

Mary Wept: Gender and Power in *The Gospel of Mary*

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5. But they were grieved. They wept greatly, saying, "How shall we go to the Gentiles and preach the gospel of the Kingdom of the Son of Man? If they did not spare Him, how will they spare us? Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren, "Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for His grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather, let us praise His greatness, for He has prepared us and made us into Men." When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good and they began to discuss the words of the Savior. Peter said to Mary, "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of the women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, which you know but we do not, nor have we heard them. Mary answered and said, "What is hidden from you, I will proclaim to you." And she began to speak.....

*10. But Andrew responded and said to the brothers and sisters, "Say what you will about what she has said, I do not believe that the Savior said this, for certainly these teachings are strange ideas." Peter responded and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior, "Did he really speak with a woman without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and all listen to her? Did he choose her over us?" Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother, Peter, what are you thinking? Do you think that I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am telling lies about the Savior?" Levi responded and said to Peter, "Peter, you have always been an angry person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you, then, to reject her? Surely the Savior's knowledge of her is trustworthy. That is why he loved her more than us. Rather, let us be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and proclaim the good news, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said." After he had said these things, they started going out to teach and proclaim. *The Good News according to Mary.**

The *Gospel of Mary* is an extra-canonical text that was unknown to the modern world until a copy written in Coptic was discovered in the late nineteenth century, and its contents were translated and made public in the twentieth century. Since then, two additional Greek fragments have surfaced, although several pages of the whole remain missing. Biblical scholarship for this still-fragmented text is currently in its early stages, but most scholars agree that the text was written sometime in the second century. Karen

King places it in the early part of the second century, around the same time that the *Gospel of Luke* and the pseudo-Pauline epistle of *1 Timothy* were likely being written.¹

The first and second centuries were an incredibly dynamic and creative time for Western civilization. Karen King writes that:

The Mediterranean world in which Christianity appeared was in a period of rapid social change and religious experimentation. Traditional values and ways of life were being challenged and reshaped through contact with others; the family, gender roles, and sexuality were being redefined; local resistance to Roman rule often took religious form – whether by outright rebellion as in the Jewish revolts in Palestine, or more covertly by turning a crucified criminal named Jesus into a heroic symbol of resistance to worldly power and tyranny.²

What scholars for most of Western history have called “early Christianity” was in fact a diverse set of responses to massive social change revolving around the teachings, death, and continuing revelations and mythologies associated with Jesus of Nazareth. It was not until later in the third and fourth centuries, that a particular set of ideas surrounding Jesus clearly began to emerge as “orthodox Christianity.”

It is within this more nuanced understanding of Christianity’s origins that I would like to position this exegetical analysis of the *Gospel of Mary 10*. The chapter depicts an argument between Mary (probably Mary Magdalene) and three of Jesus’ male disciples (Peter, Andrew, and Levi), over the validity of the teachings she has shared in the preceding chapters. Written at a time when questions about who had the authority to interpret and preach the Christian gospel had not yet been answered,³ the charges that Peter and Andrew bring against Mary reveal something of what was at stake for the Christian communities of the second century.

¹ Hal Taussig, *An Introduction to the Gospel of Mary*,” *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-First Century*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 220.

² Karen King, *Gospel of Mary Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003, 158.

³ Karen King, *Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 173.

First, there was the question of the content of the Savior's teachings, and the reliability of revelations that seemed new, "strange," and had been given in secret.⁴ A mass proliferation of texts and teachings that claimed to contain hidden teachings of Jesus had already begun to circulate, and there was clearly some debate over the validity of public versus private revelation. However, there was also an issue with the revelatory witness of women, and their right to teach men. For Peter especially, it is obvious that the problem is not only that the Savior gave a strange teaching privately, but specifically that he gave a strange teaching privately *to a woman*.

Does the *Gospel of Mary* provide the long-awaited evidence that women were indeed leaders, preachers, and apostles in the early church? Dr. King thinks that it does. She writes that *Mary* "provides direct evidence of early Christian arguments in favor of the leadership of women, and allows us to see that views excluding women were but one side of a hotly debated issue."⁵ The *Gospel of Mary* does show undeniably that women actually did serve as teachers of the gospel in the earliest churches. The very fact that a community of Christians would even write a text invoking the name and revelatory authority of Mary Magdalene implies that she must have had considerable influence. But what does the text reveal about the *nature* of women's leadership roles within the church? What *kinds* of leaders were women expected or allowed to be, and how was their authority understood? The text seems to betray some ambivalence with regard to women's roles, particularly in terms of their relationship to male apostles and disciples.

In order to better understand what *Gospel of Mary 10* is revealing about women's leadership in early Christianity, this brief analysis will place the text within its ancient

⁴ Christopher Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 198.

⁵ Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene: The First Apostle*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, 171.

social, economic, cultural, and political context. Beginning with an examination of ancient gender constructions, including how gender was perceived to be related to power and leadership, we still explore the social and political dynamics surrounding women's lives in Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture. Hopefully this will show how the pervasive and complex social paradigms in which the early church participated were both replicated and resisted within the church and the gospel text.

Throughout this analysis, it is important to keep in mind that what ancient male writers *thought* about women's roles in society should not be confused with what women's roles in society *actually were*. The ancient world, like our world today, was full of complexities and ambiguities, with very wide gaps between any given person's ideal, and the real world of human relationships. Because most written sources were composed by men, our understanding of the historical realities of women and the social dynamics impacting their reality will always remain slightly skewed. But it is my hope that by observing some of these inherent contradictions, we can better recognize the contradictions surrounding gender that we find in *The Gospel of Mary* itself, and understand the contribution that it makes with regard to questions of gender and power.

There are some major differences between twenty-first century concepts of sex gender, and those that were common in the ancient world. Generally speaking, most people nowadays tend to think about the difference between male and female as a difference in *kind*: that is, technically speaking, there is one "thing" – a human being – and it comes in two different kinds (or chromosomal variations): male and female. In ancient world, however, the difference between male and female was perceived as a matter of *degree*. Along with children and slaves, females were understood to be imperfect or incomplete

males. For this reason, in order for women to transcend their mortal limitations, it was believed that they needed to move along the gender/sexuality spectrum towards the place occupied by men, who were thought to represent the perfect human being. Consequently, “for a woman to have life, she must first become a male.”⁶

Gillian Clark writes that in the ancient world “femaleness, by general consent, was a disadvantage. It was assumed that females were physically weaker than males, were unlikely to be the intellectual equals of males, and had a more difficult time controlling bodily desires and the onslaughts of emotions.”⁷ Apparently this was considered to be true even for women who had been trained in philosophy. This was because a woman’s inferiority was not understood to be merely social, but in fact was believed to be biological. Women were, quite literally, believed to be men who had failed to reach their full physiological development in the womb.

A treatise from Pergamum in the 2nd century explains that “the female is less perfect than the male for one, principal reason – because she is colder.”⁸ The medical understanding was that because women were colder, their muscles hadn’t matured, their voices hadn’t deepened, their facial hair hadn’t appeared, and most importantly, their generative parts had been formed inwardly, as mutilated variants of male generative parts. In other words, the vagina was believed to be an inverted penis that had never emerged.⁹ Furthermore, Aristotle believed that there was an inherent weakness in the female’s *soul* on account of her lack of vital body heat, which, he believed:

⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend*, Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2006, 204, 212.

⁷ Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, 119.

⁸ Galen, “On the usefulness of the parts of the body 14, 6-7,” *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, eds., London: Duckworth, 1982, 215.

⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 212.

...must also affect the female power of reason, [since it] never reaches full development in the female any more than menstrual blood is ever sufficiently heated to become semen. Women cannot, therefore, be expected either to match the intellectual ability of the male or to have their reason fully in control of desire: they need external guidance and restraint to stay out of trouble.¹⁰

The Greco-Roman understanding of gender was also related to notions of power and dominance that were seldom, if ever, questioned. Bart Ehrman writes that it was “common sense that human relationships were organized around power.”¹¹ The powerful were *supposed* to dominate the weak: masters had control over slaves, parents had control over children, and men should assert power over women. Ehrman explains that “this ideology of power affected not only military and political ideology but also personal and sexual relations. Free men were created to be dominant.”¹² Hal Taussig explains that ancient notions of “masculinity” were defined specifically around the ability to penetrate. Thus, it was not at all considered unnatural for adult men to penetrate women, children, male slaves, and conquered peoples in overt displays of domination and subjugation.¹³

Being physically, medically, and spiritually framed as the weaker sex had its consequences: women had very limited rights in much of the ancient world. In Rome, women were always required to be under the guardianship of a man. When a woman married, her father’s authority passed over to her husband, and she was considered *infelias loco*, a child in the family.¹⁴ However, despite their limitations, women clearly found ways to exert their influence in the legal and political spheres of Rome.

Particularly as Rome began to develop into an Empire, women gained more and more

¹⁰ Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 121.

¹¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 212.

¹² Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 204, 213.

¹³ Hal Taussig, “Gender Constructions in the Ancient World,” Biblical Exegesis course lecture, Union Theological Seminary, November 14, 2013.

¹⁴ Marjorie W. Bingham & Susan Hill Gross, *Women in Ancient Greece and Rome, Vol. 1*, St. Louis Park, MN: Glenhurst Publications, Inc., 1983, 57-58.

freedom. They were allowed to move freely about, to join their husbands, relatives, and other guests at meals, and to go out to public gatherings. They were also allowed to inherit property, and at various times exerted great influence in politics.¹⁵

Examples of this elevation in the social power of women during the first century can be found in the primary literature. Valerius Maximus complained, “we must be silent no longer about those women whom neither the condition of their nature nor the cloak of modesty could keep silent in the Forum or the courts,” and cites several examples of women who had been advocating for themselves in civil suits.¹⁶ Electoral graffiti in Pompeii indicates that even though women could not vote, “they took a lively interest in local politics, endorsing candidates publicly, with or without husbands or male associates.”¹⁷

The situation for Isrealite women during the era of Roman occupation seems to have remained somewhat more restricted. According to Flavius Josephus, a woman’s testimony was not considered admissible evidence in any Jewish court “owing to the frivolity and temerity of the sex.”¹⁸ Women were expected to be veiled if they ventured out into public, and in the context of the Greek city of Alexandria, Philo wrote that “while outdoor life is suitable for men in time of peace as well as war,” for females “domestic life and diligence in the home are best. Maidens, cloistered within the home, must not venture further than the door of the *gynaeceum*. Grown women may not venture further than the door of the house.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Bingham & Gross, *Women in Ancient Greece and Rome*, 58.

¹⁶ Valerius Maximus, “Memorable Deeds and Sayings, 8.3,” *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, eds., London: Duckworth, 1982, 206.

¹⁷ Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, “Politics: Electioneering, Pompeii,” *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, London: Duckworth, 1982, 213-214.

¹⁸ Monique Alexandre, “Early Christian Women,” 415.

¹⁹ Monique Alexandre, “Early Christian Women,” 416.

Yose ben Yochanan, a Jewish rabbi of first-century Jerusalem, advised men to limit conversation with women, writing: “So long as a man talks too much with a woman, he brings trouble on himself, wastes time better spent on studying Torah, and ends up an heir of Gehenna.”²⁰ Jewish women would sometimes not receive the payment due them upon divorce if they had gone out with their hair flowing, spun in the marketplace, or talked “with just anybody.”²¹ Because of the destructive potential of their contagious impurity following menstruation, women’s participation in religion was heavily restricted during the second temple era. In the Jewish Diaspora, women were not required to observe the commandments, or to attend synagogue for Sabbath readings and sermons. Even when present at the synagogue, they did not count toward the *minyan* (the minimum number of men necessary for public prayer), and “out of respect for the congregation” they could not be called upon to read.²²

However, we find again that the restrictions on women’s behavior written down by Israelite men provide a much better description of how men *felt* about women in the public square, than the actual social *experiences* of women in first-century Palestine. A scholar named Bernadette Brooten who has examined Greek and Latin inscriptions dating from the 1st century BCE to the 6th century AD found that women’s names were listed in synagogues across the Jewish diaspora as leaders, elders, mothers, and even priestesses, using titles similar to those of male leaders. Brooten also found evidence of large financial donations made by women, indicating that there were prominent, independently wealthy women with substantial religious and economic power in their communities.²³

²⁰ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 196.

²¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 196.

²² Monique Alexandre, “Early Christian Women,” 417.

²³ Monique Alexandre, “Early Christian Women,” 418.

Economic class was indeed a major factor determining the extent of a woman's rights in the ancient world, especially in terms of how it affected access to education. Contrary to popular belief, a good number of women in the ancient world could read and write. For the wealthier classes, it appears that "the literate, educated woman in the ancient world was not an exception...she was the ideal."²⁴ Erwin Rohde has even argued that Hellenistic literature, particularly the novel, was written primarily for a female audience, in particular the educated women of Alexandria, Athens, and other cities throughout Asia Minor.²⁵ And Stevan Davies has argued convincingly that the *Acts of the Apostles*, written around the same time as the *Gospel of Mary*, were popular stories written by women, for women, in defense of female celibacy.²⁶

In Rome, Stoic and Epicurean philosophers greatly encouraged the public education of women and advocated for more egalitarian civic relationships between women and men. The philosopher Musonius Rufus, born in 30AD, taught that "equal virtues require equal training."²⁷ Arguments such as these from the elite class of philosophers contributed to an overall increase in women's literacy. Education became part of the standard training for middle-class women and the daughters of wealthier slaves, while some upper-class women were able to achieve success as poets, writers, and historians.²⁸

In spite of these advances, it is important not to overstate the facts or lose sight of the very real restrictions that women in antiquity faced. Women's influence in writing

²⁴ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*, Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980, 102.

²⁵ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 101.

²⁶ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 12, 64.

²⁷ Bingham & Gross, *Women in Ancient Greece and Rome*, 98.

²⁸ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 101.

was in most cases limited to popular stories told for the entertainment and edification of other women, and men were unlikely to consider their writings seriously or engage theologically with them.²⁹ This was especially evident in the attacks made against the writings of the Montanist women in the mid-second century. The female priests and prophetesses of this sect produced at least seven oracles, but their texts were denounced on the basis that no woman in the Bible had ever issued a prophecy. Didymus of Alexandria reiterated the arguments of Origin and others, saying that “no woman from Deborah to the Virgin Mary had ever written a holy text.”³⁰

The idea that no woman had ever authored (or should ever author) a sacred text does not necessarily indicate that women were excluded from political or theological influence. Many people in the ancient world were suspicious of books anyway, feeling that “truth was not transmitted by means of written documents, but in living speech.”³¹ And the most powerful and authoritative kind of speech was considered to be prophetic revelation: “Christian prophets played a variety of leadership roles – prophesying and speaking in tongues, offering prayer, providing guidance, interpreting scripture, and teaching – and clear distinctions were not always made among these functions and their accompanying roles of leadership.”³²

Gerd Theissen’s *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* argues that community authority in the earliest Christian churches was not passed down through a clear lineage of apostles, but was instead in the hands of wandering charismatics.³³ In fact, the leadership criteria for the early “apostles” were quite broad. By the time *Didache*

²⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 196.

³⁰ Monique Alexandre, “Early Christian Women,” 428.

³¹ Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 95.

³² Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 178.

³³ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 49.

(another second-century text) was written, it was clear that congregations had accorded much greater authority to wandering prophets and apostles than to local functionaries, and that the latter were beginning to see the former as a threat to their office.³⁴ Karen King explains that:

...because of the widespread belief in antiquity that the gods spoke through human vessels, prophets potentially had enormous power to direct people's lives, political events, and public opinion. Diviners and oracles were consulted by senates, kings, and emperors, who yet sometimes forbade inquiry into politically sensitive areas, such as the emperor's health. Since prophecy represented a dramatic claim to authority, both for the prophet and for the message, serious issues of power were at stake in distinguishing true from false prophets.³⁵

As mentioned in the introduction, the question of how to distinguish false prophecy from true revelation was a major part of what was at stake in the conflict depicted in the tenth chapter of *The Gospel of Mary*. According to Ann Brock, the concept of "worthiness" served as an important means for measuring one's eligibility for Christian leadership.³⁶ This was apparently in line with ancient expectations that teachers would "manifest their teaching in their actions, providing instruction not only by what they said but by how they lived. The personal character of the teacher was considered to be fundamental to his or her capacity to instruct."³⁷

Remember that women were not independent beings, but the property of their fathers or husbands. Their public behavior was carefully scrutinized. Women on public display (i.e. actresses, dancers, and musicians) were often assumed to be sexually available, and so when it came to speaking, preaching, teaching, or praying aloud, a woman's personal character or "worthiness" would be evaluated very differently from a man's. Karen King points out that in ancient sources (both Christian and non-Christian),

³⁴ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 29.

³⁵ Karen King, *Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 179.

³⁶ Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene*, 86.

³⁷ Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, 87.

the sexual status of women was frequently noted in discussions of their prophetic experiences, while analogous observations about male prophets were rare.³⁸ Ultimately, a woman's worth was judged in terms of her sexual status and her willingness to conform to traditional roles, especially marriage and childbearing.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, virtually all people were expected to enter into heterosexual marriage. This was not a mutual partnership of "love," but a property-agreement that was reached between an adult man and a woman's father for the purpose of procreation.³⁹ Celibacy was rare among men, but it was almost unheard of among women outside of the early Christian communities, since there were no other structures for the financial support of women. Some traditions say that the philosopher Hypatia refused to marry, but she is the only known example of a non-Christian woman who opted for celibacy.⁴⁰

The early Christians, then, were perhaps quite radical with regard to their promotion of female celibacy. This unprecedented encouragement of female continence seems to have developed from an extension of the existing Jewish practice of caring for widows, combined with Jesus' apocalyptic teaching that the disciples should abandon earthly families to form a new family system "in Christ."⁴¹ Jesus encouraged his own followers to begin implementing the values of the kingdom in the present, and taught that in the kingdom, there would be "no marriage or giving in marriage."⁴² Many men and women of the first few centuries of took this quite literally, believing celibacy to be the

³⁸ Karen King, *Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 180.

³⁹ Hal Taussig, "Gender Constructions in the Ancient World."

⁴⁰ Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 130.

⁴¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 203.

⁴² Mark 12:25

authentic core of the Christian message.⁴³ “Widows” were a semi-clerical ecclesiastical order of celibate women, with certain leadership responsibilities in the early churches.⁴⁴

Ehrman is one of many scholars who explains why so many women flocked to Jesus’ teachings with regard to celibacy: “the social payoff for women to choose celibacy was significant because they were free from the restrictions otherwise imposed on women in a patriarchal society.”⁴⁵ Monique Alexandre writes,

The ascetic life promised liberation from the solitude and constraints of marital and family life; it promised autonomy as well as greater spiritual, intellectual, and even emotional intensity; it offered possibilities of male friendship and foreign travel; it could bring fame and contacts in the secular world; and it could serve as a means of birth control and estate management.⁴⁶

It is true that there would have been significant and liberating gains for women who chose a life of continence, not the least of which was an escape from the very high mortality rate of childbearing in the ancient world. However, any such gains must be placed against the backdrop of the enormous challenges this decision presented within the established culture of patriarchal family values.

Gillian Clark recognizes that, while men could easily opt to renounce marriage without renouncing their career, “a woman who did not marry renounced her only social role, and might come under great family pressure.”⁴⁷ On a practical level, chastity meant an end to reproduction, and in many cases, it involved the collapse of established marriages or the end of relationships between parents and children. In the *Acts of Paul*, for example, Thecla’s mother demands that her own daughter be executed because of her determination to be celibate.

⁴³ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 12-13.

⁴⁴ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 71.

⁴⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 204.

⁴⁶ Monique Alexandre, “Early Christian Women,” 415.

⁴⁷ Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 131.

Women who renounced their husbands had no other choice but to turn to the church for financial support, which placed many celibate women in tenuous positions. Stevan Davies explains, “In becoming Christian they had rebelled against their larger society but, having rebelled, they were given little option but to become again subservient to the male hierarchy of the church.”⁴⁸ Christian women of the second century faced a kind of double-bind: it was only through celibacy that women could become the spiritual equals of men, but males in the church increasingly began encouraging women to remain married, effectively denying women this path of perfection.⁴⁹

The rejection of the body as the self in the churches of the first century opened up the possibility of an ungendered space within Christian community, where leadership was based on spiritual maturity, not on a person’s sex.⁵⁰ This was not intended to validate a *higher* position for women over and against men, but to support an abandonment of the social notions of gender difference altogether. The *Gospel of Mary*, however, was probably written a century later, during a time when the church was beginning to move away from Paul’s ungendered understanding of Jesus’ teachings.

1 Timothy, which most Biblical scholars agree was not written by Paul but by an anonymous author sometime in the second century, encourages women to return to the function of motherhood, consoling them by saying that salvation is possible through childbearing. Second-century church leaders also were beginning to downplay the importance of prophecy in leadership, and the prophecies of women in particular were

⁴⁸ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 114.

⁴⁹ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 112.

⁵⁰ Christopher Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, 200.

increasingly placed under male scrutiny.⁵¹ Tertullian writes about how women's prophecies were dealt with in his own second-century congregation:

...whether it be in the reading of Scriptures, or in the chanting of psalms, or in the preaching of sermons, or in the offering up of prayers, in all these religious services matter and opportunity are afforded to her of seeing visions. *After the people are dismissed at the conclusion of the sacred services*, she is in the regular habit of reporting to us whatever things she may have seen in vision (for all her communications are examined with the most scrupulous care in order that their truth may be probed).⁵²

Clearly, women's prophetic experiences were valued, but their role as independent public orators, at least in Tertullian's congregation, was not.⁵³

Other second century texts reveal a similar trend in the Christian communities. In the Gospel of Luke's re-telling of Mark's earlier gospel narrative, more women are added to the story, but they are also increasingly depicted as adhering to traditional social roles and expectations, and treated with more scrutiny. Only in Luke does Peter go to the empty tomb after Mary Magdalene and the other women to check on their testimony, because the men do not believe her. In *1 Timothy*, entrance into the ecclesiastical order of widows became restricted, a trend that escalated until the third century, when in the *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles* and the *Constitutions*, widows were barred from baptizing, from teaching, or from eating, drinking, fasting, receiving gifts, laying on hands, and praying in another person's home.

When we consider the wider historical context, we know that the attacks Christians were facing during this time included accusations like those of Celsus, who remarked "that belief in the risen Jesus was based on the testimony of a 'hysterical

⁵¹ Monique Alexandre, "Early Christian Women," 424.

⁵² Karen King, *Gospel of Mary Magdala*, emphasis mine, 178.

⁵³ Karen King, *Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 182.

female.”⁵⁴ Ann Brock has conjectured that perhaps the canonical writings of the second-century church set out to respond to these criticisms by offering a more “orderly presentation” of Christianity, what she calls a “programmic mitigation of some of the revolutionary content of the gospel.” This makes sense in light of Roman culture’s general suspicion that Christianity was a religion that “brought members of the lower classes together in assemblies, which was particularly worrisome to the authorities.”⁵⁵ But it may also be that by the second century, the catastrophic end times predicted by Jesus and Paul did not appear to be immanent, and in this context the abandonment of procreation altogether was starting to seem less practical.

It is important not to dismiss the presence of misogyny in the early Christian writings, as if its presence was merely some undercover strategy intended to disguise the real revolutionary values of “Christianity” against a patriarchal “culture.” The early Christians were, in many ways, countercultural and revolutionary. But they were still products of their time, and were themselves a diverse group of people who unwittingly participated in the cultural assumptions of their surrounding society to varying degrees. As we have seen, both ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures contained contradictory elements with regard to sex and gender. “Christianity” came into being within this cultural milieu, and so it is unsurprising that it would also come to reflect this same ambivalence.

Tertullian is a perfect example of the complexities surrounding the issue of gender in the churches of the second century. Though he was affiliated with Montanism (the

⁵⁴ Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene*, 82.

⁵⁵ Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, “Christianity, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, 262.

early Christian sect that caused such a stir over the writings of its female prophets), he also had this to say about women:

Do you not know that you are Eve? God's sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil's gateway; you are she who first violated the forbidden tree and broke the law of God. It was you who coaxed your way around him whom the devil had not the force to attack. With what ease you shattered that image of God: man! Because of the death you merited, the Son of God had to die. And yet you think of nothing but covering your tunics with ornaments?"⁵⁶

It is clear that the first century of Christianity included experiments with a diversity of leadership arrangements, from formal hierarchical orders to unstructured charismatic organizations. In some congregations, leadership was shared among men and women according to the movement of the Spirit, whereas in others, elders, bishops, deacons, and widows performed certain duties. In many congregations, women and slaves were important leaders, while others resisted this reversal of the dominant social order, and worked to exclude them.⁵⁷ This immense ambiguity with regard to both gender and leadership serve as the social context for the writing of the *Gospel of Mary*.

Christopher Tuckett therefore rightly questions how far the *Gospel of Mary* goes in ascribing or affirming a public leadership role for women. The ambiguity is especially expressed in the *Gospel of Mary 10*, when Mary seems to embody a "traditional and passive" female role in her brief emotional response to Peter.⁵⁸ Indeed, some have even commented that she "seems to lose her voice at the end of the gospel," pointing out that it is another man – Levi – who finally steps in to defend Mary.⁵⁹ What's more, the entire basis for Levi's defense of Mary seems to be that the Savior – another *man* – declared her

⁵⁶ Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum II*, in Monique Alexander, "Early Christian Women," 409.

⁵⁷ King, *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 188.

⁵⁸ Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, 200.

⁵⁹ Hal Taussig, "An Introduction," 219.

to be worthy. Tuckett also makes note of the fact that it is unclear as to whether Mary actually joins Levi and the others when they go out to preach.

Taken within the context of the ancient world's social dynamics regarding sex, gender, power, and prophetic leadership, it seems to me that what is primarily at stake in the *Gospel of Mary* is not the question of women's leadership *per se*, but the primacy of prophetic speech, and the reliability of women's prophetic testimonies. Both of these are very strongly upheld in Mary's gospel.⁶⁰ However the text remains vague about whether or not women can serve as itinerant preachers, and it does not seem at all interested in the question of women's involvement as administrative clerics or presbyters.

The *Gospel of Mary* seeks to emphasize that the prophetic revelations and the teachings of women are just as legitimate and trustworthy as those of men. While the story probably does not tell us very much about the historical reality of Mary Magdalene, or her own leadership role in the first generation of the church, it does reveal something about the memory and influence of her leadership for the second generation of church women. Mary's "teachings" may have remained "hidden," but her "worthiness" and validity as a prophet and a teacher are recognized even above the other male disciples. Mary Magdalene's authority is referenced in the text as if it were common knowledge. Perhaps by invoking Mary's memory as a character in the text, the writers are reminding their early Christian audience that it was, after all, a *woman* who is remembered as the first witness to the resurrection – a powerful way to authenticate the prophetic testimony of women.

In light of our social analysis, it is especially interesting to note the depiction in *Mary 10* of unmarried men and women speaking together in a private household. Such an

⁶⁰ Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 189.

arrangement would have come under the suspicion of Roman authorities, as well as certain sects of Jewish culture. Even the Christian writer Pseudo-Clement argued in the second century that it was an abomination for continent men *to go near any woman*, since women – even celibate Christians – were the greatest threat to men’s salvation. In his Epistles, Psuedo-Clement specifically condemns “homeless itinerants” who “go from house to house, wander about idly, and dwell with Christian women,”⁶¹ which appears to be precisely the arrangement favored by the writers of the *Gospel of Mary*.

As our analysis has shown, different Christian congregations of the first and second centuries were, to varying degrees, critical of and/or complicit with the various Greek, Roman, and Isrealite cultural trends regarding sex, gender, and social behavior. The discrepancies felt by the early followers of Jesus, between their identity in this world and their identity in the Kingdom, must have been great. *Mary 10* shows disciples, both men and women, struggling with these tensions in very real ways. Mary remains strong in *Mary 5*, but when the adversary is embodied by her brother Peter, she collapses into tears and disappears into the background. Peter, for his part, appears to be fine with the fact that Jesus loved Mary more than *other women*, but when the content of her teaching seems to imply that Jesus loved her more than he and the other male apostles, he becomes jealous and angry. Andrew shows doubt when faced with things that are new and strange, and Levi does little more than tow the patriarchal line by validating Mary’s testimony, not on its own merit, but on the basis of another man’s testimony about her worthiness.

As previously mentioned, the *Gospel of Mary* was written at a time when conflicts like the one depicted could not be settled by appealing “to a commonly-accepted rule of

⁶¹ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, 92.

faith or canon of gospel literature, let alone an established leadership.”⁶² And so perhaps it should not be surprising to find that the last scene offers no real resolution. Still, it seems striking that virtually all of the questions raised by the narrative should be left unanswered. It is not clear at the end whether Andrew or Peter accept Mary’s testimony, and it is unclear which of the disciples went out to preach, or *what* they preached.

Yet, I would argue that this ambiguity is not an accident, but another aspect of text’s historical meaning and expression. If the *Gospel of Mary* was written primarily in defense of an ungendered, charismatic, itinerant, and prophetic style of Christianity and Christian leadership, we should consider that perhaps the kinds of theological “resolutions” we have been taught to expect from what later became orthodox Christian literature do not apply here. At the end of chapter ten, Mary explicitly reminds the male disciples of the importance of “not laying down any other rule or any other law beyond what the Savior said.” It would seem that the text’s writers did not intend to offer official answers or rulings on the question of women’s leadership, because unlike the male authorities who advocated for the formation of a hierarchical and male apostolate based on a highly redacted and official “orthodox” version of Christian history, the writers of the *Gospel of Mary* seemed to actually believe that the good news of the Savior was received through a participatory and revelatory trust in the Holy Spirit, to guide the Church into an unpredictable future through the prophetic witness of the faithful.

If the narrative in *Mary 10* represents a real conflict among differing groups of Jesus-followers in the second century on the question of female prophecy, then perhaps the writers themselves did not know what the resolution was. Rulings and resolutions do not appear to be a goal of the text. Rather, the *Gospel of Mary* offers suggestions for what

⁶² Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 188.

the disciples ought to be doing in the meantime: clothing themselves in “the perfect Human” (aka, Christ), and emboldening one another to proclaim the good news. The text supports the continued proclamation of the gospel through prophetic witness, even in the midst of internal conflict. Rather than trying to provide a clear model for “women’s leadership” in the early church, the *Gospel of Mary* offers a witness of faith in the Savior to make his revelations known among his most faithful disciples, no matter what their physical or social limitations may be.

I would like to conclude this paper with a brief look at what this text might have to commend to women of the twenty-first century. At first glance, it may seem like *The Gospel of Mary* does not have much of anything to offer women who are trying to succeed in a patriarchal world – except perhaps a good step-by-step example of what *never* to do when a man challenges your authority: become emotional, cry, try to defend your worth with relational rather than rational appeals, and ultimately fall silent. In Christopher Tuckett’s opinion, these actions indicate that Mary’s “character” is not as perfect as feminist scholars have suggested.⁶³ In fact, he points out, Mary ultimately does precisely what the disciples do earlier in chapter five: she weeps. Thus, Tuckett believes that Mary shows “fallibility and weakness” in the text, ultimately demonstrating her lack of worthiness for the job of preaching.⁶⁴

Many feminists (particularly white feminism) would agree with Tuckett. Indeed, many feminist-leaning Biblical scholars focus the majority of their attention on the parts of the text where Mary stands confidently before the male disciples. When it comes to the part with Mary’s tears, they either downplay its importance, or like Levi rush in to defend

⁶³ He mainly has Karen King in mind.

⁶⁴ Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, 189.

her.⁶⁵ One almost has to admit that Mary has effectively “handed over her power” to Peter – a major feminist no-no. The story ends unresolved, but even a cursory glance at the history of the Christian Church reveals how the story turns out: the priesthood is restricted to men. To this day, women in nearly every denomination are still trying to access leadership roles within the pyramid structures that were believed to be instituted by Peter himself.

But if we look at Mary’s gospel from within the social context of women in the first two centuries of Christianity, another perspective begins to emerge – one that asks us to lift the veil on nearly two thousand years of patriarchal Christian history, and question the very standards by which we have come to measure success, power, and “leadership.” As we have seen, *The Gospel of Mary* supports an ungendered and relational power dynamic that is managed not by a hierarchical lineage of male apostles, but by the unpredictable and yet steadfast Holy Spirit of God, who speaks through visions to faithful men and women that clothe themselves with “the perfect Human” – something that requires a full embrace of Christ’s suffering.⁶⁶

Yes, Mary wept. But by what standard are we to evaluate her weeping as “weakness?” The other disciples weep in *Mary 5* out of fear, self-pity, and despair; their desire is to preserve their own lives. When Mary weeps, on the other hand, it is because her brothers Peter and Andrew have attacked and betrayed her. Mary’s desire is right relationship. Jesus himself weeps in John 11:35 for the same reason – his relationship with Mary and Martha of Bethany are momentarily severed on account of their grief over Lazarus’ death. Perhaps in certain cases, tears are not a sign of cowardice or weakness,

⁶⁵ Here I’m thinking especially of Karen King, Anne Brock, and Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza.

⁶⁶ cf. *Mary 5:3*

but a sign of strength, and recognition of value. Perhaps like Paul, the *Gospel of Mary* shows us that real inner strength is made perfect in “weakness.”⁶⁷ In other words, true power, in the Christian sense, is an ability to stay grounded in one’s truest identity, as a child of God and a follower of Christ. It is not to be found in the judgments of those who are seek to rise to the top of the pyramid structures of this world.

I would interpret this drama in the *Gospel of Mary* as part of the larger gospel message that seeks to turn sociocultural power structures upside-down by revealing the truth of real inner power. For Jesus, rising to the “top” is the quickest way to the bottom, spiritually speaking. While the text may not ultimately depict Mary standing at the “head” of the church, or leading the male disciples out to preach, Mary does not seem interested in claiming power on Peter’s terms anyway. She grieves for her relationship with her brothers, yet she is free to “hand power over” to him because she knows that real power is not ultimately his to take, nor can it be grasped by the kind of authority he seeks. The good news of Mary’s Gospel is that true power and authority includes the courage to be emotionally vulnerable in seeking out accountability from others in the context of authentic relationships.

Liberals often like to joke that if women ran the world, everything would be better. The wisdom of *Mary* offers a caution to this assumption: if women attempt to run the world in the exact same way men do now – by obtaining power and clinging to positions of leadership and authority – then nothing changes. The goal of women’s liberation cannot be simply a matter of replacing male bodies with female bodies in the roles of president, CEO, and bishop, which merely becomes a modern-day version of the ancient requirement that women must “become men” in order to be fully human.

⁶⁷ 2 Corinthians 12:9

The *Gospel of Mary* reminds feminists that true change happens *both* within and among both women and men.⁶⁸ It suggests that what we need is not necessarily more women in charge, but a dismantling of the whole “in charge” aspect of our social organization and hierarchies. *Mary* challenges us to stretch beyond the patriarchal paradigms that blind us to one another’s truth, suggesting that we can work from wherever we find ourselves to be on the social spectrum in order to build new paradigms for social interaction and relationship based on honesty, trust, mutuality, vulnerability, and love.

⁶⁸ i.e. “The Kingdom of Heaven is within/among you [plural].”