Mary’s gospel for so many centuries. Peter was the historical “winner” of the conflict regarding leadership in the early Church. We now have fragments from the other side of the argument that hint at the prominent position that Mary Magdalene had in the early days of the Jesus movement.

---

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

### *The Conflation*

The various myths and legends characterizing Mary Magdalene negatively have no basis in the New Testament or in the gospel of Mary. It is crucial to dispel these fallacies in discovering the real woman behind centuries of speculation. Pope Gregory I applied the negative label of prostitute to Mary Magdalene erroneously during his reign in the fifth and sixth centuries. He conflated multiple biblical stories about a “Mary,” a woman anointing Jesus, and a sinner, into the one person of Mary Magdalene.<sup>140</sup> Conflation involves taking texts that are not inherently related to one another and stringing them together into an ideological whole. Jane Schaberg suggests that this tool was used as an ancient form of backlash, achieved by empowering certain texts and ignoring others.<sup>141</sup> The result of conflating certain texts led to the common assumption that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. The power of influence that the historical “winners” have in compromising or silencing competing and threatening histories are clearly illustrated in the degradation of her character for centuries by this designation.

Every gospel contains a story involving Jesus, a woman and anointing (Matt 26.6-13; Mk 14.3-9; Lk 7:36-56 and John 12:1-8). By performing a parallel analysis among them, it will become apparent that certain elements of each may have been combined to form a composite sketch of a singular woman. The gospels of Matthew and Mark contain versions of a conflict story that are virtually identical to one another. There exist some minor wording differences, but essentially these two are the same. The setting is in Bethany, at the house of Simon the leper. While Jesus was seated at a table, a woman

---

<sup>140</sup> Maisch, p. 44.

<sup>141</sup> Schaberg, Jane. *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*. New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 73.

approached him with an alabaster flask of expensive ointment, which she proceeded to pour over Jesus' head. Some people protested (in Matthew they are identified as the disciples, 26:8) arguing that the ointment could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor. Jesus then replies that the woman's action was beautiful: "For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me"(Mt 26.11,Mk 14.7). He suggests that the anointing is preparation for his burial and announces, "truly, I say to you, wherever this (the) gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her"(Mt 26.13,Mk 14.9). In many places, exactly the same wording is used in both Matthew and Mark's gospels. It is clear that Matthew closely followed his Markan source.

John presents a similar story involving Jesus, a woman and an anointing in John 12.1-8. However, there are some significant differences between his narrative, and those of Matthew and Mark. First of all, although his setting is also in Bethany, John's account identifies the home as being of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, rather than that of Simon, the leper (12:1). The woman featured is identified as Mary (12:3). While Jesus was seated at the table, Mary anointed him with an expensive ointment, but on his feet rather than his head. She then wiped his feet with the hair of her head. In this account Judas Iscariot is named as being the one who is critical of her actions (12:4). He makes reference to being able to sell the ointment for money which could be given to the poor, as is done in Matthew and Mark's story (12:5). John includes additional commentary which is absent in the other gospels: then at the end of this passage he repeats the same sentiment expressed in Matthew and Mark that the woman was justified in her anointing as preparation for burial, and besides, "you do not always have me" (Jn 12.8).



In the gospel of Luke, the evangelist also presents a narrative involving Jesus, a woman, and an act of anointing (7:36-56). Luke, however, has his narrative setting at the house of Simon, but other than the similarity of the name, they are completely different (Lk 7:40). Luke's Simon is a Pharisee, not a leper. No mention is made of the town where it takes place. The woman involved is described as a sinner (whereas this designation is absent in the other gospels) who actively seeks out Jesus when she hears he is in the Pharisee's house (Lk 7:37). Similar to John's account, Luke describes how the woman anointed the feet of Jesus with an expensive ointment and used her hair to dry them (Lk 7:38). Unique to Luke, she is kissing his feet and weeping. To himself, the Pharisee questions Jesus' association with that type of woman, but Jesus reads his mind, already knowing what kind of woman she is (Lk 7:39).

Luke completely diverges from the other gospels at this point by proceeding to tell a parable about a creditor and two debtors. He likens the debtor with the greater amount owed to the sins of the woman...the more sins forgiven resulted the in the greater love (in this context is understood as gratitude)(Lk 7:47).<sup>142</sup> Jesus then chastises his host, the Pharisee, for refusing to offer him the expected hospitality toward a guest (Lk 7:44-46). He contrasts the Pharisee's lack of action with those of the woman, who acted so overwhelmingly graciously to Jesus by kissing and anointing his feet, showing abundantly her love. After relating the parable, Jesus tells the woman that her sins have been forgiven, and she is to go in peace (Lk 7:48-50).

There are obvious and significant differences between this story of Luke's and the other stories. Of twenty-three possible points of agreement between all the gospels, Luke

---

<sup>142</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sacra Pagina Series, Volume 3, Luke*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 127.

agrees with only four of them: the woman, the ointment, the anointing, and rebuke.<sup>143</sup>

There exist some minor discrepancies regarding where the incident occurred, in whose home, who was present, and who the woman was. Luke's inclusion of a parable dramatically changes the substance of his narrative compared to the others. The other relevant difference centers around the overriding theme of the three other narratives, which contrasts substantially with Luke's.

The main idea of the stories presented by Matthew, Mark and John is that Jesus' time here on earth is limited. By anointing Jesus, the woman has prepared him with this ritual before burial. They identify Jesus as being special, and worthy of this anointing with the costly ointment. No price could be put on the presence of Jesus among them! The woman performing the anointing could be considered a prophet for her perception of the imminent death of Jesus.

Contrarily, the message of Luke's story clearly revolves around the themes of faith, sin, forgiveness, and salvation, rather than of glorifying Jesus. It appears as if Luke purposely uses the character of a woman with many sins to again emphasize salvation-as-reversal. It is significant that Luke uses a Pharisee as a main character as well, because it provides an unexpected dichotomy to the sinful woman. Jesus eventually exalts her, the outcast of society, and admonishes the Pharisee, who represents the accepted authority of society. Those people who are so entrenched in their observance of the "Law" or commonly held rules and regulations, are sometimes blind to Jesus' message. They have become a new category of sinners. The woman, alternatively, undisputedly identified by all as a sinner, has become the example of love and faith that welcomes her to God's

---

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. p. 128.

table of the kingdom. Jesus says to the woman that her sins have been forgiven. This statement challenges those at the table to accept him as a prophet by having faith, such as displayed so profusely by the woman. Luke ends the passage with the statement, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Lk 7.50).

Matthew, Mark and John place this passage near the end of their gospels, immediately preceding the passion of Christ. The placement of Luke’s passage closer to the beginning of his gospel is another way that makes it unique. The particular point in the gospel where it is placed facilitates his flow with the preceding chapters, which contain stories of Jesus as the prophet of God. In some of them, he connects acts of faith with God’s healing and salvation. The following chapters illustrate further God’s salvation of the faithful.

It is unknown exactly what the sources were for Luke’s story. It falls in a section of Luke’s gospel that does not seem to be using Mark as a source.<sup>144</sup> The unusual differences between Luke and Matthew in this passage suggest that Q as a source could be eliminated. Oral tradition may be assumed. It has been suggested that the differences between this story, and the other parallel gospels may warrant the conclusion that Luke’s story is altogether a separate account than the others, which have only small variations between the three of them.<sup>145</sup> On the other hand, Jane Schaberg asserts that the evangelist Luke has radically rewritten Mark’s account of the anointing woman in order to illustrate his theological viewpoint.<sup>146</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> Tiede, David L. *Augsburg Commentary On the New Testament: Luke*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988. p. 159.

<sup>145</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Luke*, p. 129.

<sup>146</sup> Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 75.

I feel the value in interpreting this story in Luke is in its literary content. Luke apparently exaggerates a scenario by using contrasting characters to emphasize the all-encompassing message of inclusion and forgiveness of God through Jesus. The unfortunate consequence has been the downgrading of the anointing woman in the source of Mark's gospel from prophet to prostitute.

Immediately following the story of the sinful anointing woman in Luke's gospel is a new chapter in which Mary Magdalene is first mentioned (Lk 8:2). The conflation of the Mary (of Bethany) in John's anointing story, the sinful woman in Luke's, combined with the subsequent mention of Mary Magdalene as well as the attempt of Mary Magdalene to anoint the body of Jesus at the tomb have cumulatively provided the necessary ingredients for the imaginative projection of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. Pope Gregory I in his sermon in 591 proved to cement the conflation when he stated: "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark."<sup>147</sup> Pope Gregory I also linked the woman adulterer (Jn 8) with Mary Magdalene as well, jumping to the conclusion that the woman's sins in Luke 7:36-56 were sexually oriented.<sup>148</sup>

Interestingly enough, the Eastern Orthodox Christians have continually regarded the figures of Mary of Bethany, Luke's unnamed sinner, and Mary Magdalene as independent from one another. Eventually the Roman Catholic Church admitted that its conflation of the multiple women named Mary was erroneous, eliminating the thread that

---

<sup>147</sup> Gregory the Great, *Homily XXXIII*, *PL LXXVI*, col.1239, quoted by Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: The Essential History*, London: Pimlico, 2005, p. 96.

<sup>148</sup> Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, p. 29.

held together the initial label of sinner and prostitute of Mary Magdalene, but of course by then the irreparable damage had already been done.<sup>149</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

It is unfortunate that recent popular film and literature today continue to perpetuate the legend of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute. Such works as the Martin Scorsese film adaptation of Kazantzakes' 1955 novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1970s musical "Jesus Christ Superstar," Zeffirelli's television movie *Jesus of Nazareth*, and Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* all portray Mary Magdalene as a prostitute.<sup>150</sup> Dan Brown's *DaVinci Code* revolves around the sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and essentially ignores the meaningful disciple/master relationship that represents her prominence in early Christianity.

What we are left with at the end of this research is simply a vignette of this woman, Mary of Magdala, who has inspired so much intrigue. We have barely scratched the surface in our discovery of who she really was and her role in the early Christian movement. What we do know is that she was central in following and attesting to the message of Jesus. Women today can be inspired by Mary Magdalene's central and leading role that is highlighted in these texts. Mary was a prime example of women following, ministering, teaching, preaching, and leading in the early years of Christianity. She offers much hope for the future of women in the Church of tomorrow.

---

<sup>149</sup> McBrien, Richard P., ed., *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989, p. 839.

<sup>150</sup> Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 71.

History is constantly changing as various viewpoints present a more multi-faceted, complex understanding of events that have occurred in the past. We are only afforded a glimpse into a slice of the past, which is then open to speculation. That which is accepted as history is never a complete history. By critically examining both widely accepted texts, such as the Gospels of the New Testament, as well as appropriating more controversial material with alternative perspectives, such as the gospel of Mary, one can reach a fuller understanding of the truth. As more evidence is discovered, more pieces of this puzzle of history can be filled in. The constant examination and re-examination of materials assists us in properly contextualizing our interpretation, thus, giving us a richer and fuller understanding of what and who shaped history as we know it.

### ***Part III: Conclusion***

#### ***Chapter 5: Moving Forward***

*“As many as you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* –Letter of Paul to the Galatians 3:27-28

*“...more and more historians are now demonstrating, with increasing persuasiveness, that women provided religious leadership in Jewish and Christian communities over long stretches of their histories.”* –Karen Jo Torjesen

*“Jesus and the early church were ahead of their time in their valuation of women; today the Catholic church lags far behind its time and other Christian churches.”* –Hans Kung

It is inevitable that the way that Scripture and its history have been appropriated is bound to change. Understandings of history constantly change as various viewpoints present a more complex understanding of events that have occurred in the past and the way that they have influenced the interpretation of our sacred texts. That which is accepted as history is never a complete history. By critically examining multiple perspectives, one can reach a fuller understanding of the truth, and a more humble attitude towards what comprises the divine message. The reinterpretation of Scripture from a female perspective enables us to retrieve female models of discipleship that are embedded in the text, but were hidden and suppressed since the dominant perspectives did not perceive of these perspectives as valuable.

God envisioned as father has been used to legitimize a patriarchal structure of the church and society. Names, images, and metaphors for God have been manipulated to support the idea of a male gendered God, which-in turn-have had societal, cultural, and ecclesial implications. The maleness of Jesus likewise, has been used to support the

notion that males are the normative human beings, with women being subservient. Women have been denied full participation in leadership of the church based on the erroneous belief that their gender excludes them from being considered equivalent in their likeness of Christ. The overwhelming usage of masculine pronouns in reference to God and divinity subordinates women, and the patriarchal roots of the Church's tradition stifles the spiritual imagination of women. The presumption of a masculine, patriarchal God provides little salvific hope for women. We find support for change in our vision and understanding of God and gender in scripture. Until the Church recognizes the value of its women, I fear that its very integrity is at stake. It is inevitable that many women will eventually turn away from an institution that continues to ignore their struggle.

In 1976, in the publication of *Inter Insigniores*, the Church officially denied women the possibility of being admitted to the priesthood.<sup>151</sup> One reason, among many, was that women did not physically resemble Jesus as a man. Schneiders condemns the men in the Church for their flawed theology on this topic, utilized in order to maintain their patriarchal traditions. Women in the early Church were teachers and evangelists, prophets, participants, and probably leaders of house churches.<sup>152</sup> It was the male repression of women's participation in Church leadership that regressed the equality that Jesus modeled for society in the early days of the Church. As Christianity became institutionalized as a state religion, it increasingly absorbed the social beliefs and restrictions concerning women of the Greco-Roman world and began to lose the radical

---

<sup>151</sup> Schneiders, Sandra, *With Oil in Their Lamps: Faith, Feminism, and the Future*, New York: Paulist Press, 2000, p. 55.

<sup>152</sup> Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Sexism and God-Talk, Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, p. 61.



egalitarian message that Jesus proclaimed and practiced.<sup>153</sup> We must recognize the social context of Scripture in order to put the maleness of Jesus in perspective, and dismisses any notion that it intimates a superior gender. Hans Kung comments, "...the activity of Jesus called to life a community of disciples who were equals, and this also represents a criticism of the situation in the church today."<sup>154</sup> What is relevant is that Jesus Christ did not merely emulate the ideal of the new male, but of the new human being.

Schneiders states that "...the maleness of Jesus is theologically, christologically, and sacramentally irrelevant."<sup>155</sup> So why was Jesus a male and not a female? Schneiders feels that there are significant reasons for this. First of all, the stereotypical male attributes in his day were greatly in conflict with the true nature of God and his hope for humanity. The situation necessitated an example of humanity that was atypical in order to provide a model for new behavior. The virtues that Jesus represented, such as humility, compassion, and non-violence were stereotypically regarded as feminine. By espousing those virtues, Jesus validated women and demonstrated a revolutionary way of behaving for men. Secondly, he regarded women in a completely new and unusual way. By treating them with equality and respect, he revealed God's love for all of humanity in addition to validating their uniqueness. Women held a special place in the life of Jesus. He chose them as disciples and apostles<sup>156</sup>, spoke about them on equal terms as men, and most importantly, revealed himself as risen from the dead to women first. The maleness

---

<sup>153</sup> Torjesen, Karen Jo, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the early Church and the Scandal of the Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993, p. 6.

<sup>154</sup> Kung, Hans, *Women in Christianity*, Translated by John Bowden, London: Continuum, 2001, p. 5.

<sup>155</sup> Schneiders, Sandra M. *Women and the Word*. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986, p. 55.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

of Jesus intentionally provided a cultural contradiction and instigator for change in the patriarchal society in which he lived. He showed the possibility of reworking the relationships between men and women.<sup>157</sup>

Jesus as a woman would not have been able to accomplish that same task. By becoming a member of the oppressor class of men, Jesus was able to effect change from within, according to Schneiders.<sup>158</sup> By virtue of being a male, Jesus was able to undermine patriarchy in a way that only a man could. He dispelled the belief in a divinely appointed superiority of men through his actions and words. He recreated an image of God that renounced patriarchy and called for a new social order.

In the past century women have struggled to achieve equality with men in numerous areas. The ratification of the nineteenth amendment in the political arena was a monumental step forward. Women have made giant strides in their quest in social, economical and athletic realms as well. Not only can women vote now, we actually have a woman vying for the White House as a hopeful Democratic Presidential candidate. The “glass ceiling” has been shattered now that females have the potential to earn as much in the workforce as their male co-workers. Female student athletes are given similar opportunities as their male counterparts to excel at their sports on the collegiate level with the institution of Title IX; funding is granted equally for men and women’s athletic endeavors on college campuses around the nation now. The challenge for women has been not only to secure a sense of equality, but also to inspire society to re-imagine an entire social structure that has historically conceived humanity as normatively male. Instead of being regarded as differing from the norm and adjusting to fit into the male

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p.

normative model, women need to be regarded as autonomous, intrinsically vital contributors in order to be fully validated as equal human participants.

Unfortunately, one institution, which has been painfully unresponsive in regard to reevaluating the role of women, is the Catholic Church. In many ways the church still mirrors the unbalanced sociopolitical system that the contemporaries of Jesus hoped to overturn. Just as Mary was lowly in her society, women today remain lowly in the power structure and leadership of the church. It is shocking to acknowledge the limitations imposed upon half of its participants. The exclusion and marginalization they endure cries out for rectification. One step in creating a justified balance is the recognition of women as authentic disciples of Christ. The gospels provide us with women who fit that category, as I have demonstrated in this thesis.

Theology is the process of reflection upon the Christian message. It is anchored in the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, and is expressed in concrete symbols of the church, and oriented towards praxis. Systematic theology involves assessing the major elements that make up our study of God, and using the understanding we have of them to address current issues in our society. It allows us to adapt to our changing world as we discover new ideologies or perhaps uncover past errors in our worldview. Systematic theology allows us to incorporate improvement and advancement without jeopardizing the foundation of our faith.

I believe that continually re-evaluating our tradition is crucial in enabling our faith system to remain fluid and not become static or outmoded. It is important to have the ability to evaluate the multiplying challenges that we are faced with in our world today.

As science, technology, and society progress, situations arise that were never considered centuries, or even decades ago. I, thus, want to echo John Henry Newman's statement, "In a higher world it would be otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."<sup>159</sup> Not only is change inevitable, it is also a sign of a healthy society and church.

Systematic theology is an interdisciplinary endeavor as it employs biblical theology, historical theology, and moral theology. It relies upon the biblical foundations, historical developments, and the teachings of the church in analyzing current theological issues. It necessitates the three tasks of understanding the whole of Christianity, the integration of faith and reason, and finally, addressing contemporary issues.

A major theological issue that has surfaced in contemporary society is feminism. Feminism, as defined by Sandra M. Schneiders, is "a comprehensive ideology which is rooted in women's experience of sexual oppression, engages in a critique of patriarchy as an essentially dysfunctional system, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision to realization."<sup>160</sup> Applying this definition to theology involves the systematic review of theology in light of the changed vision we have of humanity as a result of feminism. Biblical theology is used to determine if this ideology is scripturally supported. It is also imperative to examine the historic developments that contributed to an ideology that was primarily patriarchal and marginalizing for women. This is the root of the feminist movement. Finally, moral theology contributes to the affirmation of the values proposed in feminism, specifically

---

<sup>159</sup> Connolly, John R., *John Henry Newman: A View of Catholic Faith for the New Millennium*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 16.

<sup>160</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *Beyond Patching*, New York: Paulist Press, 2004, p.15.

the equality of all human beings, regardless of their gender. Systematic theology is the comprehensive method for evaluating the topic of feminism, and the question of the gender of God, and its meaning for women.

Feminist theology strives to imagine an entire societal system that reflects the equality of all of humanity. The beneficiaries of this movement are not just women, but all marginalized persons, including men. As contemporary society makes advances in regarding women as equals in the political, athletic, and social spheres, it is only inevitable that the Church will need to adapt to these issues as well.

In conclusion, I suggest that not only do we need to re-examine the interpretation of Scripture in light of today's situations, but we must also be more open to accepting the possibility of the divine occupying more space than we could ever imagine. Scripture does not offer a singular meaning, but continually evolves to encompass the society in which it is appropriated. All sacred texts reveal something meaningful, facilitated by the transcendent immanence of the divine in and through the text and its appropriation by the reader. It is unwise to limit the existence of the divine to our own understanding of it. Narrow interpretations of messages revealed in Sacred Scripture are a reflection of the narrowness of the interpreter. God is an entity that is beyond human comprehension. God's revelation through the medium of Scripture merely offers a glimpse through a window into divine space. If we acknowledge the limitlessness of the divine, then we must graciously accept that the divine voice transcends our own understanding of it. The nature of God is such that it transcends any image that we may assign to it. God's mystery will forever be beyond our grasp.

It is our challenge today, for both women and men, to discover the pearls of inspiration embedded in the New Testament Gospels. The strength of women disciples transcends the boundaries set by centuries of patriarchal interpretation. Despite the androcentric nature of the environment of first century Palestine, women step forward at crucial junctures in the narrative of the gospels, providing exemplary models of discipleship. We owe it to them to authenticate our collective memory of them, reclaiming Scripture by dispelling any culturally derived falsehoods that are destructive to their integrity. The retrieval of their true contributions to our faith tradition provides us with figures who can mentor our own faith. The Samaritan woman at the well, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Jesus are three such women, as we have discovered. Their faithfulness to Jesus Christ and his message proves them to be female models of discipleship in a world where men occupied positions of power, prestige, and leadership. Each in her own way single-mindedly followed her own inspired heart, blazing forward with the mission of Christ against all culturally defined odds. They are truly remarkable for their determination in following their unique call. These revolutionary women are testaments to the Kingdom of God that Jesus facilitated. We are called to emulate their example.

It is my wish that the image of a true disciple of Christ be redefined in an inclusive way to reflect the authentic reality that these three remarkable figures have provided. Not gender<sup>161</sup>, but rather beliefs and actions define what characterizes a true disciple of Christ. Their courage, loyalty, and faithfulness to the divine call held fast in the face of

---

<sup>161</sup> see the apostolic letter by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores* (Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood), October 15, 1976 for details on Church's position.

challenges and adversity. Recognizing the validity of female models of discipleship in Scripture provides the foundation for advocating the appropriateness of women for rightful consideration for all leadership positions in the Church, in particular priesthood. The retrieval of the Samaritan woman, Mary of Nazareth, and Mary Magdalene as models of discipleship offers inspiration and hope to all Christians today.

## ***Bibliography***

- \_\_\_\_\_ *The Nag Hammadi Library*. San Francisco:Harper, 1990.
- Barlas, Asma. “*Believing Women*” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002.
- Brock, Ann Graham. *Mary Magdalene the Apostle: the Struggle for Authority*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Brown, Raymond. *The Gospel According to John: Anchor Bible Volume 29*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966.
- Connolly, John R. *John Henry Newman: A View of Catholic Faith for the New Millennium*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.
- Conway, Colleen M. *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999.
- De Boer, Esther. *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1996.
- Farmer, Craig S. *Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman in Early Reformed Commentaries on John*. *Church History* 65.03. 2006. pp. 365-375.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schussler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1983.
- Haskins, Susan. *Mary Magdalen: The Essential History*. London: Pimlico, 2005.
- Haskins, Susan. *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1993.
- John Paul II. “*Mulieris Dignitatem*” (On the Vocation and Dignity of Women). August 15, 1988.
- Johnson, Elizabeth. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York, Crossroad, 1992.
- Johnson, Elizabeth, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. New York: Continuum.
- King, Karen. *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003.



Kung, Hans, *Women in Christianity*. Translated by John Bowden. London: Continuum, 2001.

Kysar, Robert. *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: John*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986.

Levine, Amy-Jill. *A Feminist Companion to John: Volume 1*. New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003.

Lockwood, Peter F. *The Woman at the Well: Does the Traditional Reading Still Hold Water?* *Luthern Theological Journal*. Adelaide: May 2002. Vol. 36, Iss. 1;pg. 12,13 pgs.

Maisch, Ingrid. *Mary Magdalene: The Image of a Woman through the Centuries*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press: 1998.

McBrien, Richard P. (Editor), *The Encyclopedia of Catholicism*. San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1989.

Meyer, Marvin, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*. New York:Harper One, 2007.

Meyer, Marvin. *The Gospels of Mary: The Secret Tradition of Mary Magdalene the Companion of Jesus*. San Francisco:Harper-Collins, 2004.

Moore, Stephen D., “*Are There Impurities in the Living Water that the Johannine Jesus Dispenses? Deconstruction, Feminism, and the Samaritan Woman*”, *Biblical Interpretation* 1, 2 (1993).

Mullins, Michael. *The Gospel of John; a Commentary*. Blackrock Co., Dublin: Columba Press, 2003.

Raschke, Carl A. and Susan Doughty. *The Engendering God, Male and Female Faces of God*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Mary – the Feminine Face of the Church*. Philadelphia:Westminster John Knox Press, 1977.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk, Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.

Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Inter Insigniores* (Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood). October 15, 1976.

Schneiders, Sandra M. *Beyond Patching, Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church*. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004.

Schneiders, Sandra M. *With Oil in Their Lamps: Faith, Feminism, and the Future*. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000,

Schneiders, Sandra M. *Women and the Word*. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986.

Schneiders, Sandra. *Written That You May Believe*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *What is Scripture: A Comparative Approach*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the early Church and the Scandal of the Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993.

Van Wijk-Bos, Johanna W.H. *Reimagining God: The Case for Scriptural Diversity*. Louisville: Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.